



The Rifters

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An [Untethered Realms](#) World

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The stars are
the beginning...

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For Maddy



The Rifters

by M. Pax



Earl Blacke exhaled a mist that didn't originate from the chill of night. His lungs burned. The obsidian pillars on either side of the twisted juniper hissed, smoke pouring off their chiseled faces. The energy streaming out of the rift tasted different, overcooked sugar with a strong hint of rotting fish. Whatever beast traveled the portal, it would not pass. It would not sully his lands.

Over a century ago, Earl wore a different name, one synonymous with notorious and robbing stagecoaches. He'd need that grit tonight. He'd need it to save his girl. No longer perplexed by technology that enabled him to talk to people a long way away without hollering or using the telegraph office, he fiddled with the buttons on his cell phone.

"It's me," he whispered. "The gate is opening."

"The message said the rift would activate three nights before the summer solstice, ushering in a new dark age. It didn't lie. The darkness must be stopped. Nothing will come through while you're there. You and the portal don't mix." Her bright voice pierced through the overcharged air. "I need three more minutes to finish the device, then I'm on my way." It would take her an added ten minutes to hike out to the portal from her place, less if she ran.

The power emanating from the stone columns pushed at Earl, flattening his lungs, slowing his blood. "It's not the usual visitor, Charming." Rarely did something tame roll through the gate, but this was something much more vicious and heavy. Why did his girl insist on grappling with such things? She should stick to her fossils.

He had spent three years searching for Charming Moon Knight. He found her when she was about to finish graduate school. The perfect time. Like they were meant to have these moments. She meant the world, and whatever it took, he'd keep her in this one.

Inching toward the blue light fizzing between the pillars, Earl squared his shoulders. "I won't let it through until you get here, darling."

"You're the best—" She started to say his name, but the opening to another place cut her off as effectively as a knife across her tongue.

For once his struggles with the gate paid off. It refused to let him enter, refused to open when it sensed him, like he tasted wrong, for he had been its guest once then never again.

The blue light sparking between the pillars hadn't been so fickle in 1888. The flickers had grabbed onto his curiosity out in the shadow of an old volcano in the middle of Oregon, a new town dubbed Settler. The rift had clutched onto his mind and swallowed him up. Almost as quickly, it spat him out in a time that wasn't his. In the same place, however, still Settler, Oregon.

Since that day, the gate wouldn't let him through again. He'd been branded an outcast, as if this world knew of his past sins. The horrid twist in fate hadn't been all bad. The gold coins he had buried in the 1880s hadn't been found by anyone else and were worth a fortune in this century. They bought him the dream that had egged him on in older times, plus the trip had shaved forty years off his age. Forty years to live over again, to become a better man. If he held true to Charming, he'd be that man.

Everything about her resembled light: a wan complexion as pale as they came, fiery hair, long and fine, that showed off her cold blue eyes to their best advantage. The exact shade and shape of his. Her spirit shone brightest, always tugging her lips into a smile and her wit into fascinating words. Two years out of graduate school, her zest for life hadn't cooled.

He pressed his hand against the column, and the world hissed into a solid dark gray. Gray upon gray upon gray. It hunted his girl. He gripped the pillar, the smoothness of the volcanic glass heated up under his palm. A string of red snaked through the gray and wrapped itself around his fingers. It snarled in Earl's thoughts, *Retreat or die*.

"Then it's a fight." Earl clenched his jaw, willing away the pain. The agony didn't matter, the past didn't matter, only atoning for it and saving Charming.

The ribbon of red pulled taut, creeping up his wrist to his elbow. It flashed like an explosion behind his eyes, then all went hush. He floated in a gray fog that prevented his thoughts from mooring onto anything solid, as if he slept in a twisted dream.

His consciousness found its way out and he awoke to the thuds and grunts of battle, the dull thwacks of flesh on flesh pounding it raw. Sitting up, he couldn't focus. His vision swam, the ground tilted. A scream stopped his heart.

More than ten minutes must have passed with him in a fogged state. "Charming?" He crawled toward her shriek, blurs moving across the silvery night. How had anything gotten through the portal with him beside it? Maybe if he was unconscious, the rift couldn't detect him. He could think of no other reason for what had happened. The trees came into sharper focus. A small body slammed into a twisted juniper.

The ensuing grunt thundered from Charming's throat. Twenty feet away she wrestled with the gray entity. "Get away from the gate, Earl." Her wrist glowed with violet light and her punches flew faster than most people could spit.

The gray entity moaned, a sound like wind funneling through a tin can. The size and bulk of a small room, it stood between Charming and the gate. She fired a strange weapon made from a crystal at the creature.

Across the rough lava ground, Earl crawled to her. He wouldn't let her die. She wouldn't fight alone. He hadn't gone a foot when another being, resembling a beautiful young human male, rose up from the shadows, materializing from nothing, joining her, waging combat at her side. The place where Earl should be.

Chrome pigments slithered across the young male's blue skin, gathering in his hands. Amber leaves cascaded from his scalp, a strange sort of hair. Earl recognized him as something that had been here before, a something calling itself Cerin. Charming had been warned by her fellow monster slayers to stay away from him. What was she doing?

"We can't force the evil to leave until you move away from the portal." Cerin spoke like waves slapping against a shore of jagged rock. He and the gray beast mingled then parted. With speed Earl had never seen, the monster whipped past Cerin to go after Charming. Her screams drove pangs into Earl's chest.

Blood dribbled down her cheek, and she collapsed onto her knees. Her glasses fell off, twisted and cracked. "Earl, you have to go. Now!"

Leave her? He struggled onto his feet. "I won't let it take you."

The majestic Cerin leaped between her and the gray beast. His blue complexion tinted toward black, his chrome eyes flashed, and his cheeks puffed out, straining. "I'll protect her."

The gray mass ignored Cerin, tendrils of its gray bulk breaking out, whipping Charming, surrounding her.

If Earl stayed, she would surely perish. "I'll be right up there." He pointed to an overhang of rock ten yards away. "One wink and I'll be back like cannon shot."

"I'm counting on it. Now run." She gasped. "Just run. And look after my sister. Promise."

"That sounds like you won't be coming back."

She grunted, hitting the ground flat. A new gash opened on her neck, gushing red like a downpour. "Promise."

He'd promise her anything and keep his word. "I swear."

Earl hurried down the trail. When he reached the wall of ancient lava, he climbed up to the overhang. From up there, fifteen feet off the ground, he overlooked the entire scene, the struggle between Charming and the gray beast.

The light between the pillars shifted to gold, and Cerin dragged Charming toward it. She vaulted into his arms and threw a small device at the portal. Five copies of her clutching onto Cerin sprung up before the gate. One version of him carried her through. The color of the rift changed to crimson, another Cerin ferried another Charming into the rift. This repeated until all five couples had gone. The gray mass dove in after the third.

Earl hoped the third Charming and Cerin had been one of the reflections. Had her device split them into five or had Cerin done it? The trick was typical for a Rifter's arsenal, so it could have been Charming's doing. The more important question was, would she survive?

No one from this Earth had been through the gate besides Earl, according to Charming. She had said it was forbidden by the same rulers of the rift who had stranded Earl here. What would they do to her?

He could only wait and be the first thing she saw when she returned to Settler. He had to believe she would.



Chapter 2

Metal struck metal, hollow and violent, distinct and unmistakable, the cocking of a gun. It stopped Daelin Long's heart as readily as the layoff notice texted by her former boss and supposed friend: *mergr cuts = no room 4u. b gone bi 4*. Not a sorry. No care taken to use proper English or spell all the words correctly. Not one answer to Daelin's pleas. The absolute worst day of her life.

Her box of office things clutched in her cramping fingers, she had shuffled to the subway. Getting mugged at gunpoint on the platform, where she had lost her cashed severance pay, her cell phone, laptop, and even her stapler, had left her short of breath and babbling. Her younger sister had taken advantage when called via a borrowed landline, promising a safe haven. Here. Amid pine trees and rocks. Nowheresville, Oregon. Where Daelin thought she'd at least escape assholes and bullets. If she could swallow, she'd laugh.

Fine strands of black broke free from her updo and tangled in her mascara-lengthened eyelashes. Unbidden, the memory of burnt gunpowder from the worst day of her life assaulted her freefalling senses. Her hand froze around the ceramic frog.

"Turn around nice and slow, *ladrón de rana*." The accusation of frog thief shook, high-pitched with gusts of fury.

The lawn ornament chirped out a chorus of gibbets when Daelin set it back in her sister's garden. She raised her hands as she had three weeks ago, and just like then, they were defenseless save for dried sweat. Straightening to her full six foot height, she twisted around so slowly it'd frustrate a double semi colon.

"Whoa, you're taller than Sabina. Never thought I'd see that. You're obviously not from around here." Inky curls tumbled around dark eyes that didn't stay still. With the shotgun poised deftly in her hands, the tiny woman towered as a giant.

Daelin stared down the barrel. She fixated on it, unable to speak, unable to move. The wind picked up, carrying a frigid blast down from the snowy peaks, ignoring the arrival of late June.

At an elevation of almost four thousand feet, Settler, Oregon, ignored the seasons respected by the rest of the continent. Nestled inside an ancient volcano in the arid high desert, the area had a unique landscape. The remnants of the volcano had the names of Gold and Swit Peaks. They sat behind the town. Two kindly grandfathers keeping an eye on things. A cinder cone rose between two placid lakes to the west of the peaks, before the eroded line marking the other side of the old crater. Beyond it rose the snowcapped Cascade mountains. The town had established itself between the twin lakes and the twin peaks, snuggled into the perfect nook to enjoy all the splendor surrounding it.

Stiffening, Daelin expected to shiver from the wind. Instead, the slap of cool calmed her, soothed nerves raw from experiences three thousand miles away. The people she knew in the city had warned her about the wild west. Rightly so, it seemed. "M-my sister

didn't answer the door. I've been waiting over an hour. She told me how to find the spare key in case she wasn't around."

"You that Darling girl?" The barrel lowered. Her well-worn gray sweatshirt and khakis fluttered with the next gust, and delicate fingers, not made for pulling triggers, swept hair out of her elfin face. She appeared no older than Daelin. "*¡Hola!* I didn't figure you for the fancy-pantsed type. Charming ain't. You don't look like the elder sister either."

"Yes, that's me. Darlin Dae Long. Everyone calls me Daelin. I'm only two years older than my sister." She glanced down at her green T-shirt dress and flip flops, perplexed as to how anyone could label them as fancy. "Can I put my arms down now?"

"Charming and Darling. What was your mother thinking?" The woman aiming the shotgun stood as if she ate no more than one bean a day.

Daelin hoped her sister would come by soon, get her out of this lunacy, and lend her some cash and a sandwich. A nice thick sandwich. It was past noon, and she'd been on the road since five. "Our mother has no love for the conventional."

"That's obvious." The wind threatened to whisk the young woman off to another place with no civilization, because Daelin hadn't seen any since leaving Boise six and a half hours ago.

Over three hundred lonely miles had stretched between here and there. Sixty miles ago, the tips of the majestic Cascades had started to come into view. Daelin had heard cities thrived on the other side. Maybe she'd make it over there sooner rather than later. No way did her future reside in this tiny town.

"If you know Charming, then you know." She licked at her lips, wishing she hadn't let her sister talk her into this. However, Daelin had nowhere else to go and no better job prospects than the librarian position Charming had dangled like a juicy two pound Rueben. "Do you know where she is?"

Shotgun Evita held her finger up in the air then fished a baseball cap covered in foil out of her sweatshirt pocket, settling it over her messy curls. "Who?"

Searching for some possible explanation for the crazy hat, Daelin had to glance up. She hoped Shotgun Evita wasn't representative of the typical Settler resident. "My sister. Do you know where my sister is?"



Chapter 3

A bellowing roar made Earl jump. He dug his fingers into the jagged rock to keep from tumbling off the ledge, which overhung the obsidian pillars. The noise came from down there. He had heard the grating roar many times. Charming must have dropped her phone during the skirmish with the blob of evil.

The rift hadn't reopened, and she hadn't returned. He'd have to figure out a way to track and go after her. He couldn't leave her out there.

The day had dawned as bright as any and with a sky as blue and cloudless as perfection. The sun didn't chase away the chill or the bite of winter, however, winter wouldn't give up its place to summer easily. It never did.

Earl climbed down off the overhang and returned to the clearing inside a copse of pine trees. The gateway never opened during the day, and it only became active between the summer solstice and fall equinox. Usually. Opening three days early twisted as a warning in his bowels. Of what?

Charming had told him the rules of the rift when needing to unload some of her other pressing secrets. Earl didn't know what to do with all of her confidences, but he knew some should never be thought of, let alone spoken.

The roar of a T-Rex disturbed the quiet of the woods again. Charming had played a movie with that exact bellow for Earl on many occasions. It was her favorite and Earl didn't mind. He loved any movie and anything allowing him to spend time with her. In the 1880s he never imagined the existence of motion pictures and certainly not stories that made him feel as if he stood in a make believe world. He wondered if film makers knew of the rift. Did they know its stories?

He scanned the area around the obsidian pillars and the juniper tree, finding mostly pine needles and rocks. The sun shifted, its beams reflecting off Charming's glasses into his eyes. He went to pick them up and cringed at the crusted blood. Did she still live? If so, would Cerin keep her safe?

Beside her eyeglasses sat the crystal disc the size of his palm. The disc was encased in coils and had a crank on the side. Had it let Charming into the rift or had Cerin? Earl would keep the device until he found out, pocketing it and her fractured eyeglasses.

The dinosaur shattered the quiet morning once more. Earl homed in on it, discovering the phone stuck on the rough bark of the juniper. He plucked it off. Charming's sister's icon lit up then went to voice mail. Charming had said her sister would arrive today and had been looking forward to it.

Earl had been too, until his girl disappeared. In what time did she find herself? In what place? The rift roiled with more mysteries than how he had ended up here. Why'd she have to go like this? He could have helped her make a better plan. Although he no longer appeared close to seventy, he had those years of experience to draw on. He rubbed at his face, relishing the feel of the younger skin, skin that had yet to know a wrinkle. The

crunch of rock on rock spun him on his heels.

There stood Culver Swit with a swagger suggesting he intended to draw pistols. If a cap and ball ever fired at him, he'd piss himself. All the blustering pretend cowboys around here would.

"Morning, Earl." Culver's thin dark mustache twitched with his words. If things had started differently, if Earl hadn't traveled through the portal, they might have been friends. For a man yet to hit thirty, Culver had done all right for himself. He had two businesses besides playing postman. "Weren't you wearing that yesterday?"

Winning this particular duel didn't matter. Earl had to keep his wits to be the victor in the overall war. What war, he didn't know, but the rift was a threat and the rules of its battles weren't so clear, not compared to the big war he'd been in, the one that pitted brothers against one another. None of the greenhorns around Settler knew anything about that kind of death. Certainly not the sneering postman.

Culver distrusted everything arriving through the rift, hunting it, sending it back from where it came. Earl had defied Culver's attempts to send him off, pitting them on opposite sides. A private war.

Yet Earl didn't see the point in denying the obvious. He didn't hide his like of fine clothes and fine living. He never had and never would. He owned a better business than Culver's two combined. Blackes Ranch Resort and Spa attracted tourists with money. Tourism was how Settler kept itself alive.

"Just looks the same with the outdoor gear on." It was true enough, besides before Earl greeted Charming's sister, he would change into something dapper. He didn't want to make the wrong impression, although compared to his neighbors that'd be hard to do.

Flicking Charming's phone onto vibrate, he slipped it in his pocket where her eyeglasses and the crystal device were safely tucked away. Then his fingers smoothed the close-cropped beard and mustache framing his jaw. The idea of being bare faced appalled him, but he had nothing against the trimmer fashions of this era. "You're off track for delivering my mail, Culver. My box is over that way, and I told you I'd come pick it up from now on. Save you the trip out here."

Whatever else happened, Earl had to keep Charming's whereabouts a secret from Culver and his cohorts for as long as possible. Her entering the rift broke the rules. Despite Culver calling her friend, he'd have to enforce the rules and dub her outlaw or enemy or whatever the term was Culver's ilk used.

"I don't mind the work." Dressed in blue with a worn *USPS* badge on his chest, Culver also wore a pair of aviator goggles from a time after Earl's but long before this one. They glowed purple, powered by coils rimming the lenses, the same type of coils as on the crystal disc.

"Reports came in you were busy out here last night. You know I have to check it out." Culver raked those glowing lenses over Earl.

Earl shrugged, twisting his face away from the goggles. He worried they would reveal his age as it had been before he traveled through the rift. "Just be sure to stay on forest land and off mine." Half the clearing belonged to Earl's ranch, the other half to the Volcanic National Forest. "Don't want your screwbird doings scaring off my guests."

"Imaginary guests? Or will your guests this summer sense I was here now? You're a crusty thing for a man yet to meet thirty." Culver pulled a rectangular device out of his mail pouch. Bulky and having heft to it, the device had a handle and buttons on one end.

The center of it glowed purple and green as he moved about the clearing. “The rift didn’t open for long. What came through? Did you see?” Jaw flapping, he panned his purple covered eyes at the pillars and the juniper tree. A faint image of the gray thing flitted on the lenses. “Something wicked.” He pulled the goggles down so they hung around his neck.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about. Just came out to check the trails. I’ve guests booked this weekend.”

“Don’t play the idiot with me. That kind of stink doesn’t cling to you. The stench of lying does.” Culver sniffed and wrinkled his nose. “Weird time for folks to come. Ski season is done, and summer hasn’t started. Did you tell them?”

Earl didn’t blink. “I have nothing worth lying to you about.” He fingered the crystal disc in his pocket. “The cooler weather in spring is better for rock hounds. Most of the back country roads should be cleared up by the weekend.”

Switching off the boxy device, Culver set it in his mail pouch. “Maybe I believe you. However, the Paleo Institute’s office has been empty all week. Won’t that ruin the Settler experience for your guests?”

That meant the strangebloods in town wouldn’t miss Charming for a few days, which would help Earl out a lot. He’d keep her secrets. In his pocket her phone vibrated, reminding him of another promise.



Chapter 4

Standing in the middle of nowhere with a shotgun pointed at her by a crazy woman in an aluminum foil hat wasn't what Daelin pictured as a fresh start. Charming had chattered on about chaste air and mountains, lots of sunshine and sky, not weirdoes acting as crazy as loons on the subway. And why wasn't she here yet? "Do you know where my sister is?" Maybe she was stuck at work. "Which way is the Paleo Institute?"

Shotgun Evita took three steps backwards, whirled, then ran across a meadow of brush to a grouping of five dilapidated trailers the next street over. Nuttier things had happened in New York: naked people on the train in a snowstorm, a pink bear racing down Fifth Avenue, men in bras and lipstick. One loony woman with a gun didn't faze Daelin.

She took the prepaid phone out of her pocket and tried her sister again. It went to voice mail. "Charm, I'm running out of minutes, I can't find your key, and I'm standing out here in the freezing cold. You should have said Settler was like Alaska and full of half-baked fish."

The phone tucked away, Daelin surveyed the whole of the town. Charming lived on Madeline Street, number 24, atop a knoll. Closer to East Lake than Gold Lake on the south side of town, she had a nice view of them both. No building rose higher than three stories, most two or less. Houses dotted the blocks, no more than nine to each one, grouped like well-edited paragraphs. Charming's cottage stood alone at the end of Madeline, which stretched farther into the wilds than the other streets, giving an unobstructed view of nature to the west, the center of town across some scrub brush to the north, and the quiet neighborhoods to the west and north.

The unblemished soul-quaking vista of unpopulated lands spread before her as fine as classic literature, finer than lines of poetry — snowcapped mountains, pine trees, two blue lakes, a cinder cone, tumbleweeds, and a field of black rock, which appeared to be asphalt but wasn't. From her research on Settler, she knew it was lava. Miles and miles of lava. The town seemed so lonely, the edge of the world.

Daelin shivered and reached for another frog. A mob of them thronged her sister's gardens. The first fifteen croakers hadn't had the spare key, but one of them did. So Charming had said.

"The key isn't under that one. I believe it's under a frog on the side of the house. A blue one."

Daelin dropped the frog, braced her hands on her hips, and spun around. Holding a U.S. Postal Service pouch and dressed in a blue uniform, the man had no gun. He stood a few feet away next to her car. The cock of his hip and the hitch of his lips marked him as a once-was bad boy who hadn't completely outgrown his rakish ways. Dark hair flirted with his eyes, partially covering them, definitely calling attention to their inky depths.

"At least you're not holding a shotgun." Daelin crossed her arms, waiting for what

he had to say for himself.

His fingers fiddled with the old-fashioned aviator goggles hanging around his neck. “You met my cousin then?”

“Little thing with messy dark curls?”

“That’s her. Trinidad Cepeda, and I’m Culver Swit. Descendents of the illustrious Patrick Swit.” He said it as if it meant something, puffing his chest and raising his chin. The world beyond urban boundaries was strange.

“If you know which frog, you must know my sister,” Daelin said. “Which side of the house?”

“You won’t be able to avoid knowing everyone by the end of the week. That’s the nature of places like this.” His expression curved into a chuckle, igniting sparks in the ebony pools beneath his thick long eyelashes. He left the car, heading to her, clutching a fistful of envelopes. His perfectly angled nose almost touched hers, and he came only an inch shy of her height. His regard didn’t leave her, stripping her naked, heating her skin wherever the wind had chilled it.

Daelin reached for the letters. “Well, I don’t know anybody yet.”

His smile dimmed. He placed the mail in Daelin’s hand, but didn’t let go. “You know me and my cousin, Tiny. You’ll see us many times again. Keep that in mind. Things are different here.” He went with her up the porch steps. “You can’t just sashay in like you belong. You have to give the place and people a chance to know you.”

A throat cleared behind her, deep and gruff, startling her frayed nerves. Daelin whirled, wishing she had kept a frog. Then she’d have something to hurl. The mail in her hand would only cause a paper cut at best.

A well-dressed cowboy resembling one of her favorite authors stood there. Like the postman, he appeared close to her age, somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. Maybe she didn’t want to throw anything.

In a long rust-hued coat, black boots, and black cowboy hat, the newcomer leveled a pair of startling blue eyes at Daelin. Familiar blue eyes. “Go on about your rounds, Culver, I’ve got this. I can let you in, miss.” A few inches shorter than her didn’t prevent him from being as confident as a mountain.

“And you would have a key because?” Daelin shoved her sister’s mail in her purse.

“I’m the landlord. I live straight down the road.” He pointed at a dirt track that hugged along the lava flow then disappeared into the trees. “The name’s Earl Blacke.” He came closer and extended a hand. “Darlin Dae Long, I presume?”

Despite the nip in the air, his hand boasted a hearty warmth when Daelin grasped it and shook. The set of his jaw and the sternness of his eye made her feel safe, as if he knew how to take on the world.

“I prefer Daelin if you don’t mind.”

“I’m all for people naming themselves whatever they like.” He let go and tipped his hat. His hair shone as gold as the brush covering the lowlands spreading wide before the mountains. The curls on top were longer than the sheered sides, a roguish and playful style as hip as the in-crowd in the city, and his beard and mustache framed it all perfectly.

The postman butt in, smirking. “I’m not sure Earl is his real name.”

What an odd thing to say. Daelin studied them both and their stiff posture toward one another. They weren’t friends and would tear each other to pieces whenever the opportunity presented itself.

The dapper cowboy ignored the postman and held out a key, a beautiful old-fashioned thing with ornate scrolls worked into the aged metal.

She plucked it from his outstretched palm. "Where is she?"

"Hmm?" He arched his brows as if he laughed at her.

Nothing about any of this was funny. Here she stood in the middle of wilderness with no city in sight with no hope of a career with no promise of a better future. All she had was the hope of reconnecting with her sister and surviving. "Charming. The only reason you would have come with a key is because she asked you to."

He shifted his weight to his other hip. The pressed crease of his gray slacks highlighted his graceful movement. He obviously spent a good amount of time on physical activity. "She did."

That was all? These people were unbelievable. "Then where is she?" Daelin's tone crackled more than she intended. She didn't need enemies, not in a new home where she could see half the houses from where she stood. There'd be no avoiding anybody. Taking a deep breath, she wetted her lips and tried again. "Where can I find Charming?"

Culver shifted his letter bag, his lips twitching. "Yeah, where is she?"

The glower Earl shot at Culver could bleach all the words out of a book. "She's out on a dig with the Paleo Institute." He waved his hand behind the town. "They've been gone all week."

Glancing over the low-lying town and the vast nature surrounding it, Daelin balked, taking a step closer to the door. How did her sister stand spending days out there? "I just spoke to her yesterday, and she never mentioned it."

"She thought they'd be back by now. She texted me last night, saying they were about to go off the grid."

Off the edge of the world most like. "Which means what?"

"No signal, darling."

She hoped he wouldn't make a habit of getting her name wrong. "Daelin."

He stood straighter and nodded. "Right." His boot scuffed at the ground. "May I assist you with your luggage?"

"No, let me." Culver beat Earl over to her rental.

"Do get her settled. Quickly." The words snapped as brisk as the wind.

Daelin twisted, facing toward town, finding an older lady. She wore huge round glasses, had short pin curls as white as the snowcapped mountains, and a lithe build that stretched to match Culver's height. The crocheted sweater and green pants would have fit in the 1970s, the same with the green polyester scarf decorating her long neck.

The woman held out a set of papers. Her hand had character, knots and lines depicting years and adventures. Surely, a person couldn't live in the wild west without adventures. Daelin hoped to find some soon.

"I'm Sabina Staley," the woman said.

Culver and Earl inched toward the road, obviously intending to leave Daelin alone with this formidable personality. Sabina had the air of a person who could beat down any obstacle in her path, and what an impression Daelin made.

Her new boss, and here she stood in a dirty dress, flip flops, and among local crazies in a garden of a hundred frogs. If only Daelin could delete this scene and start over. Smoothing her hair, she did her best to make herself more presentable. "Ms. Staley, it's great to meet you." She held out her hand in greeting.

Sabina slapped the papers into Daelin's waiting palm. "Fill these out and return them to Wald Macadam before ten in the morning. You'll find him on the ground floor in reception of the county building. It's the only one with a steeple. Understood?" The large glasses scanned Daelin from flip flops to wind-tossed hair. "Culver, come with me. Now." Sabina pivoted on her heels and swept back the way she'd come, toward the center of town. The postman trotted after her.

"I think she likes you," Earl said. His chuckle brightened the hard edges of his expression. If he kept it up, they might wind up friends.

"I imagine life here to be miserable with enemies," Daelin said. "There's nowhere to run."

"There's always the mountains." He gripped onto the lapels of his rust-colored duster and shrugged in the direction of her car. "Give me your keys and I'll get your bags."

Daelin handed them over. "I probably shouldn't have locked it. It's a habit. Everything has to be locked all the time in the city."

"A good habit to hang onto." Earl left her on the porch and went to the sedan. He pulled out both suitcases, the duffle bag, and the assorted shopping bags. In one trip he brought them to the door. "What else can I do for you?" His gaze met hers.

He appeared to really mean his offer. "Do you know when Charming will return?" She chewed her lower lip, glancing at the car. "I have to get the rental to the Bend lot by four, or I'll get charged for another day." Another fifty bucks she didn't have. "The company said Bend is close. About an hour? And I'm starving."

"Yup, about an hour northwest of here." He tipped his hat. "At your service. How about you get unpacked and settled, and I'll come for you later this afternoon? Will that do?"

Daelin shook the papers in her hand. "I have to get these completed and to Ms. Staley."

Earl took out a pocket watch and checked the time. "She said tomorrow morning. If we leave within the hour, we'll have time to enjoy the city, a late lunch, and be back by sundown. I'll bring you a snack to tide you over. Your sister never has any food in the house."

He had to know Charming well. If so, Daelin felt better about trusting her day to him. Another word he said struck her. "City?" She didn't think she could wait an hour. With the exception of Boise, it had been days since she saw one.



After every fruitful heist in the 1870s and 1880s, Earl had stashed away a handful of gold coins, his retirement fund. It would have bought him a few years of modest living then. In this later century, it funded his dreams. He had purchased land and built a luxury resort, Blackes Ranch Resort and Spa. His youth returned, money, the fixings to flaunt it, life in these modern times suited Earl better than his life in the 1800s had. He didn't have to pretend to be a well-off businessman anymore.

He hiked west from Charming's cottage down a dirt road to his ranch house of massive cedar logs, stone, and glass, bigger than any mansion he'd seen in his former century. A lava field hid it from town, making it appear as if he owned the whole of the old crater by himself. He had built the ranch at the far end of East Lake within sight of the shore. A marina jutted out into the calm waters, heated to a comfortable temperature by the sleeping volcano. The geothermal activity dotted the lake with bubbles, their rings marring the perfect reflections of sky and mountains.

Beside the house, sat the spa in a cedar-planked lodge of its own. Huge windows sparkled in the sun, revealing the delights inside. From his bedroom on the top floor of the house, Earl could take in all of the area's splendor. In the summers he spent the dark hours watching the obsidian pillars.

"Not bad for a miner who never found more than a fistful of nuggets," he said.

As he saw it, the world owed him for his life in the previous century. For other's ideals in 1862 he had learned to master slop, blood, and death, delivering it, holding the last moments of those around him succumbing to bullet, ball, and cannon. During it all, he had lost his soul, and he believed he should be compensated for it.

Digging up his gold and selling it had finally given him the future for which he had yearned. Yet once he established his beautiful life, it wasn't enough. It didn't make up for what the war had taken from him. It didn't make up for leaving his wife and daughters to fend for themselves in 1867. He had never returned to the Midwest. Maybe he'd never be able to right such a terrible wrong, but he kept trying.

An employee booked most of the guests for the resort ranch off of something called the internet. Earl didn't understand the half of it or the machine that ran it. The idea of a box slimmer and lighter than a strongbox to communicate with the world awed him. No one had imagined such a thing in his former time. Guests took rooms on the first and second floors of his home. Although he didn't let anyone close, he enjoyed having people around.

Down the dirt road, through the lava and trees, and up his long driveway, he thought about Daelin. It surprised him how little Charming and she resembled one another. If he didn't know they were related, he never would have guessed. Daelin appeared to have more of an aesthetic for fine things than Charming, was taller than he expected, and had a boldness under her shaken nerves. Where Charming conjured up thoughts of light, Daelin

made Earl think of shadows. They both had good brains. Eventually Daelin would find out he was more than her sister's landlord and would ask a lot questions. He didn't want to lie to her, but he couldn't disclose Charming's secrets. They were too dangerous.

Wilma Rider sauntered out of the spa, waving at him. "Mr. Earl, I didn't see you leave this morning." The glossy light brown tendrils of her braid never strayed out of place, nor the sheen on her lips. She wore no other makeup other than her nude-tinted lip gloss. In her mid thirties, she was a handsome woman, but her personality was too close to his former wife's, one that grated on his nerves if he was around it too long.

A soft tan always graced Wilma's complexion, most likely due to her centuries of roots in the region. If he could get her to quit thinking she had a chance with him, she'd be the perfect employee.

"I hope because you were busy and not because you keep tabs on me." He had enough of folks keeping an eye on him. Five years had passed since he came through the rift, yet the agents of Wells Fargo haunted him as if they continued to sit on his shoulders, and certain townspeople, like Culver, gazed too often in Earl's direction. He had left Northern California in 1888 to get away from that sort of thing. "I'm going into the city. If you have any needs, leave the list on the front desk."

Her long cheeks twitched, and she frowned. "Thanks for thinking of me, Mr. Earl."

She wanted more. He didn't. Their daily standoff. He didn't dare smile at her and went on into the house.

Scott, his other full-time employee, didn't need checking. That man never faltered in the care of the steer and horses. Good thing. Earl had never cared for horses. He had never owned one or used one in his former century. He wasn't about to start. His years as an infantryman had served him well, allowing him to cover twenty miles in a day over the roughest terrain. These days he still used his feet and a shiny new pickup truck.

In his office, a room as large as the farmhouse he once shared with his wife and daughters in Iowa, he strode to an old mahogany desk. It had once belonged to a well-to-do mine owner. Neither the man nor the mine had any bearing on the world anymore.

Earl took Charming's glasses and the crystal disc out of the top drawer, wrapped them carefully in a piece of rabbit fur, then slipped the package into his coat pocket. At the fireplace, he kneeled at the hearth and slipped his fingers underneath one of the floorboards. It lifted with ease and he pushed the insulation out of the way. Beneath it, a safe was embedded into the volcanic rock that made up the ground in all of Caslow County.

Defly, Earl dialed the combination and opened the vault. From its depths he lifted out a cell phone, one different than his normal phone. He'd have to get another of these prepaid models today. This one was almost used up.

His thumb selected a contact, one of two. Charming was the only other. The line rang then clicked when the other end picked up.

A lilty voice striking notes as harmonious as a bow on a violin spoke. "Are they onto me?"

"Not yet. I'm coming in today with a guest." He brushed insulation dust off his pants.

"Who?"

"Charming's sister."

"Do you think it wise?"

“Sooner or later she’s going to find out about her sister’s activities and look into it all. It’s more likely than not since Daelin will be working directly for Sabina. I think that means our Envoy to the rift has plans for Daelin. If so, the young lady should have proper guidance. Don’t you think?”

The line went quiet, but Earl could hear breathing. Pots clanged then came the rapid-fire thuds of chopping. Finally, there came a sigh. “You may come. You still going by Earl Blacke?”

“Yes. You still going by Dante?”

“No, I go by Dan now, and I don’t look as old.”

Earl wondered how that worked. Were he and Dante actually younger or did they just appear so? “Still in the same place?”

“No. I have a little sandwich shop now.” He rattled off the address.

“Perfect. It’s right by the return lot for the car rental, and my new friend is very hungry.”

Earl hung up, placed the phone back in his safe, and locked up. In the kitchen, he found some leftover roast chicken and made a sandwich, topping it with his homemade tomato salad. With a square of waxed paper, he wrapped it up and stuffed it into a paper sack with a bottle of water.

Inside the spa, cedar and rain hit his nostrils from ten candles blazing across the top of the reception desk. Earl rubbed the sides of his nose. It was probably a scent to put him in the mood. He blew the flames out and nabbed Wilma’s shopping list from the desk. She wanted supplies for scrubs, facial masks, and wraps. At the bottom she added chocolate, roses, and a set of silk sheets.

“I’ll never understand her.” He pocketed the list written on the spa’s linen stationery and left without speaking to her.

In the garage, the sight of his shiny gold pickup made him smile. It was like having his own stagecoach. If only it had a strongbox that filled up with gold on a regular basis.

It took four minutes to drive to Charming’s place. Daelin waited in her rental. Earl drove up beside her and handed her the sack lunch through the vehicle windows. It took less than five minutes to drive out of town. The Basin Highway never had much traffic, so he didn’t fret about losing her. Thirty minutes west and they turned onto the busier Highway 97, heading north for another thirty minutes. He drove slow, careful to keep her right behind him.

The rental return lot was located across the street from where Earl needed to go. He pointed at the sandwich shop, telling Daelin to meet him there when she finished.

Inferno Grill blazed on the window next to the door of the little restaurant. From all the hours spent in Dante’s company, Earl knew Dante liked the joke of it. Earl thought it stupid.

Two customers sat at tables nibbling sandwiches the size of bison noses. The small eatery had a simple decor in black, red, white, and chrome: an order counter, a place to assemble and grill sandwiches, and a few simple square tables. The rich aroma of specialty coffee perfumed the air. So did bacon. Dante wiped down the grill, his deep blue irises heating to yellow for the briefest of moments, long enough for Earl to notice.

When Earl tugged at his collar, Dante smiled. His appearance differed greatly from when he ran Settler’s library. With blue eyes and sandy hair, he could be one of Earl’s brothers. They had the same fit builds, the same style of beard and mustache, only Dante

stood an inch taller and had longer hair. The dapper old man who had helped Settler pick out books now had less wrinkles, no eyeglasses, and wore no tweed. The hat was gone too. Wisdom, however, still furrowed his brows.

Tossing the cleaning rag aside, he smirked. "You've always inspired me, my friend."

"Makes me wonder what kind of convoluted place you come from." Earl thrust his chin toward the back of the restaurant. "Ran into your brother last night. We've a lot to discuss before she gets here." He took out Charming's bloodied glasses, peeling back the rabbit fur enough to give Dante a quick glimpse.

"I knew recruiting you was a wise move." Dante squinted at an elderly woman dressed in pink eating at one of his tables. "Betty, keep an eye on things for a minute."



Chapter 6

Her thirty-ninth move, and Daelin knew it wouldn't be her last. In the doorway of Charming's cottage, she clutched the handles of her suitcases. The tiny house basically had one room with a converted sunroom for more space, a bathroom, and a ladder leading up to a bedroom loft.

Setting her bags down then hauling the others in from the porch, Daelin could now claim to be an official resident of Settler. She shut the door against the chill and stepped farther inside.

The house smelled like her sister and Oregon: fresh dug soil, pine, cedar, sage, and hyacinth. A battered side table had traveled here from their childhood, one they had converted to a dollhouse until they outgrew dolls. Later they played hours and hours of card games on it with their baby brother. Charming insisted it go wherever she did. It was the only piece of furniture that had remained a constant in their young lives.

The essence of Charming surrounded Daelin, a bond, familiarity, the one thing she had hoped most to find in Settler. "Charming?" The expectation of finding her grew stronger, beckoning Daelin to the middle of the main room. Only the gentle rustling of the wind tapping tree branches against the windows answered. She had never experienced such utter silence, except when begging her mother not to move again.

Shabby chic described much of the cottage's furnishings. Old, worn, welcoming. She envied Charming for having this bit of stability, running her hand across the timeworn red of a wicker chaise lounge. It had soft floral cushions and a chenille quilt she could curl up in with her sister later. Under its comfort, they'd catch up on their lives, chatting and laughing until dawn. Such had been their habit when meeting as adults.

A door off the kitchen led to an attached garage that could fit a compact car if it hadn't been outfitted as a workshop. Fossils and tools covered the surfaces along with bits of wire, crystal, and circuitry. The soldering iron still smoked. Daelin went and unplugged it, brushing her fingers over the chips of rock and wire. What had Charming been doing? What did wires and circuits have to do with fossil hunting? A glance out the window showed a Jeep parked behind the garage. What kind of rush would have had her leaving it behind?

Daelin chewed her lower lip and searched the house for a note. Not one message anywhere, and she had no idea what to think other than either Charming or Earl had lied. Why?

She checked her watch. He'd be here in forty-five minutes. She didn't know where to put her things and hoped Charming would be here when she returned from Bend. She hated living out of suitcases, and her little sister knew it.

In the bathroom, she made room for her toiletries and did a quick wash to rid herself of the road. Out of her luggage, she took a pair of jeans, her favorite purple sweater, socks, and sneakers. She put them on and her trench coat. The business coat didn't fit

with Settler, but she had nothing else.

Finding a pad and pen on Charming's writing desk in the sunroom, Daelin jotted a quick note. *Earl took me to Bend to return the rental car. Be back by sundown.* Two steps later and Daelin was in the kitchen. A quaint little island divided it from the seating area.

The 1950s aqua refrigerator had a few magnets stuck on it — clear buttons with photos of dinosaur bones in their centers. One held a recent image of Earl and Charming out on one of Settler's two lakes, laughing, their arms around each other. Daelin froze, staring at it. There was no mistaking he held Charming on a pedestal, and she blossomed under his attention. Her sister had never mentioned him as a boyfriend, or any boyfriend.

Daelin stuck her note beside the happy photo, then she searched the cottage for other pictures. She found some of herself, Charming, and their brother Cobb, and a few of their mother in concert. One with Charming and her father. He had agreed to meet her, but as far as Daelin knew they hadn't kept in touch.

Daelin and Cobb hadn't fared half so well with their fathers. Not having the same dads didn't keep her and her siblings from forming a tight bond, one distance hadn't loosened. Cobb lived in Atlanta, still in college. Daelin envied him. She wished she could return to a university's sheltered reality.

In the front room she found recent images of Charming out in the desert digging with other fossil enthusiasts. Dinosaurs had been in the ground for millions of years. They never required a rush. Did they? Daelin squinted at the garage and rubbed at her temples. Where else would Charming be?

Out the front window a wake of dust approached from the direction of Earl's ranch. Daelin grabbed her purse and went outside. After locking up, she pocketed the pretty antique key and hopped into the rental car. She watched the nearing vehicle, unsure what to make of Earl. Landlord, indeed. He had left a whole lot out of who he was.

He smiled friendly enough when handing over a paper sack, and he drove in a way that made it easy to keep up with him, which made Daelin feel a little better. Perhaps over lunch he'd tell her how long he had been with Charming and what all he knew.

A sandwich now, lunch with another sandwich later, it'd be a good day. Unwrapping the one Earl had made her, Daelin took a bite. "In all the dictionaries." She devoured it. That cowboy didn't just slap some bologna on bread, he'd made a gourmet meal on fresh-baked slices of whole grain as good as any New York deli. Better.

The sun filtering through the windows baked the interior of the car. Daelin cracked the window to let the cool mountain air rush in. It smelled better than any air freshener. Cedar, sage, and pine filled her lungs and sucked all the moisture out of her. She'd shrivel into a raisin if she didn't get a gallon of lotion and stay hydrated. She guzzled the bottle of water Earl had given her, wishing for more.

Charming had mentioned Settler was in the high desert. It didn't look like any desert Daelin had seen in films or television shows. For one, it wasn't warm. For two, she didn't see any vast plains of sand. There were plants and water and life. Sort of. Scrub brush was life, but not civilization.

Periodic campground and attraction signs graced the highway. Others cautioned of deer, grades, and curves. Daelin saw no evidence of a city, just mountains, pine trees, and scruffy brown brush. A large sign announced how much farther to Bend, but didn't hint at an urban oasis.

"Please have a mall." Daelin flicked on the radio and found a station playing an

eclectic selection. “Not so bad.” Yeah, she could live with it.

When Earl exited the highway into Bend, an RV park broke the wilderness and houses began to dot the brush. A strip mall cropped up and a traffic light. Earl made a turn. Stunted and twisted fir trees stuck up over the brush, all in shades of sage and brown.

Before the next traffic light, Earl’s golden pickup veered into a car lot. Daelin pulled up beside him and rolled down her window.

“There’s a restaurant across the road. Come over when you’re done.” Earl tipped his hat and drove off.

Daelin watched him to make sure she’d wind up in the right place then got out of the sedan. A tiny gray hut sat in the middle of twenty cars. She handled her business, cutting short the conversation the attendant wanted to have. He didn’t care about Daelin’s shivering.

Hands shoved into her pockets, she walked over to the restaurant. The little house, not much bigger than Charming’s, had been painted a deep red, and *Inferno Grill* blazed in neon across the picture window. Inside, she was greeted by an elderly woman sitting by the door. Daelin didn’t see anyone else.

“Did a cowboy in a red coat come in here?” Daelin sniffed and reached for a napkin. The cold then sudden warmth shocked her nose into running. She dabbed at it.

Bright pink colored the woman from lipstick to boots. The only thing not pink was her cropped halo of white curls. “He went in the back with Dan.” She pointed. “You can sit here and keep me company until they finish.”

Daelin blew her nose and tossed the napkin in the trash. “What are they doing?”

Pink lady shrugged. “I hope they’re creating a new sandwich. Dan makes the best.”

The French bun oozing cheese and guacamole smelled divine. “Sandwiches are my favorite food.” Daelin smiled. Her stomach rumbled at the lingering scent of bacon. She glanced around the place, which reminded her of an old diner. A sign on a door off the food prep area read, *Employees Only*. “I’m just going to tell him I’m here.”

She went to the counter, lifted a section, then scooted behind it. The private door opened into an extension of the kitchen. At the far end stood another door leading to an office. In it stood Earl and a gentleman who could be his twin. They didn’t see her. With only twelve feet of space between them, she could hear their words clearly.

“We don’t know what Sabina wants her for yet.” Earl’s lookalike spoke so beautifully, drawing Daelin closer. “So you can’t tell her about last night and Charming’s part in it. How would you explain it?”

The stranger knew Charming. Worse, something had happened to her. Daelin felt ill, more shaken than when an asshole pulled a gun on her three weeks ago. And what did Sabina have to do with all of this? Daelin held her breath, tiptoeing to just outside the door, plastering herself against the wall.

“I don’t plan on explaining anything,” Earl said. “For one, it’s not my place. It’s Sabina’s or one of her minions. For two, I’ve promises to keep.”

He had lied about Charming being out in the desert with the Paleo Institute. Why? Where was her sister? What was she involved in? Daelin dug her fingers into the wall.

“The second reason you gave is more important. It’s dangerous for everyone if you slip Charming’s confidences. Dangerous for you, me, the whole darn world.”

Daelin wished her heart would quit beating so loudly. She didn’t want to miss a

word.

“I know, Dante. My tongue will be still. Mainly I’m here because I’m worried. Tell me about the disc with the wires and circuitry. Will it get me to her?”

Wires and circuits brought to mind the mess in Charming’s workshop. Since when had her younger sister learned to make anything involving wires? Scooting to the side of the door, Daelin peeked around the frame.

A piece of rabbit fur laid in Dante’s hand. He held up a crystalline disc. Sunlight from the office window hit the object, sending a rainbow over his skin. “No matter what it does, you can’t go after her. The Envoys will tear you apart before you get farther than ten steps.”

International intrigue in the middle of Oregon? That was what envoys brought to mind, and it sounded as if Earl and Dante knew where Charming went. Daelin would make Earl tell her.

“If the Envoys don’t get you, the secret will,” Dante said. “You know it. We need a better plan.”

“As soon as I think one up, I’ll be in contact.”

“Not too often or I’ll have to make you the special of the day.” The musical laugh didn’t hide the threat.

Earl walked out of the office, rebundling the device in the rabbit fur along with a pair of broken eyeglasses.

Daelin pressed herself against the wall as flat as she could, holding her breath.

Dante strode out and his gaze fell on her as if he had known all along she eavesdropped there. His irises sparked yellow, and his smile made her shiver.



From all their afternoons and evenings together, Earl knew Dante hated surprises. Especially this kind. He jumped in front of Daelin and pushed Dante back. His fingers heated up, blistering, but he didn't let go. "Watch yourself. Remember who she is."

"Explain." Her tone could whiplash bedrock.

The whole truth of the rift and Dante strained reason. Snippets had to threaten sanity. Earl did his best to put a reassuring smile on his face. "No lying. He can see a lie. How long have you been out here?"

Her olive complexion paled. "N-not long." She stood straighter, locking gazes with Earl. "You know where Charming is."

She'd come off as downtrodden earlier, and due to the tales of despair he'd heard from Charming, he had assumed Daelin weak. Wrongly so. She had spunk, and she'd need it.

A mountain would cover before Dante's full bluster, but he couldn't mean it. He had called last month asking about Charming, showing keen interest in the arrival of the sister. He had plans. Earl didn't like being in the middle of something he didn't know two hoots about.

More than anything, he had promises to keep to Charming. She most likely had plans for Daelin as well. Earl couldn't chance spoiling them by saying what he shouldn't. "Just a hunch as to where she went. She might be home tonight." He'd keep wishing for it. Her return would save him a lot of worry.

"So tell me the hunch." Daelin crossed her arms, raising her chin.

Now wasn't the right moment to reveal Settler's biggest secret. "In time. I promise." Earl needed to quit making promises. One of these days he'd have himself all tied up in knots. "Now you," his fingers thumped on Dante's chest, "you can handle this pleasantly."

"What I'm going to do is best for all of us, especially Charming. Take my hand." Dante reached over Earl.

To define what kind of being Dante was, went beyond Earl's understanding. Everything about the rift did. He continued to grapple with how he had arrived here and why Dante had gone to great lengths to befriend him. Dante came from the class of beings who controlled the gateway, the Governors. He came to Earth to hide after stumbling upon some unfortunate truths he refused to disclose to anyone except for Charming. Why her? Worse, Earl's insides knotted over the role he had played in getting her involved.

Daelin scooted out of reach, lifting a box to keep between them. Her instincts had merit. No doubt she'd be recruited by Sabina.

"Your job with the library is about more than books," Earl said. "We're on your side. and your sister's. Let Dante take your hand or you'll deepen Charming's troubles."

“What does that mean?” Daelin backed toward the door. “Deepen her troubles how?” She dropped the box and grabbed a ladle off the stove. “Explain to me what kind of trouble she’s in and how you two dragged her into it.”

For a long minute, Dante studied her, smirking at the flimsy utensil in her hand. He spoke softer. “I’m really glad you moved to Settler. Soon you’ll understand every word we said, but you can’t know yet, and your confusion will lead to troubles just as volatile.”

A sticky spot, indeed. Earl leaned against a tall stack of flour bags, hooking his thumbs through his belt loops. “She’ll need to understand later.”

“Later is key. The rift will reject her if she’s allowed to remember what she knows. It marks her as the Governors’ enemy. They’ll kill her.” Dante’s thumb massaged his knotted brow. “I’d like to avoid her death and mine.”

Daelin growled. “Quit talking about me as if I’m not here, and tell me what you know about my sister. Reject me for what? Enemy of what? What are you talking about?”

By day’s end she might wish she had never moved to Settler. “If you trust your sister, trust us. I swore to her I’d look after you, and I will,” Earl said.

The ladle sliced the air, a respectable slash. “No closer. You love my sister. I saw your photo on the fridge.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Tell her whatever you like, she’ll unknow it in a few.” Dante swept his sandy waves behind his ears, such a human gesture.

“Un-unknow?” Her voiced quivered like tumbleweeds in the wind.

“To keep us and this world safe you must forget what you heard and saw.” Dante leaped before her. His breath hovered on her lips, and his skin grew blue.

The ladle clanked to the floor. She groped for another utensil and came up with a spatula.

Dante didn’t understand restraint. Earl clutched onto his sleeve, yanking him back a step. “Make it less scary. Huh? If she fights, she’ll remember too early.” If this went wrong, Daelin would unravel all of Charming’s lies. “Then I have no chance of saving her sister.”

“This is a nightmare, right?” Daelin slapped the spatula against Dante’s chest.

Chrome pigments in his skin slithered across his cheeks. “Earl can’t rescue your beloved sister if you don’t cooperate.” Dante’s laugh rumbled like stone down a hill. “This won’t hurt.” His eyes shifted from yellow to orange.

She twisted and with all her might kneed Dante between the legs. He fell to the floor like a sack of fools gold. As if scraping off a disease, Daelin brushed her hands over her arms. “What in all the dictionaries is this about?” Her glare snapped, despite the shake in her words.

Dante took a slow breath, his eyes cooling to blue, his hand covering his bruised parts, wincing. “Settler is a junction between worlds. It’s about protecting you and your sister. I can’t tell you more until the time is right, which isn’t now.” He reached for Daelin. “Give me your hand.”

She scooted toward the door, clasping the spatula. “None of this is believable. I don’t know how to believe you. Why are my sister and I so important?”

Dante’s gaze shifted to Earl. Earl tugged at his collar. How did he fit in? His questions numbered as high as Daelin’s. At least she hadn’t been transported into a different century. He wouldn’t tell her she had it easier, though. Nothing about

discovering the existence of the rift was easy. “Your sister trusts us. You can believe that.”

“I trained your sister as best as I could in this world and prepared her for the next,” Dante said. Probably trying to be helpful, unaware the words he chose had a morbid connotation.

Earl cleared his throat, raising his voice. “He doesn’t mean—”

Daelin’s forehead furrowed, drawing her dark eyebrows together. “Is she... is she... dead?”

“What he meant is he took the best care of your sister. She trusts us. You can, too.”



Chapter 8

To trust or not? Daelin gripped the spatula until her knuckles turned white, taking a deep breath. “Half my gut says to call the police. The other half worries for Charming. My sister wins. For now.”

As soon as she extended her hand, she regretted the decision. She’d prefer to maintain control over her fate. She’d prefer to keep the knowledge she had and find her sister. Yet, she knew she was out of her depth. Way out.

Dante’s grip heated as hot as the New York streets in August, and the acrid aroma of char compared to the smell of burned gunpowder, as if she stood in the subway again helpless. Never again.

She met his gaze, refusing to blink. This went beyond crazy, and she knew in her bones Dante was more dangerous than a mugger with a gun. What was he? What was her sister involved in? To get close to him was the quickest way to find out.

No way would she let him think he could push her around, though. “Don’t piss me off, or I’ll turn my sister against you.” Yeah, Daelin could make demands of her own.

Earl smiled and tipped his hat. “You’ll be right and fine. See you shortly.” His footsteps echoed like a death knell when he walked away.

She felt less safe, but wouldn’t admit it to Dante. She stared into his gaze as blue as Settler’s lakes. “Get on with it.” Right. Before she lost all nerve.

Dante’s mouth quirked to the side and he stood, leaning in against her, pressing her up against a refrigerator. “I’m waving the white flag.” His chuckle rumbled against her chest. He stripped the spatula from her grip. It clanged to the floor. “You’ll make a formidable opponent one day, and you’ll fight with me not against me.” He shifted, pinning her beneath him like a long-lost lover and raised his arm to her chin. “Do you like my bracelet? Take a good look at it.”

What? He was every bit as strange as that Trinidad woman, and Earl wasn’t so far off target either. How could any place be more kooky than New York City? Perhaps it was an elaborate prank by her sister: the man in her face with glowing eyes, the wanting her to unknow the most bizarre things. Who would want to know them?

Dante held her like a viper about to strike, and she knew this was no hoax. She had fallen into a rabbit hole. Her gaze fell on his wrist. A band of small crystal ovals graced his muscular arm, flat and opalesque. The colors danced, flaring then dimming.

“Keep watching,” Dante purred into her ear. “Tell me your name, your full given name.”

His bracelet shone blue, the glow burning brighter. Sleep weighted Daelin’s eyelids. “Darlin Dae Long. People call me Daelin.”

“Shhh.” His breath entered her mouth, soft, tasting of toasted bread. “You came into the grill, sat down with Betty and Earl. He left to run errands, you stayed and ordered a sandwich. You like Betty.”

What little she knew of Betty, Daelin did like. That truth seeped deep, taking root in her gut. She licked her lips, remembering Earl's determination to run after Charming. Repeatedly Daelin thought, *rescue Charming*. Another sandwich would be great. Something hot with lots of cheese this time. No more chicken.

The gems on Dante's wrist shifted to yellow. Little lines of green and purple swirled. "You didn't hear Earl and I talking. What you heard was the TV in my restaurant. An episode of *Missing in Memphis*. It ended. You understand?"

Maybe a story would help. Right. Earl, the dashing knight, would protect her. Together they'd rescue Charming from the evil chicken and they'd all live happily ever after. The rest of her thoughts slipped, waves of nothingness washing over them. "Yes."

"When you see the obsidian pillars open the doorway, you'll remember everything." The crystals blazed in red, growing more violet. He leaned in, exhaling into her mouth. "You're going to be the best of soldiers." The bracelet flashed purple.

Daelin blinked and found herself sitting at a table with the pink lady. "Betty," she whispered.

The cook, a man who resembled Earl, set a huge sandwich on rosemary focaccia in front of her. "My special chicken club as you ordered, miss."

Why had she ordered evil chicken? Where was Earl? Charming needed rescuing. Didn't she? Daelin couldn't remember, but knew she shouldn't let the sandwich guy know she was aware things weren't completely right.

She sighed at Betty. "That episode of *Missing in Memphis* was really engrossing. I don't remember Earl leaving."



If Dante would have let Earl stay, he would have. Leaving Daelin in his otherworldly hands poked at Earl wrong, as if he broke his promise to Charming. What were she and Dante up to? Part of him believed he should warn Daelin off. The part devoted to Charming said he couldn't.

"I'll see how things play out. Yeah." He filled a cart at the bulk store with items from Wilma's list, groceries, and a prepaid phone for himself. "No matter what, I can be Daelin's friend."

"What's that, sir?" A young man in a blue and gray apron blinked up at Earl from the floor.

"Just talking to myself."

"It's a rampant disease in this town." The stock boy carted off his empty boxes, shaking his head.

After loading up his pickup, Earl headed back to Dante's. Daelin sat with Betty, watching the television, picking at her sandwich. Whether it was magic or an ability of alien origins, Dante must have succeeded in erasing Daelin's memories of the afternoon. Earl deduced so because Dante left her alone. Yet she appeared restless.

"My errands are done. Do you want to see more of Bend?" he asked her.

She shook her head, her dark eyes crinkling slightly at the edges, the hint of a frown. "I'm anxious to see my sister. What if she's home? I can see the sights another time."

Her teeth tugged on her lower lip, red and full. The sun had deepened her olive complexion. The sun had more strength in the high desert, suffusing the thinner air with its intensity. If Daelin had never set foot outdoors in her entire life, she'd still not have the fairness Charming did.

Their beauty was as individual as their fathers. Charming had told Earl about their free-spirited mother, and he had the honor of meeting Rosalie Dae Moon two months ago. He had honestly never met anyone like her. A saloon gal in San Francisco he had once known came close, and if she had lived in this century she might have rivaled Rosalie, but he doubted it. At any rate, Daelin showed more of her mother's spunk than Charming.

"Sure thing." His girl could return tonight, then he could quit lying. The constant stream of falsehoods did nothing for his redemption. He tipped his hat at Dante. "See you."

Dante's eyes sparked like electric lemons. "Stay away from the horses."

Earl didn't like the way he said it, as if from here Dante could impact the minutia of his life. Sooner rather than later he needed to figure out how to take Dante on and win. It'd be necessary for his survival. Mostly he worried for Charming's.

With a hand to her elbow, Earl escorted Daelin out to his pickup. Her height made it easy for her to climb up into the cab. The truck started with barely a rumble. Its power

surged up his leg when he pressed down on the accelerator, a high he would have missed if he had never been brought into this century. He steered toward the highway and whatever fate had been set into motion by Dante and his girl. The way Daelin sat as the mountains whoosh by, she couldn't have any idea what she had agreed to when moving in with her sister.

Her lips pursed, and she glanced at Earl. "It's not much of a city," she said. "When you mentioned going to the city on my sister's porch, I had such great hopes. I don't see anything taller than a two story house."

In his time, San Francisco had bustled more than the towns around here. He could see her point. "We could swing through downtown if you'd like." That wouldn't bolster her impression, though. He shrugged. "Give it a chance. It'll grow on you."

"Maybe Portland. I can't see staying in Settler long."

Yes, a lot like her mother. "Rosalie didn't. Three weeks was her limit."

The knot between her eyes threatened to burst into storm. "My mother? She was here? You met her?"

The coldness in her tone didn't escape him. Charming had harbored it too. He'd best tread cautiously. "She visited in April."

"Charming never said." Daelin crossed her arms. Her jaw stiffened, and she glared at the world. "How long have you been seeing her?"

What an abrupt change of subject. He shifted in his seat. "Seeing her? Who?"

"Don't play dumb. You don't strike me as dumb. How long have you and Charming been together? I saw a photo of the two of you on her refrigerator."

Oh boy. Dante had succeeded. She didn't have any memory of having talked about this earlier. "It's not like that."

"Then how's it like?"

If he said anything other than what she expected, she'd not believe him. Yet he could only answer with the truth. "We're good friends. I gifted some money to the Paleo Institute so they could hire a paleontologist. I helped interview the candidates. Charming and I hit it off."

"I think there's more to it than that."

Oh, there was, but Earl would keep his secrets.



Chapter 10

Why wouldn't he admit he was in love with her sister? Well, if he wouldn't own up to it, Daelin would wager people in town had plenty to say. With less than a thousand souls, everyone in Settler had to know everyone else's business.

How many secrets did her baby sister keep? Why had she never said she had patched things up with their mother? Granted, Rosalie was an extremely sore spot among Daelin, Charming, and their brother Cobb, so Daelin could forgive Charming's discretion. Not about the boyfriend, though. Why keep Earl a secret? It made no sense. Maybe if Daelin knew him better the answers would come.

"Did you grow up in Settler?" she asked.

His palm tapped on the steering wheel. "No. Never spent much time in Oregon until recently. I've moved around a lot. Guess I bought into the commercial, 'Come Settle in Settler'. Have you seen it?"

The tiny town had a commercial? Daelin would have to search it out and watch. She could use a laugh. "How long have you lived here?"

"Five years. Charming said you all moved around a lot."

Charming had revealed a lot to this man for him to claim they weren't involved. It wasn't like her to trust a stranger with so many delicate details. All through college, Charming had pretended to have grown up outside Chicago and had made Daelin play along whenever she visited. The rest of the story claimed their parents had become missionaries in New Guinea. All that had changed. Now Charming painted illusions for Daelin. It hurt worse than the worst day of her life.

"Yeah," Daelin said, "you met Rosalie. She didn't like to stay with a band more than two years. If she wasn't on tour, we moved about looking for the next band. American nomads is what we were. Where did you grow up?"

"Nowhereville, New York. Left as soon as I was old enough."

"Really? A New Yorker? I never would have guessed."

"Why not?"

"You don't talk like one, and you seem so at home with the cowboy thing." The clothes fit him as well as if he had come from another century, and he had the build of a cowboy, of a man who spent a lot of time working on the land.

He chuckled softly. "I was never a cowboy. I'm a businessman who pretends to be one."

His pretending came off as genuine. He acted as if he and Charming were something innocent. With all her sister had disclosed about her early life, that wasn't possible. Daelin watched his lips move while he spoke about the ranch, not really listening. Something tickled in the back of her mind about rescuing her sister. By Earl? From Earl? She chewed on her fingernails unable to remember and wanted a sandwich. How could she be hungry? "You pretend a lot, Mr. Blacke."

The smile left his cheeks. “No. Not anymore.”

His answer hit her ear as odd. “What did you used to pretend about?”

His guffaw came out like a dry hack. “It wasn’t so much pretending as changing. You know, once in awhile you wake up and realize you aren’t the same person. When that happens, I can’t go on living the same life as the same man.”

She hadn’t taken him for the philosophical type. Earl was a definite enigma. “Did you learn your cooking skills in one of those former lives?”

His brows rose. “What?”

“The sandwich you made me was unbelievable. Did you used to be a chef?”

“No, but I’ve been on my own a long time. So Charming mentioned you did something in relation to books in New York?”

Her former life, the one she regretted giving up. “I was an editorial assistant for a publishing house. It was everything I wanted. I didn’t change. The world did. I still want to be that Daelin, not this one.” She sighed and picked at her fingernails. She could use a fresh coat of polish.

“So you aren’t a writer?”

She had started many times, but never stuck with it. She couldn’t claim the title. No, she only made other writers better. Well, used to. “Never had the time. Maybe someday.”

“You’ll have lots of time on your hands as Settler’s librarian.”

“Yeah?” She hadn’t thought of that. What would she write? Maybe life here wouldn’t be the horror story she feared. “Bend is really a city?”

He exited onto the Basin Highway, and they headed east. The brush gave way to pine trees. The air burdened itself with their scent, filling Daelin’s lungs.

“The definition is a little skewed in these parts.” He laughed, this time carefree, brightening his eyes. They almost twinkled.

“I thought Charming would end up at a museum in Chicago. She was obsessed with Chicago.”

A group of deer sauntered onto the highway. Earl slowed to a stop and waited for them to bound off before hitting the gas again.

“She told me she had been in plenty of towns like Settler growing up,” he said, “and liked the idea of staying put. If she’s been in Podunks, so have you.”

Daelin watched the deer disappear into the woods. “None as tiny or as remote. Dinky towns like to push new people out, which is why I went to the biggest city there is, counting on its size to keep me anchored. Who knew the publishing houses would merge and a job like mine would become as obsolete as Charming’s dinosaurs.”

“It’s just a down cycle. You’ll find your place again, one you love as much as the old.” His head bobbed in rhythm with his words. “That’s what I hope anyway.”

“You too, huh?” He was an all right guy. She could see why Charming would fall for him. “So tell me about Settler. How can I fit in and not stick out like a New Yorker in the wilderness?”

“Be yourself and take a genuine interest in the lives of others.” His lips twitched into the hint of a smile. “Everyone will know you sneezed within ten minutes. Your sins don’t disappear in a small town, they linger forever. But they’re pleasant enough people and good souls.”

As the new person in town, Daelin would bet everything she did would be of unshakeable interest. Great. “I met Culver’s cousin. She seems a little kooky. Are they all

like her?”

“Tiny?”

“Yup.”

“There’s a few. Most like to gab, and conversations can get deeply personal right quick. It’s Settler’s favorite entertainment.” He raked his gaze over her. “You should trade in your business coat for something more casual. Warmer, too. Layering is best in these parts. Fleece is a good idea too.”

“This is all I have until I get paid.”

“There’s a thrift shop in town. I just brought the owner some items left behind by my winter guests at the resort. There are a few nice coats. For a mere twenty dollars, you’ll be all set.”

It wasn’t only twenty dollars when her whole fortune was forty. “This coat will do. It’s summer.”

“Summer usually doesn’t start until mid July and it’s a short season. Central Oregon only has winter, which is most of the year, and August.”

If Charming had mentioned the dreadful weather, Daelin would have figured out somewhere else to go. “Why is it so cold?”

“We’re at a higher elevation. Elevation dictates everything in Oregon, especially weather. Be careful when working out for awhile. You’ll feel the lower oxygen. It’ll make you feel as if you’re old and out of shape.” He paused to take a swig of water from his canteen. He used an old-fashioned one Daelin had only seen in old camping photos. “The festival season is about to start. You missed Memorial Day weekend’s Race Days, but you’re in time for Swit Days and the rodeo.”

Daelin watched his face. It didn’t flicker with the faintest hint of a joke. “Was that English?”

He took a pack of mints out of his pocket and popped one in his mouth. “Patrick Swit was the founder of Settler. So this is Settler’s version of Founders Day. A carnival, music, and a rodeo.” He offered her the mints.

She took one and chewed it. “The postman mentioned he and his cousin were descendants.”

“Yeah, the last of them. Patrick Swit was a little odd.”

With Culver and Trinidad as examples of the Swit family, oddness obviously ran in the genes. “How’s that?”

“You should get Wald in the county offices to give you a tour of the house. It’s crazy. Doors everywhere. Hallways to nowhere. Old Pat believed Settler possessed by spirits.”

“How bizarre. I hadn’t heard it mentioned until now, which is the weirdest part.”

“It’s one of Settler’s hidden secrets. The town doesn’t talk about the house much or Patrick’s craziness.”

Yeah, who would want to admit their home was founded by a loon. “Yet they celebrate him.”

“History loves rewriting itself.”



Chapter 11

Earl had rewritten his past. He didn't say it aloud, though, dropping Daelin at Charming's with four bags of groceries. Certainly he atoned for Dante with the gesture. Yet he still felt like he had gas.

At the ranch, he sent his employees home and put stuff away, setting the new prepaid phone in his safe. Leftovers abounded in the fridge. Some he added to fresh veggies and whisked a dressing to pour over the top. He ate his tasty salad facing west, enjoying the colors the slipping sun sent spilling across the sky. It'd be dark soon, and he hoped to be welcoming Charming home.

Meal finished, he cleaned up then went to his bedroom, the only room on the third floor. He changed into outdoor work pants and a flannel shirt, hanging his cowboy hat on a peg beside the closet. Hats in different colors made an artful arrangement on the wall. The only other wall decor came from the scenery outside the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Since his first trip out west in 1852 as a young man, he'd been awed by the panoramas. The lack of striking gold had hid some of the glory then. Luck had a lot to do with how the world and he got along. It had been bad so long, he thought luck and color had gone for good from his life.

"Only took a trip through a portal and a friend from another world to turn things around." He laughed, striding down the granite staircase past striking paintings and grand sculptures. Finery he claimed as his.

His fingers brushed over the bronze mustang in the lobby. It ran with others in front of the waterfall cascading down the back window. The richest man he had known in the 1880s didn't possess such extravagance. A smile dislodged the guilt he had harbored over Daelin. His home had that effect.

Returning to his office filled with more fine things, he grabbed worn ones: a backpack, a wool cap, and a heavy long coat that matched his tan pants. Life in the wilderness had a very different set of rules than civilized life. A pattern from his former century he couldn't change. Savagery didn't belong in town.

He took the trail leading to the obsidian pillars and veered off the path to climb up onto the overhang. Orange streaks in the west flamed to reds, blues, and violets, the sparse clouds giving the dusk its soul-inspiring pigments. When all hint of the sun disappeared, the wind kicked. Earl zipped his coat and put on his hat.

Out of his pack, he took a pair of binoculars. For now, Earl could only assist Charming by observing the otherworldly door from his perch. If she came through with trouble, he'd do more.

He glanced toward town. No beams of light moved in his direction. The early opening of the portal last night hadn't attracted the Rifiers, the people in town who guarded the gate, to sit vigil tonight. Culver's earlier investigation must have satisfied their questions. Earl went back to staring at the obsidian columns.

A hint of silver broke in the east. The moon rose higher, washing out most of the stars. The pillars awoke. The posts hissed in a flash of blue, fingers of lightning caressing their reaches into the sky. The energy built in intensity until it burst. Glowing in yellow and blue, the portal pulsed then settled. Shadows flickered in its brilliance, dancing and looming.

Earl's vigil ended. His girl came home. It had to be her. He stood, ready to run down into the clearing and embrace her, but the angle of the head gave him pause. Silhouetted by the blue energy, the arrival had a long beak. Yes, a beak. Definitely not Charming.

"No." Earl slumped to the ground and scrambled behind a boulder. Once concealed from the visitor below, he raised his binoculars.

The figure came into focus illuminated by the moon and the rift. It wore a mask with goggles over its beak. Green mist poured out of it in a breathing rhythm, and it had the tail of an eel. The thing stood like a human with two arms and two legs in the usual places. It set down a gyroscope, a metal orb of rings, some full rings, some partial, before the gateway. The gyroscope spun, siphoning energy from the pillars, energy reaching for a crystal in its center. It spun faster, faster, faster until the crystal began to glow. A disturbing shade of green.

The beaked thing from the rift shrieked, which came out as a bubbly burp, an odd sound to go with an odd sight. It kept burping, stopping periodically to sniff at the wind. It continued with its strange behavior until the moon started to set, which deepened the shadows of night, stretching them to distorted patches.

Green mists slinked out from the trees, bowing before the birdman thing. It laid a hand on every mist, dunking its head into the globs of vapor one at a time. The beaked thing bobbed, burped, and snorted, prancing in and out of the fog gathered around it. Finally, it chose one, adding its green breath to the selected mist. At the others, it flapped its arms, sending them away.

Earl inched closer, engrossed, his elbows slipping off the edge before he realized he verged on going over. What was the birdman doing, and what exactly were the green cloud things? His scalp prickled, and he glanced toward town, checking for Culver or one of the other guardians of this world. The forest lay unnaturally quiet. No rustles of branches. No whispers of crickets. It was up to Earl to protect the town.

Alone with the chosen mist, birdman stepped into it, pulling it on as a second skin. This had a horrid effect. The vapor took form, the form of a headless man. In his hands, he held his head. The lips parted, and he howled. A strange sort of phantom with the beaked thing's head where a human one should be.

Together, birdman and the phantom plucked the crystal from the center of the gyroscope. Birdman put the ghostly head on over its beaked one and together they swallowed the glowing stone. The jewel sat in the phantom's throat pulsing. The birdman sank fully into its ghostly skin, disappearing into the gossamer form.

The phantom lumbered away from the pillars, and the rift shut down. The ghost's head jounced, threatening to tumble to the ground. The mouth twisted into an awful laugh, and the hollow eyes peered directly at Earl.



Chapter 12

Resurrected. George “Haw Shot” Hawley hadn’t expected such a thing. Testing his body, he rolled his shoulders and shook each limb. They all worked, except his head. If he moved it too much, it fell off. Yet his senses worked, and he could speak. So he didn’t have much to grumble about, except for the strange thoughts sometimes invading his mind. No problem. He’d get rid of the birdman’s influence soon enough. It had no strength, annoying him like a case of the hiccups.

“Haw, haw!” Anyone in George’s way would be sorry. He hadn’t changed at all, except for the empty holsters. Hell on hot sand, he wanted a gun.

The birdman tasted strange, like fresh peas and sour beer. It tried to tell George what to do. *Grab the man watching us.*

Haw Shot hated being told what to do, but he hated being spied on more. “Haw, haw.” His first couple of steps stumbled. The nippy air pressed into his muffled senses, which worked slow. Everything about him worked slow, except for his hate and the pretty vows the birdman whispered in his mind. *Kill. Revenge. Blood. Bart lives, but not for long. Not if you swear to listen to me.*

Revenge had a ring to it. Maybe the thing in his head was his guardian angel. What else could have resurrected him from the grave?

The man on the rocks is Bart.

A temptation Haw Shot couldn’t say no to. “My guardian angel promises me a kill.” He howled his words, enjoying his new job as a spook. “You’re going to die, Bart. Outlaws shooting it out. It’s our destiny.”

Haw Shot had only met Black Bart once, well not so much met as spied on him. From thick brush, he had watched Bart perform the perfect heist, getting away clean with the Wells Fargo box and the mail pouches, earning more script with less effort than soldiering ever paid.

The following day, Haw Shot had polished his guns and loaded them with his best bullets. From town he procured a flour sack and cut two eye holes in it. Returning to the same spot Bart had profited from, Haw Shot had hid, waiting on the next stagecoach. Wheels crunched up the road, and the horses’ harnesses jangled. When he heard the driver’s whistles, Haw Shot jumped out, firing. “Haw, haw.”

A pretty young lady with golden curls had wept, bleeding from her stomach, hit by one of his bullets. Men and women in the coach had wailed like sunrise would never happen again.

Worse, the stagecoach had a shotgun rider and a second as a passenger. Crack shots, they had aimed at George and pulled their triggers. A fiery kick roared through his shoulder and another in his gut.

That had been the last thing Haw Shot saw until he found himself sitting on a horse under a tree with rope around his neck. The pretty young lady, dead because of him, had a lot of friends. The mother kicked the horse out from under him, wishing him an eternity

in hell. As if the angels granted her wish, the rope had snapped off George's head.

Entrenched in chaos and death, the heist had caused more raucous than any of Bart's, yet no one knew Haw Shot's name. His life, or lack of, was all Bart's fault, and it was all Bart's fault no one had ever heard of the notorious Haw Shot. "It's not fair. Everyone knows who you are, Bart, and you never killed anybody. You never stole a huge amount of gold. You still got your head. That isn't right."

Stumbling down the trail, Haw Shot smelled cedar, sage, and juniper mixed in with the pines. Hot on a desert rock, it was nice to smell again. Crispness from snowy mountain peaks tingled his deadened skin. "This ain't Nevada County."

"No, it isn't." Bart came down from his perch to stand before Haw Shot, fresh and full of vigor. Life danced in those cold blue eyes. Not for much longer.

Vengeance would go down better than three thick steaks. Haw Shot licked his lips. "Last time I saw you, you was gray and wrinkled. How'd you get younger?" It irked him to distraction his holsters were empty. Bart's were too. It'd be a fair fight then.

"I don't recall ever meeting you, but I'll be straight as the wind is true. The truth is awful. You sure you want to know it? We're being used for nefarious purposes by things from another world."

"Nefarious. You made that up. Haw, haw." Bart was full of it, like his method of robbing stagecoaches. "You done this to me, you piece of shit. You're a goblin or something, bewitching stagecoach drivers. Nothing else explains why you wasn't shot and hanged."

"I see. You had known of me."

Haw Shot growled. "Where's your diamond pins and fancy rings?"

Take them from him. Attack. George's angel had some good advice.

Haw Shot lunged. His angel rewarded him, sending surges of great power into his veins. He felt alive, so deliciously alive. Green spindles of energy arced from his fingers, wrapping around Bart, squeezing, jolting, until Bart fell limp to the ground.

The more you listen, the more power I'll grant you. You'll rule this desert.

"King George. Haw, haw."

Take Bart with you. Vengeance is coming. He will hang.

Yee haw for revenge. A path led out of the clearing. Haw Shot lumbered down it to a dirt road, dragging Bart by the leg. When the dirt met up with a paved track, Haw Shot stomped his feet on it. He liked the smoothness of it. "Must be an enchanted road." What else could it be? He veered toward a blinking light. It called him like a beacon. He could travel forever and drag Bart to the moon. Being a spook was all right. He didn't tire or feel pain.

The light blazed brighter with a profound message. *Vacancy* blazed under a dancing cowboy heralding Leeds Motel.

"Saloon girls." It had been too long since Haw Shot had the companionship of the fairer sex. "Haw, haw." Lights snapped on and three faces peered out of windows. "Haw, haw."

In the middle of the long building of doors, a larger section had brighter lights. *Open*, it said in red neon. Haw Shot shuffled toward it. A slight woman with long black hair fumbled with the glass doors and a set of keys, frowning at him with wide eyes. Her voice trembled through the glass. "Go away. I'm calling the police." She held something to her ear, her foot tapping.

Her heartbeat echoed in Haw Shot's chest. *Thump, thump. Thump, thump.* Delicious. He pressed Bart's face to the glass. "Meet your doom."

Bart's fist pounded on the pane. "Susan, run. Run!"

The drumming of Bart's rapid breaths filled Haw Shot's lungs, and he squeezed Bart's throat until it stopped, a limp Bart doll to do with as Haw Shot pleased. "Haw, haw."

"Deputy Banks? This is Susan Leeds at the Leeds Motel. You need to get out here. I've an intruder. Earl Blacke..."

She didn't need to say anything more. Haw Shot reached through the glass, putting his arm through it as if the glass didn't exist, and clutched onto her neck. The object in her hand dropped to the floor. It squawked like an angel, "Miss Leeds? You there? Miss Leeds? Mr. Blacke?"

Haw Shot stepped all the way into the motel office, this time shattering the glass into shards. He liked the effect, the way the pieces sparkled as if they knew they contributed to the deeds of a great name. Haw Shot would be known. "Haw, haw."

Teasing power churned up in Haw Shot's gut. *You feel it?* his angel said. *It's yours if you get her head.*

"Keep that coming, and I'll do whatever you say." Haw Shot slipped his hands into Bart's, and placed Bart's fingers around the blubbing lady's neck. Using Earl as his puppet had a lot of appeal, especially if it resulted in power and revenge. Earl would hang for killing the lady. Fantastic. "Haw haw."

"Earl," she wailed. "Earl, don't." Her screams filled Haw Shot as sweetly as kisses.

The object on the floor talked again, yelling. "Susan? Earl?"

Not letting go of Bart's hands, keeping them on the woman's neck, Haw Shot twisted Susan Leed's head until it popped off. Her gurgles and shrieks serenaded him like the clink of bullets in his pocket. Finally, he let go of Black Bart, depositing him on the floor beside the headless woman. "Payment begins, old friend."

Placing the new head on his shoulder, she had such pretty hair, Haw Shot felt as good as if he had unloaded three guns. "Haw, haw."



Chapter 13

Daelin sat in her sister's converted sun porch drinking coffee, filling out the paperwork for the librarian job. In the distance, lights flashed and sirens wailed. Tragedy happened all the time in the city, so she didn't think anything of it.

She had made herself a breakfast sandwich — toast, cheese, egg, salsa — from the groceries Earl had gifted her. That man was all right. She'd tell Charming so as soon as she saw her. A call to the Paleo Institute confirmed the area researchers were out on a dig. The recorded message on their voice mail said so, but didn't say where. After the beep, Daelin asked and asked for Charming to call her immediately.

The task done, she stared out the window at an alien landscape. Wilderness after seven years in a huge city was as foreign as foreign could be. Frost dulled the muted colors of the high desert outside, including the carnival of ceramic frogs in the garden. They surrounded the glassed-in room with their cheerful grins and pigments. "A cheery morning to you," she said to the frogs.

Last night, she had found an empty dresser beside her sister's in the bedroom loft and had put away her clothes. She hung a few things in the armoire then a few more. Charming had hardly used any of the hanging space.

Choosing a pair of gray wool slacks, a pink flowered blouse, and a periwinkle cardigan, Daelin changed and prepared for the day. She twisted her hair, pinning it up, and applied a few smears of eye shadow, blush, and lip gloss. Her naturally thick eyelashes and brows allowed her to skip mascara and eyebrow pencil. She decided less would always be the better choice in Settler.

The neatly filled out forms completed, Daelin locked up and headed toward the Caslow County offices around the corner from the library. Its steeple stood out among the other buildings, negating the need for directions. She walked five blocks to Settler's main thoroughfare then veered up hill, passing the mercantile, the cable and internet provider, a car dealership, and the Patrick Swit house. She squinted at the old relic with exposed clapboards and peeling paint. It appeared so ordinary, an old building in need of repair. It hid a lot of crazy, huh?

She had the streets to herself this morning, as still as the lakes mirroring the peaks and sky. Eerily so. No cars. No other pedestrians. All the shops remained closed. "Where is everybody?"

The wind sliced down from the Cascades, rattling her nerves. She noted the thrift store on the corner. *Junk in Your Trunk*. Daelin pushed on the door, greeted by the happy soft jingle of a bell. Clothes, luggage, dishes, and knickknacks lay on the floor, and the strong stench of wet paint hit her nostrils.

A woman in a long flowered dress hurried forward carrying a paintbrush. "Hello, hello." She waved. "Excuse the mess. I'm renovating... again." She laughed with little snorts, stumbling in a little circle, defying her years. She couldn't be younger than forty.

“Inside joke, man, sorry. What groovieness can I help you find? I know where everything is.” She gestured at the piles of castoff merchandise strewn about.

If not for the goose bumps on her goose bumps, Daelin would have left. “A winter coat? Earl Blacke mentioned you might have some.”

“Oh man! What a tragedy about him, huh?” She wore her amber hair in two braids, tied with twine and decorated with plastic flowers.

Tragedy? What had happened to Earl? Daelin clutched at her knotting stomach. “What do you mean?”

“There was a murder last night. Umm, wow. Didn’t you hear?” She set the paintbrush down on a plate that had been used for the purpose before. Bracelets covered her arms, clinking with her simple movements.

“In Settler?” Violent crime wasn’t what Daelin expected to hear. She didn’t know what she had expected, but not murder.

The thrift store woman leaned in closer, whispering in a conspiratorial tone. “Yeah, they’re saying Earl Blacke killed Susan Leeds. Took her head plum off, man. Only thing is...,” she glanced at the shadows then wet her lips, “her head is missing.” The soft scent of melon accompanied her words.

Earl had murdered somebody? Daelin gulped, getting a lungful of paint fumes. Right, the paint. The fumes had to be messing with her mind. “Are you serious?”

“Yup, it’s as true as my paint is peach. Do you think peach is a serene enough color? I dig serenity.”

Gray spackled bins with drips of peach paint marring their grainy surfaces had been jammed together in the middle of the shop. They held pails of paint in all shades, no longer having room for the merchandise gracing the floors. The bins and shelves came from an era long before Daelin breathed life. Most of Settler had been built in decades long forgotten by the rest of the civilized world, the interiors as suspended in time as the exteriors. The goods scattered on the floor had the same issue, rejected by modern times, adding to the jumble scrambling Daelin’s head. She tripped over a cluster of glass grapes and groped for the nearest wall, smearing her palm with paint. She winced, wiping at it with her other hand.

“Let me get you a cloth.” The thrift store woman disappeared then reappeared with a wet towel, handing it to Daelin. “I’m Starphish by the way. You’re Charming’s sister, right?”

“Umm, yeah.” Daelin had spent the whole day with Earl Blacke yesterday and never suspected him to be a killer. When checking facts for a novel she had once edited, Daelin had interviewed an FBI agent. The agent had stated the most dangerous killers were always the quiet ones, the psychos, the guys you’d never expect. The room spun.

Starphish caught her, guiding Daelin gently down onto the pine board floor. “You OK?”

“I spent the whole afternoon with Mr. Blacke yesterday. That could be me... the dead one without a head.” What had happened to the head? The egg sandwich sat wrong in Daelin’s gut, she gagged.

With a strong grip around Daelin’s waist, Starphish assisted her to the restroom, which reeked more strongly of paint. Daelin heaved her breakfast into the sink, because the toilet was missing. She turned on the faucet, splashing icy water onto her cheeks. “I... I just came in for a coat.”

Starphish used the cloth to swab Daelin's face. "How about I sit you outside in the clean air and I'll bring you what coats I have that might fit you? Groovy?"

"Groovy."

"Sure." Starphish helped Daelin hobble outside and sat her down on a beanbag chair that leaked white Styrofoam pebbles. "I'm going to fix it later this week. You feeling the bean vibe?"

"No. Just a coat." The brisk air helped some. Daelin swallowed it as if guzzling water. A parade of coats flashed before her like a bizarre video that had processed wrong. "I don't have much money."

"I know where you live. We can come up with a payment plan. This dark green one really suits your coloring. It's a little big, but if you have a couple of sweaters on underneath, it's the perfect size. Dig?"

The coat wrapped around Daelin in a toasty hug. Down puffed it out with warmth to her knees, surprisingly long enough. The sleeves too. The fuzzy lining felt as sinful as the fur-fringed hood. This coat had been made for her.

"It's faux fur, so you don't have to worry about animal cruelty or anything. Peace for animals, man. Someone spent a lot of money on that beauty. We can testify to it, right? I intend to charge forty dollars, but I always give new customers a special deal. Special for the new lady. Great, huh? How about thirty?"

"I only have forty to my name until I get paid."

"Oh, I don't want to put you out, man. How about you pay me five dollars now and the rest on payday? Dig?"

"I can swing that."

"Groovilicious."

At the other end of town sirens screamed. The commotion of lights had increased since entering the thrift store. Daelin and Starphish glanced in the direction of the blue and red flashes. Daelin felt sick again and peeled off the new coat. She fanned her hand in front of her face.

"I think we're the only ones in town not into witnessing the macabre," Starphish said. She twisted her head from side to side. "What's with rubbernecking? You know?" She needed to stay out of the paint fumes. "Love to Susan's soul, though." She waved a peace sign at the sky. "Beautiful Afterlife to you, lady."

Daelin peered up into the perfect blue. The brightness stung her eyes with tears. "Who is... was Susan Leeds?"

"She owns Leeds Motel... or did. There's a job opening, motel manager. You need a job, Dae? Although, it's not great karma to get one this way. Rumor has it the guests saw a ghost right before the murder. Freaky, huh?"

"Yeah, freaky. Doubt the motel needs another manager. Who'd want to stay there now?" The morning frost gripped her joints, and Daelin shivered. She slipped the green coat on, pulling it tight. She'd been too close to seeing her last day.



Chapter 14

San Quentin had stomped Earl's spirit, boxing him inside a room in which a cockroach overcrowded it. During those years, he had decided to change, to be the gentleman most had known him as, to drop his outlaw ways. After his release, the world wouldn't let him. He needed a new life. So he had run north and took the name Earl Blacke. The portal had granted his wish, depositing him in the future where no one remembered him.

The cell in Settler's police station had more room, but Earl had already served his time. He'd serve no more. Not in this sad little town, fighting an enemy as to which he had no clue as to the war or the rules.

He punched the wall. The concrete jammed into his knuckles, doling out agony. The bars he kicked did the same. Earl growled. "Deputy Banks, you let me out of here. You know I didn't kill, Susan. I'm not a killer."

Lou Banks shrugged his shoulders and hooked his thumbs on his belt. A complexion as dark as charcoal, he blended in with the shadows, which there were a lot of due to the one narrow window. A dusting of gray in his sideburns hinted he might be older than his face let on "You were with Susan. Your hands on her throat, your fingerprints everywhere. You have to be here. You understand?"

He understood the evil in the rift had targeted him. Because of Charming? She couldn't be left to fight on her own. He had to get out of here. "Where's my phone call? I need my phone call." Earl paced, swiping at the blankets on the rickety cot. "Let me out of here."

"I don't know what to make of you." Lou's teeth pulled at his lower lip. "I can give you a phone call. Make it count and get yourself a lawyer." He handed over his phone then leaned against the wall opposite, gazing out the dust encrusted line of glass as thin as the barrel of a shotgun.

Earl's thumb shook, hovering over the numbers on Lou's phone. He took a deep breath and ran his hand over his face. This couldn't happen again. He couldn't go back to prison, certainly not for murder. "I can't hang," he whispered, debating who to call.

Charming wasn't on this world. Dante would kill Earl faster than the hangman if Earl used the policeman's phone to contact him. Wilma would come, but then Earl would owe her. He dialed Scott's number. "I can't hang."

"¡Hola!"

"Scott, it's Earl."

"Morning, boss. Sorry some of the herd got out. I'm fixing the fence now."

"That's not why I'm calling. Umm..." Earl punched the wall again, cracking his knuckles open, finding less satisfaction in the pain than the first time. "I need your help. I need you to come down to the police station."

Scott inhaled sharply. "Am I in trouble?"

Later, Earl would have to look into what had Scott feeling such guilt. Most likely, he hid one of his no-good cousins again. “No, I am. Finish the fence quick, then get over here.”

“Will do.”

Earl handed the phone back to Lou. “You’ll let me talk to him, right?”

“I shouldn’t, but I will. Violet will have my head if she finds out.”

“I won’t tell her.” Earl flashed his most reassuring smile, reminding Lou they were friends, they had history. He didn’t share the same camaraderie with Violet Redfield.

Sheriff Redfield had thankfully gone on vacation. She and gung ho went together like gold and stagecoach robbery. If she caught a whiff of Susan’s murder, she’d be on the next plane.

“We can both stay mum, and she’ll find out anyway. Most likely before the day ends,” Lou said. “She’ll be here tomorrow night at the latest. You know it.”

Earl did. Violet reminded him too much of John Hume, the man who had made Earl a priority back in the 1880s and had sent him to prison. Earl only ever confessed to one robbery. If he hadn’t cracked then, he wouldn’t crack now.

After fixing the blankets he had mussed, he perched on the edge of the cot, hands folded, waiting on Scott. Two eternities passed by his estimate, despite the sun shifting only two hours to the west.

The door to the cells clicked then squealed like a dying pig. Sun spilled into the deep shadows, and Scott rushed in clutching a plastic container. The lid had been confiscated. Obviously Lou had inspected the food. Steam sent up tendrils of spices, fish, and stir fry.

“Wilma sends lunch,” Scott said. “You should eat something.” He handed over the container. “Before it gets cold.”

“Not hungry.”

“I’ve heard talk.” Scott winced as if a cow had just pissed on him. “Susan Leeds?”

Earl gripped onto the edge of the cot, choking it until his battered knuckles grew white. “Do I have to say it?”

Eyes as wide as a heifer’s, Scott held onto the bars, peering into the cell. Faint lines added the hint of wisdom to his eyes and mouth. “No. What can I do, boss?”

There might be no way out of this mess, but it helped to know he still had friends. Earl stood and approached the door. He patted Scott’s hand. “I need you to ask the new librarian to research George Hawley for me, alias Haw Shot. He was a stagecoach robber in the 1880s.” Earl spelled the name.

Scott repeated, nodding his head. “Got it. Anything else? I’ll bring dinner by tonight.”

“I assume Lou will feed me. Find me a good lawyer. Not from these parts. You’ll probably have to go to Portland.”

“Got it. My cousins are in the know about these things.”

Scott’s cousins spent more time in court and in prison than not. They would know. Earl’s shoulders felt a little lighter.

“Make sure this weekend’s guests don’t find out about this and keep it off the internet. OK?” Earl clutched Scott’s hands. “Don’t fail me.”

“Absolutely.” Scott sighed. “Wish I could take you home with me, boss.”

“I wish so, too. Now go find Daelin Long and have her find out what she can on Georgie Boy.”

Scott trotted off. The outer door banged with a jarring clank. Earl jumped in his skin. Hearing that sound was a living nightmare, one from which he couldn't wake up. "I can't hang. Can't." Neither could he live one more day in a cage.



Chapter 15

Daelin had seven minutes left in which to secure the job she had come all the way to Settler to get or she'd wind up more destitute than she was. She scooted inside the glass doors of the county offices, scurrying around the little lobby, figuring out where to go. White tile covered the walls, and tan and ivory speckled granite squares made up the floor, both from another decade. Typewriters clicked from the office across from the stairway winding its way up to the other levels.

Typewriters? Daelin peeked inside the opened double wood doors. A stylish young man's fingers flew over the keys. He appeared about Daelin's age. His shoulders had a strength, and he had a nice head of hair. Next to him sat an old-fashioned rotary phone. Both pieces gleamed in an old-fashioned black enamel under fluorescent lights that hummed at an annoying pitch. Daelin only knew what the outmoded office machines were from old movies.

The phone rang, a loud clanging that halted the rhythmic clacking. He marked the page set next to his typewriter then picked up the receiver. "No, she hasn't returned to town. Her sister just arrived. We're debating what to tell her." His fingers wound around the cord, and he nodded for a full minute. "What?" He swiveled around in his chair, gaping at Daelin. "Yeah, later."

He placed the receiver gently in its cradle. "We're really sorry for the incident out at the motel. The B&B here in town has agreed to take in all of Leeds' guests." He rose from his seat behind the ancient typewriter and straightened the cuffs of his lavender dress shirt. Grabbing a form off a stack on the counter and a stubby pencil from a bin, he handed both to her. "Just fill this out."

Daelin fished the job forms out of her purse, clearing her throat. The morning frost had made her hoarse, or perhaps the news about Earl. "Ms. Staley told me to give these to you." She held the completed forms out.

"Oh, the new gal." He extended a well-manicured hand. "Wald Macadam. It's wonderful to meet you, Darlin Dae Long." Before she could reply, he said, "I know, I know. You prefer Daelin."

"You know an awful lot about me." She took his hand, smooth and strong, normal and reassuring despite his psychic knowledge of her.

"Since you're going to live here, you should know I know everything." His hair sported the latest cut popular with fashionable men. His hazel irises sparkled with each word, and his smile could make the sun's eyes water.

His dimples deepened, his laugh tumbling from his chest, flirting with the air. "Before you go getting all hinked up, Sabina told me you'd be by, and I'm the one who checked your references."

Hinked up? Settler had a language of its own. "Ah. When do I start?"

Wald held up a set of keys. Three dangled from a plain key ring — a squat brass one

with elaborate scroll details, a long silver one, and a squarish bronze one. A crystal was embedded at the end of each key. "You can start now if you'd like."

It'd take her mind off Charming, Earl, and almost dying. "I would."

"Let me take you over." He grabbed a long wool camel coat and a hat. The hat had to come from the thrift store, because it was straight out of the 1960s. The retro piece confused Wald's modern hairstyle and clothes.

Outside the glass doors, Daelin grimaced against the biting wind and hurried around the corner. A dry cleaner graced one side of the library, a bright red firehouse the other. Located across the street were the Sparrow Roadhouse and the bank. Past the fire station came several empty lots then the high school. Behind it rose steep hills that nipped at the dizzying heights of Gold Peak. The north end of town butted up against Swit Peak.

The firehouse had fresh paint, the only building to have such in the whole town. "You all seriously put the library next to the fire department?" Daelin asked. Its long narrow windows displayed antique axes, hoses, boots, and hats. "Is it a museum too?"

"Nah, the doodads add flavor and mystique. A taste of Settler." His hand moved across the sky as if *A Taste of Settler* had been scrawled in the clouds. "Besides, we really treasure our firefighters. Notice the fresh coat of paint? Yeah, if not for this firehouse Settler would be a total ghost town."

Guess, he didn't notice it already was, at least by Daelin's definition. "Why's that?"

"The town burned down in the early 1900's, except for the heart of it, which is why most buildings are new and why the town is still here at all."

New had a different definition here too. Daelin struggled to hold in her smile. "How much of it burned?"

"Whoosh it went." He threw his arms up. "In the old days the roads, the water lines, the buildings, everything was made of wood. A lightning strike in the wrong place and everything went up like tinder."

Daelin surveyed the main street, Brucker Avenue. None of the structures dated more recently than fifty years ago. "I see no sign of fire."

"It was over a hundred years ago. September 9, 1909."

"That's a lot of nines. Did it happen at 9 o'clock too?"

Not a hint of amusement graced his cheeks. "Yes. It began at 9:09 that night. Burned until morning."

"It all burned?" Daelin examined Brucker Avenue again, searching for any evidence of a big fire. At the other end of the main street, East Lake quietly reflected the cloudless sky.

"All except the Patrick Swit House and the original county courthouse, which is now the county museum. There's some old scorch marks on their foundations if you need that sort of proof."

Wrinkling her nose, Daelin shook her head. "I'm not macabre. I like stories. If I'm going to live here, I want to know Settler's tales. When was the Swit House built?"

His chin rose higher and his shoulders squared. "1872. The old courthouse was established in 1888, the official founding of Settler."

On the east coast, that would be considered recent history. "I'll have to check those out. Is the Swit House open to visitors? Obviously, the museum is."

"Saturdays and by appointment through me." He beamed and grabbed onto his lapels. "The museum's hours are Thursday through Monday."

“Noted.” She approached the door to the library, a small white building resembling a quaint one-story house more than a public building. Its white paint had aged and weathered. Blinds covered the window, hiding the inside. How dated would it be? Typewriters and rotary phones?

She held the set of keys Wald had given her, catching the light. The sun hit the stones on the keys, which glittered like tiny prisms sending tiny rainbows onto the crumbling sidewalk laced with weeds. “Which is for this door?” she asked.

Wald pointed at the long silver key. “That one.”

She slid the key into the lock and twisted it. A green flash flared, growing stronger until green was all Daelin saw.



Chapter 16

A woman's face drifted in the green light enveloping Daelin. She felt so dizzy, She groped for a wall. The woman's lips moved, but no sound came out. Her face was round and eyes hard, neither old or young. She spoke slowly, her gaze boring into Daelin's. It appeared as if the woman said, 'Beware.' She silently spoke the warning several times then the green disappeared.

Wald tapped Daelin's cheeks. "What happened? Did you see something?"

Beware echoed in her thoughts. "It's silly," she said, laughing. She didn't know what else to do other than laugh.

He grabbed her shoulders, his brow crinkling and lips frowning. "What did you see?"

"I..." She didn't want to tell him, but she needed to know she wasn't crazy more. "I think I saw a ghost."

"Really? You know, the founder of Settler claimed this area haunted, very haunted. You'll see evidence of it when you come tour his house. What did the ghost look like?"

"I'd never seen her before. Maybe it was the murdered woman. Although the clothes were wrong. Too old fashioned." Daelin fanned her face. This town should have been called Unsettler.

"Let's get you inside, huh?" Wald pushed open the library door.

Daelin stumbled in, smelling paper, cedar, dust, a lack of use, and old library. Before leaving New York, she had studied up on libraries. Old library smell meant some very aged books decayed on the shelves. She'd have to order some magnesium oxide to slow their deterioration.

The lowered blinds and lack of other windows cast the library in gloom. She groped the wall for a light switch. A beam blasted from Wald, bouncing around worn green carpet, wood, and books. It lit up the desk and the wall behind it. Wald squeezed past Daelin to go slap the switches. Old-fashioned 1960s rectangular fluorescent lights hummed, faintly glowing, growing brighter, illuminating the room, the only room.

If it spanned more than two thousand square feet, she'd need her eyes checked. Shelves crammed the floor space, and every inch of the bookcases were piled with references, knowledge, and stories. Stacks lay on the floor and rose on the uppermost shelves to the ceiling. A few cobwebs draped over the books from the ceiling lights, connecting the shelves and books in dusty lines.

A high counter gave the librarian a bit of protection from the cold and the public. Made from dark paneling, it had chips enough to have been gnawed by a rabid dog, and the varnish had begun to peel. The desk beside it had to weigh over a hundred pounds, built from substantial pieces of lumber. A portrait behind the desk froze Daelin in place. It was the face she had seen when unlocking the door. "That's her. That's the ghost." She inched up to it and peered at the name on the brass plate attached to the frame. *Cordelia Swit*.

“Patrick Swit’s granddaughter. She crafted the desk from a single board of cedar. She and her husband felled the giant on their land, and the shelves come from that same tree. This library was her dream and gift to Settler. She was quite the character. Made her husband take her last name. Rebuilt this town after the fire. Settler would be long gone if not for her. Makes sense she would want to greet the new librarian. I’d say it’s a good omen for you.”

Right. A ghost would be a blessing in a town riddled with weirdness. Daelin didn’t know how to feel about it, other than Cordelia didn’t seem to want to harm her. “It’ll be nice to have a friend.” She returned to surveying her new workplace.

The monitor sitting on top of the desk was as bulky as the 1990s. Daelin shuffled around to get a look at the rest of it. The PC came from the early 2000s, a vast improvement over a typewriter.

“There are newer laptops in the locked cabinet.” Wald pointed behind the desk at a metal cupboard next to Cordelia’s portrait. “Culver... Have you met Culver?”

She nodded.

“He put in Wi-Fi two years ago. He’s a descendant of old Patrick too, and Wi-Fi is his gift to the library on behalf of the Swit legacy.”

“Hmm.” Daelin plucked a book off the *New Releases* rack, a popular novel about teenagers killing one another. “Not too terribly old.” She set it down and pivoted in a slow circle. “It’s rather dusty. How long since my predecessor left?”

“The high desert surrounds us. We’ve always got dust. The library has been closed for three months.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder. “What happened to the last librarian?”

“Dante Grimes was his name. His mind started going, so he retired. He moved to Arizona into a retirement community.”

The first name hit her ear with familiar notes. She had heard it before. Puzzling over it, she frowned. The answer eluded her. The harder she thought about it, the farther it slipped from her conscious thoughts. “I have a lot of work to do.”

“Will you be all right? I can stay longer and scare off any ghosts.”

She tucked her arm through his, smiling, and led him to the door. “Cordelia will look after me. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, call if you need me. For anything. The county office is in the book and so am I.” He pointed at a quaint printed phone book the thickness of a slice of cheese lying on the desk.

The phone had push buttons and, thankfully, had come from a more recent decade than the equipment Wald worked with. “I won’t hesitate if I need you. Before you go, can you tell me what these other two keys are for?” She held out the library keys.

“I assume one is for the cabinet where the new computers are kept, and there’s a storage closet in the back somewhere.”

“Guess you don’t come to the library often.”

“I can see that changing.” He grinned and tipped his hat. “In fact, I’ll bring you some lunch later.” With a wink, he scooted out the door.

She couldn’t return the smile. The last thing she needed was a romance, especially with a guy she considered a coworker. Once she had her life settled, she’d take a gander at the men around here to see if one would suit her.

The room had more books than space. Daelin didn’t know where she’d put them. It’d

take her a decade to get them all organized, but she didn't concern herself with work at the moment. She needed to find out if Cordelia was real. She peered into the racks one by one, picking her way through the books. "Cordelia? Are you here? Beware of what?"

A tap on her shoulder whirled her about, and she gasped into the face of a very tan, very square man. He took off his cowboy hat, and the top of his head barely reached her shoulder.

"Excuse me, miss. I didn't mean to startle you. Are you the new librarian?"

Her breath settled back into her lungs, and she gasped again. "Yes. That's me."

His hands moved nervously around the brim of his hat. "My name is Scott. Scott Zayas. From... uh... I need some information and hope you can help me."

"Have a seat." She motioned at a couple of chairs set around a table piled with books. She turned her seat to face him and sat down. "What is it you need to know?"

"I'm researching a man, a man from history."

"Did he live around here?"

"I don't know. I found his name among my grandfather's things. That's all I know."

"It's a start." She went over to the large desk piled with books, mail, and papers, grabbing an envelope and a pen. "Jot his name down. Sorry I'm not better organized yet."

"That's all right, miss. I think he was an outlaw. He had an alias, Haw Shot." Scott wrote both names down and handed the envelope back to her.

Mysteries and stories. Maybe working in a library would be fun. "How soon do you need this? You can see I have a lot of straightening up to do."

Scott scanned the floor-to-ceiling mess around the entire room. "Before sunset if you will, *señorita*. I could send my wife to help you clean. A fair trade for your time."

"Finding things out is part of my job, Mr. Zayas. No need to offer the labor of your family." What was so urgent about the history of an outlaw? A siren screamed outside, the library's doors and walls offering no defense against its wail.

Scott's gaze darted in that direction, and he visibly gulped. "You heard of the phantom? The one seen at the murder? I think it's him. I think it's George Hawley's ghost."

Daelin rubbed her arms against a sudden chill.



Chapter 17

The shadows in Earl's prison cell deepened, darkening blacker than the deepest mineshaft, stretching into a stain of horror with two heads. Instinct had Earl inching to the opposite corner. The shadow slinked after him across the floor.

"Haw, haw," it whispered. An unholy laugh erupted from its blackest core. "Told you, you'd pay. I've got more planned for you. Haw, haw."

Standing tall was never a bad policy when squaring off. Earl had learned the lesson in the 1800s. It applied in any time. "You're a stupid puppet without any brain matter." He stepped on it, and in a shuddering agony his leg went numb.

"What does that make you? You're my puppet. I could spring you. I've got special talents, 'cause I been resurrected. You'd like to be sprung, wouldn't you? Bart and Haw Shot on the prowl together. We'd be invincible. Although, they don't have stagecoaches anymore. Did you know that?"

"I'm not going anywhere with you. My name will be cleared, I'll be let out, then I'm coming for you, George Hawley."

"No, it doesn't work that way. You'll do what I make you do."

Ghosts didn't have the powers Haw Shot displayed. The beaked thing from the rift had to wield them. Did Earl talk to it or Haw Shot? He'd have to keep the ghost jabbering to find out. "Which is?"

"I need another head." The shadow of a second head on his shoulder jiggled indecently, twisted at an unnatural angle. "Susan has pretty hair, but pretty isn't everything in the Afterlife."

The day the army had released him from service, Earl had sworn he'd never kill again. What did that thing need with heads anyway? "I'm not going to help you." He hopped up on the cot. Black followed, marring the blanket. There was no getting away from Hawley.

"Sure as the desert is dry, you will. Unless..." Haw Shot dangled *unless* like an unguarded shipment of gold.

Earl had to ask, "Unless what?"

"Apparently your freedom can be bought."

Earl had sold a piece of himself to stoop to robbing stagecoaches. He wasn't that man anymore, and if the ghost couldn't offer redemption, Earl had nothing to sell. It didn't hurt to find out what he could, though. "At what price?"

"Dante and Charming. You know where they are." It wasn't a question. His ghostly mouth lightened when he spoke.

His girl was in trouble with the things in the rift, just as Earl feared. He sucked in a slow breath. "Why do you hate me so much? I don't recall ever meeting you."

"We didn't. I watched you rob a stagecoach and copied you the next day. With a very different result." Haw Shot pointed at a gash of light running through his shadowy

neck. "They hung me. Why didn't they ever hang you?"

Maybe if Haw Shot had satisfaction on this subject, he'd slink off and leave Earl in peace. "Was there a rider on the wagon?"

"Two."

Like most other stagecoach robbers, Hawley was an idiot. He deserved what he had earned. "See, I was careful to never stickup a coach with a rider," Earl said. "That'll get you shot."

"It did."

Shot and hung. Dead two ways. Luck worse than Earl ever had, and he had a really bad streak of it prior to his days of highway robbery. "Why is your idiocy my fault?"

"You could have learned me better."

The pout in the thing's voice came off as comical. The argument was stupider. Yet continuing to antagonize Hawley didn't seem wise. Earl feigned an empathetic frown. "I didn't know you, brother. How could I teach you if I didn't know you existed?"

"That's my other issue with you. Everyone knew your name. You left no immortality for the rest of us."

"Not my doing. A pain-in-the-ass lawman used me as an example to the rest of you. I never wanted fame. Seems to me, you found your immortality anyway." Earl shrugged at the lumpy shadow then wondered at his sanity. He conversed with a spook like it had reason.

"By end of the week, the world will whisper my name before yours, and you will burn." A green glow brightened in the shadow's throat then dimmed. The crystal, the source of the phantom's existence. Since none of the town's protectors, the ones who guarded what came out of the rift, came running, the crystal's energy had to hide the birdman. Interesting. Dante and Charming could use the same technique to hide. If Earl found the chance to tell them.

However this went, he had to figure out how to get the crystal out of Haw Shot's throat. Earl had no idea how, only knew it was the way to take this vile creature down. "You delivered your message. You can go now." Yeah, go and fall into a mineshaft to the other side of the globe.

"I didn't get what I came for. The whereabouts of Charming and Dante. I will know where they are. If you tell me, I'll spring you and share my special talents. You're going to like them, Bart. You can walk into any vault without detection. You'll be richer than the moon."

The offer didn't at all appeal to Earl. It wouldn't change him into a better man. "I think you're speaking Chinese."

"Haw, haw. Quit playing the dumbass. The woman you treasure, the broken cog in the rift, she was brought here by you. So, it'll be your fault when Charming dies. She is going to die. And Dante. Like Wells Fargo made an example of you, the Governors of the rift will make one of them."

Not if Earl had anything to do with it. Problem was, he needed Dante to put up a decent fight. Yet, he couldn't contact Dante without leading Hawley straight to him. Earl would have to use Daelin as a messenger. He'd have to get her to the gate, so she remembered the conversation in the sandwich shop. Earl had no better chance to save his girl. "Charming is out with the Paleo Institute digging fossils, and Dante retired. He said he was going to Arizona. You ever been there? I think it'd suit you."

“We’ll see how your courage serves you after sundown. Haw, haw.”
The shadows lightened, leaving Earl alone, but not for long.



Chapter 18

Curiosities littered the shelves beside the laptops in the locked cabinet behind the librarian's desk: aviator goggles with coils soldered around the rims, a clunky windup watch on a thick leather band, and what looked like an old tape recorder refitted with coils, wires, and crystals.

"In all the dictionaries." Daelin picked up the device resembling a watch and examined it more carefully. She held it out to Cordelia's portrait. "What is it?"

"Those things are mine. Will you hand them over?"

Daelin whirled. Not a ghost. The clipped words belonged to Sabina Staley. Daelin consciously twitched her mouth into a smile. "Nice to see you, Ms. Staley. Did you get my paperwork?"

She pushed her black bubble frames up her angular nose and pursed her lips. "I see you're settling in."

"I promised to get information for a townspeople, which is why I was getting out a laptop." Daelin found it hard to swallow. Why did she explain as if an alien-possessed five-year-old caught with her hand in the candy jar?

"What a citizen requests should always come first. It's part of your job."

Cleaning the library and getting it organized would take the rest of Daelin's life, finding a way to please Sabina Staley would take longer. Daelin picked up the goggles, the tape recorder, and the watch, cradling them in her arms. "Do you have any suggestions on how best to manage the library?" Right. Find out what the woman expected. Bosses liked that sort of thing.

"Being here when people need you is enough." She reached for the dressed up items in Daelin's arms. "We'll be needing these for the Swit Days festival. It's this weekend. The library will be open and festooned. Understood?"

To get this place ready by the weekend meant no sleep this week and no time to track down Charming and the Paleo Institute's dig. *Earl will save her*, popped into her thoughts. Why? The answer tickled out of reach. Her stomach rumbled, wanting a sandwich. No time for it. Not with a library to spruce up for a party.

For her new boss and her new life, Daelin broadened her smile. "The library will be ready." She dumped the bizarre objects into Sabina's hands. Maybe some of the townspeople wore costumes. Daelin could think of no other use for the wildly modified goggles, tape recorder, and watch.

Sabina dangled the watch-like thing from the end of her finger. "Would you mind trying it on? You appear the same size as my niece. I need to get her a gift."

What young woman wouldn't love a weirdo watch? It wasn't Daelin's place to point it out, though. She took the trinket and strapped it on. Covered in bronze filigree, the watch face shone with a soft white glow. Between the bits of bronze decoration, bubbles of color burst inside, mesmerizing. Daelin felt so drowsy, blinking rapidly to ward it off.

Sing a song. It drifted like a pleasant memory, tickling the back of Daelin's throat. She sat on a busted up tour bus with her younger sister and brother. Their mother had passed out in the arms of the lead guitarist in front. The rest of the band sat with Daelin and her siblings. "It goes like this," the bassist said, clearing his throat, "I had a farm on the moon."

"I had a farm on the moon," Daelin whispered. Her mind cleared, and she stared into the smirking face of Sabina Staley who had removed the watch from Daelin's wrist. Daelin rubbed the empty spot, which felt icy to the touch.

"Very good, my dear," Sabina said. She hummed with a hint of happiness in her tone. "I'll be in touch. Tell your sister to call me when she returns to town." Like a brisk wind, she reeled about and left.

Daelin shuffled to the window, watching until her new boss trotted around the corner. Daelin had never seen anyone walk so fast without actually running, except in New York where most people rushed around like mini tornados. Absently, she massaged her wrist, missing the warmth of the watch. "I had a farm on the moon." Why had that song popped into her head? Why had any? She never sang, not since leaving her mother far behind.

She stayed at the window, opening the blinds to let in more light and to observe her new town. Her view differed so greatly from the one she had a mere week ago. Mountains instead of skyscrapers. Birds louder than car horns. Cedar-sweetened air instead of car exhaust.

Other people had come out, abandoning the morbid crime scene on the other end of town, adding life to the streets. Finally. Their presence made Daelin feel better. The postman stood in front of the Sparrow Roadhouse across the street holding a rectangular object. Green and purple flashes erupted as if he held strings of Christmas lights. "In all the dictionaries, what is he doing?"

She focused so hard, he must have felt it, because he wheeled around. He waved, wearing coil-wrapped goggles and holding a tape recorder device like the one Daelin had given Sabina. Where a cassette would go, purple and green light pulsed. Settler sure had strange words and strange forms of entertainment. She waved then veered away from the window.

One thing for certain, she needed a new phone, and she tired of waiting to hear from Charming. She could fix both easily enough with one call. The receiver of the push button phone on her desk had heft to it. Good to know in case of a robbery. "A book robber," she snorted, dialing her brother's number. He interned for a communications company this summer. "Pick up, pick up, pick up," she whispered.

Cobra Moondae Buckley. His name rivaled his sisters' in bizarreness. He went by Cobb. "Hey, sorry I missed your call. Leave me a message. Awesome!" His voicemail beeped.

"Cobb, it's Dae. I need your help. First, I need a new phone. You can send it to Charming's. I'm at her place now. Second, I need the current location of her phone. She's out on a dig somewhere. I want to know where. Miss you. Stay sane, little brother."

The phone clicked in a satisfactory way in the cradle, signaling it was in the off position. So she hoped. She picked up the handset and set it down again to be sure. "You probably had an older phone than this, huh Cordelia?" Why did she keep talking to the old woman? Settler had an unsettling effect. "I'm not sure about your town, Ms. Swit."

From the cabinet behind her, Daelin grabbed a laptop. She fired it up and tapped onto the internet, typing, 'George Hawley,' into the search bar. The only article she found was a short paragraph on a site about outlaws.

George "Haw Shot" Hawley (1848 - 1882) - Held up a stagecoach outside of Angel's Camp, California. He jumped from the brush and fired his guns. One of those bullets hit a Miss Ruth Lewis of Valley Springs, who later died. Two riders accompanied the coach, which had been held up the day before by the notorious Black Bart. The riders had better aim than Hawley, hitting him in the shoulder and stomach. Miss Lewis's family was so angered by her death, they didn't wait for the fatal wounds to kill Hawley. They gathered their neighbors and lynched him. In a bizarre twist of fate, the rope beheaded George Hawley. Prior to his outlaw days, he'd been a cabinet maker in Illinois and served in the infantry in the Civil War.

Not a word more. She switched on the PC, hoping the machine would have access to the library's catalog and records. Maybe one of the ancient dust-encrusted books littering the room had more information. She could spend years combing through records in Illinois and with the Union Army to find another half sentence or two. Perhaps the little snippet she had found would be enough. What would Scott do with the information? Would it help get rid of the phantom?

It took forever for the machine to boot up. Daelin poised her fingers on the keys, waiting. The library door swung open, dumping in a flood of sun and cold. The juicy aroma of roasted meat preceded Wald. He carried a white paper sack with grease splotches on it and a cardboard tray of soft drinks, picking his way through the piles of books.

"Lunch as promised. Can we clear some of this stuff to make room?"

"Sure." Daelin transferred heaps of papers and books onto the floor. Her stomach rumbled. "Those smell divine."

"Across the road from the county offices, a few blocks over, is the FastR Burger." He took out paper-wrapped sandwiches, the paper transparent from the juices, and paper-wrapped baskets. One had fries, the other onion rings. "Which do you prefer?"

"How about we share?" She took the sandwich he offered, unpackaging it with care, happily surprised to find sliced pork with sautéed mushrooms, caramelized onions, and heirloom tomato slices. "You just missed Sabina. She took those crazy Swit Day props with her. What are they for? I saw Culver outside using one resembling a repurposed cassette recorder." She popped a bit of the pork in her mouth. It tasted as sublime as a perfect ending. "Sabina made me try on the watch-like thing."

Wald put his sandwich down without taking a bite and wiped off his hands. "This town likes a good party. It's Swit Days and the rodeo. It's a big deal." He took a long sip of his soda.

"I'm looking forward to it. Although, I'm not sure this place will be ready by the weekend like Sabina requested." She took a bite of the sandwich. She'd be visiting FastR burger often once she had money.

"Don't fret over making this place pretty. I'll see to it you get help." Wald gestured at the computers with his soda cup. "What are you working on?"

"Thank you for the offer. I'll not say no." Daelin dabbed a French fry into the little container of ketchup. "Scott Zayas came in earlier, asking me to find out information on George Hawley, an outlaw from the 1800s."

Setting down his drink, Wald reached for an onion ring. “You know Scott is employed by Earl Blacke?”

What? That fact ruined her appetite, and Wald said it so matter-of-factly. “No, I didn’t know.”

He dipped the flaky onion ring into some orange sauce. “What did he want to know?”

“About George Hawley. He thinks he might be the phantom. I’m sure you heard about the ghost?” She arched a brow.

He maintained a stoic expression. “The phantom appeared last night to ferry Susan Leeds to heaven. That’s what the town is saying.”

News traveled faster in Settler than on the internet. “Well, George Hawley was hung and the rope snapped off his head. Interesting, because I heard Susan’s head is missing. Strange coincidence, huh?”

He wrapped up his sandwich, leaving the fries and onion rings. “I need to get back to the office. There’s a lot to be done before this weekend’s events. I’ll send over a crew in the morning to give you a hand. Thanks, Daelin.” He hurried out the door.

Thanks for what?



Chapter 19

Haw Shot needed to learn some respect. Earl contorted his face into his worst sneer. For the first time since leaving the war, he wished for a loaded gun then sneered at himself. What good would bullets do against a phantom?

His wit would be the better weapon. Earl stood taller. No matter how many heads Hawley gathered, Earl had more smarts.

The shadows bounced, becoming inkier. It had nothing to do with the lowering sun. Not fully dark, this spook had special powers indeed, for it materialized in the sole patch of natural light remaining inside the cell block, a block of two cages rarely visited by worse than disorderly drunks.

Shadows left the recesses, gathering in the pool of light. The black sparked with a dim glow of green slowly brightening until the green matched the glare of the sun, then Haw Shot fully materialized. This time, he sported three heads, his own on one shoulder, Susan's on the other, and the birdman's in the center. Earl's throat tightened, but he stood his ground.

"Haw, haw. You ready for some fun?"

Earl couldn't help but roll his eyes. "You have no room for another head."

"Hell on hot sand, I've plenty of room for plenty more."

"There's the issue of me being locked in here."

"Ain't a problem." Haw Shot's green-glowing hands wrapped around the locking mechanism and squeezed. The metal creaked, squealed, and popped. It crumbled into flakes, which sifted to the ground like Hell's snow. With a theatrical wave, Haw Shot aimed his fingers at the door, wiggling them. Electric arcs of green pulsed at the hinges until the cell swung open. "Come out and play, Bart."

Earl studied the jewel embedded in the ghost's neck, the stone of energy the birdman had created with his gyroscope. The power it emitted crackled and pushed Earl away. That could prove to be an issue, and Earl already had plenty of headaches. Cautiously, he sidled out of his cell.

"It's a great night for killing. Haw, haw. The moon is bright, the stars twinkling, cold as dead woman's kiss."

Wow, an image Earl needed to expel from his mind. More than that, he had to clear his name of murder and get away from Haw Shot. No way would he hang. No way would he return to San Quentin. He cleared his throat, yelling, "Lou, I need you. Get your behind in here."

"How pathetic." Haw Shot's heads bounced, his belly laugh threatening to dislodge them to the floor. His meaty fingers clasped around Earl's throat, not feeling like mist and shadow.

Earl gulped, kicking at Haw Shot's knees. His boot swept through air to connect with the wall. The sting in his toes sprung tears in his eyes. How could the ghost touch him

and Earl not be able to touch it? Was that a smirk on the birdman's face? Earl poked at its eyes. It squawked, and the phantom let go. Well, that was something. "Duly noted," Earl muttered under his breath. He could affect the thing from the rift, but not the ghost from this world.

The birdman spoke in a language Earl had never heard — squawks, burps, guzzles. It made no sense.

Apparently it did to Haw Shot, though. He frowned as if he had never aged past the age of seven. "My head is fine on my shoulder. I like it this way."

More gibberish came from the beaked thing, its eyes, which resembled goggles more than eyes, shone with a sickly yellow light.

"I could deal with that. OK." Haw Shot plucked off his head from his shoulder and settled it over the birdman's. His face's green radiance took on a more yellow tone. He grabbed Earl by the back of his shirt, lifting him off his feet.

Earl twisted and flailed. With all of the beaked thing covered by an Earthly phantom, he could find nothing solid to punch or gouge. He couldn't get away. "Lou!"

The cell block door clanged open. "What in Timbuktu is going on in here..." Deputy Banks' mouth fell open, his eyes widening to the size of gold coins.

"Don't let it take me," Earl gasped.

"Haw, haw. Let's get going." Haw Shot lumbered past Lou, using Earl to shove the deputy out of the way, leaving the police station.

The sun had fully set, sending pitch over every crevice of Settler. The high desert night shocked Earl's breath out of his lungs. He gasped at the slap of cold, struggling harder to get away from Haw Shot.

Most of the businesses had closed, but not Greg's Pizza 'n Pies across the road. The windows blazed like freshly stoked hearths. Townspeople sat inside, eating, laughing. Families. Earl couldn't ruin their innocence. They didn't know the rift. Only a select group knew of its horrors.

"Let's go rob a bank. A big one." Perhaps the lure of riches would divert Haw Shot. Earl had to try. "We can buy ourselves a castle."

"The right kind of castle might tempt me. Be that as it may, I have something better than money now. Magic brewing in my gut, a magic powerful enough to change the universe. The more heads I get, the more powerful I become. Can't you see how much stronger I am with that sweet lady's head on my shoulder?"

How did the heads make him stronger? It didn't matter. Haw Shot had to be stopped. Earl reached out, grasping for the glowing stone in Haw Shot's throat.

"Haw, haw." He laughed like a sick coyote, shoving open the door to the pie shop. "So many pretty ones to chose from."

Mothers leaped in front of their children. Chairs toppled. Drinks spilled. Pizza plopped onto the orange tile floor. Screams and wails replaced the happy chatter.

"Run," Earl yelled. "Run."

Greg dropped the pizza he was about to put in the oven, cheese and tomato sauce coating him from waist to foot. Jaw flapping, he froze in place. Greg reacted like a slug, way too sluggish. Split seconds stretched into infinity, and in seemingly stop-motion he lunged for the phone on the wall. He was too late. Haw Shot grabbed him by the hair, pulling until Greg fell onto his knees whimpering like a child. "Please."

"See, he wants it, Bart. He's begging. Don't keep him waiting." Haw Shot let go of

Earl.

Earl threw himself in front of Greg, shoving him out of Haw Shot's clutches. "Run."

Greg scurried on all fours toward the door. Haw Shot's phantom boot stopped him, stomping him onto the ground as if he were a cockroach.

"Running won't save him. Or you. You know what will. You tell me what I want to know."

"Fools gold and empty prospects, let him be."

"Wrong answer." Haw Shot threw an arm around Earl's neck, squeezing, dragging him to stand in front of Greg.

Greg stared into Earl's soul, sobbing. "Help me. I don't want to die." He swiped at the ghost, connecting, resulting in audible thuds. It happened again.

"He's saying please. Haw, haw."

With all his might, Earl pivoted and swung at Haw Shot's jaw. His fist went straight through it. He tried the same place Greg had landed his blow. Haw Shot cackled, slipping his ghostly hands into Earl's.

Earl fought with arms, legs, and teeth, yet found his hands around Greg's neck. He twisted. "No."

"It all ends if you tell me. You know what." Haw Shot paused with Greg's head at a gruesome angle. It cut off the pie man's air so his weeping came out in a stilted gurgle.

"I did tell you," Earl said. The pressure he put on Greg's chin increased like a team of ten horses stampeding to a river. Earl couldn't stop. The man screamed then screamed no more. A sick pop silenced him. A moment later Earl held the head in his hands, blood cascading down his pants onto the floor. "Oh." He drew in a sharp breath.

The door to the pizza shop flew open. Trinidad Cepeda slid in on her knees, firing a crystal gun. Blue energy blasted from the long slim barrel. The pistol grip had elaborate works of bronze and silver — scrolls, coils, gears. Before her first shot dissipated, Culver rushed in, aiming the same type of weapon. Haw Shot quit moving, as motionless as a vein of untapped gold.

Earl lunged for the stone in Hawley's throat, but his fingers went through the phantom. "Son of a biscuit and lard."

At that precise moment, the weapon wore off. Haw Shot swiped at Earl, sending him onto his butt into a wall.

"Shoot it," Earl groaned.

Tiny blinked at her weapon, examining the barrel. "Why don't the neutrolyzers work?" she asked Culver. She straightened her aluminum foil hat as if it might help.

Tattoos glowed on both of their hands and wrists. Tattoos like the one Charming wore to designate her rank in the Rifters. Earl squinted, trying to make out what level Culver and Tiny had achieved. The tattoos resembled old circuitry and shone softly with blue and violet light.

Culver fussed with a watch contraption on the same wrist. The glow shifted to orange on the device and on his tattoo. "Don't know. I'm calling in backup." He spoke into his wrist then fired at the phantom.

Tiny joined in, hopping, yelling, making wild hand gestures. It had a small effect. Haw Shot froze. The chance Earl had been waiting for. He knew how to stop Hawley, and he knew who had to do it.

He sprinted out the door to the library. He found the spare key Dante had hid above

the window and let himself in.



Chapter 20

“Please leave your message—” Daelin tired of leaving messages. She needed answers. Cobb hadn’t called back. The Paleo Institute hadn’t called. Their message remained maddeningly the same. “We’re out on an archaeological dig for the summer, our offices are closed.” No word from Charming. It wasn’t like her.

Daelin’s stomach snarled in knots. *Earl would save her sister*. Why did she keep thinking it? Her stomach gurgled, and she craved another sandwich. Her stomach was crazy.

How could a man who had murdered an innocent woman and hid her head save Charming? Daelin didn’t want his help. She didn’t want to see or speak to him. Yet the same unfounded thought about him playing the hero rattled her mind over and over. “He’s the key. I know it. Key to what exactly?”

She sat at the tiny table in the glassed-in room finishing her second egg sandwich. If not for the groceries Earl had given her, she’d be eating her sister’s lawn. Maybe he had been framed. By a ghost? She snorted. The town’s nutty gossip didn’t equate to fact. The only facts she had were what she had observed in his company. There had been an edge to him, but he hadn’t struck her as psychotic.

“I’m so tired of thinking about it.” She huffed, and finished her meal.

If she didn’t get to work on time, there was no telling what Sabina would do. Prepared for a day of cleaning at the library, Daelin wore a denim trousers and a cotton top. She poured coffee into a thermos she found in one of her sister’s cupboards. From a peg in the garage, she grabbed one of her sister’s flannel shirts. It didn’t matter if the sleeves were too short. It’d still keep off some of the dirt.

She picked up her bag by the door and slipped on the green coat. “Come home today,” she said to Charming’s photo on the bookshelf then locked up. The air had a warmth Daelin had believed she’d never feel again. She peeled off her winter coat before reaching the end of the street. The town had more life this morning. It was good to see. A normal day would be nice.

People hurried down the main thoroughfare. “Hmm. What’s the rush?” She hadn’t noticed any type of bustle in Settler before. The townspeople ran in the same direction, up Brucker Avenue. Toward the library.

“In all the dictionaries.” Daelin picked up speed, jogging onto Brucker, gawking at the crowd gathered in front of the library.

The door sat wide open. The annoying postman shielded the entrance, shooing the curious away. They scurried off toward flashing lights down the street from the county offices. A bigger crowd gathered there. The throng in front of the library dwindled to a work crew of eight with buckets, mops, and cleaning supplies. Culver Swit smiled sheepishly. Strangest event of the morning yet, because he didn’t strike Daelin as the least bit shy.

“Wald sent us to help with the clean up,” he said unable to look her in the eye.

Right. Wald had promised her extra hands yesterday. Daelin recognized the thrift store owner and Culver, but she hadn't met the others. Moses Kane, a forest ranger with an imposing stare. Beside him stood a firefighter who should be on a calendar, Vance Lambert. Francine Storm, a dusky woman with a stunning smile, owned the general store. The town pharmacist, Ken, introduced everyone then pushed up his horn-rimmed glasses. Great. Wald had kept his promise, but this was something more. The crowd. The way none of her helpers would meet her gaze. The expressions hinting they all wished to be elsewhere.

“Beauteous day to you,” Starphish curtseyed. “Glad you dig your new coat.”

“What?” Daelin glanced at the garment draped over her arm. “Uh, yeah, it's great. What's going on?”

Spattered in peach paint, Starphish fiddled with a plastic tulip woven into her braids. “Wald let it be known you could use a hand sprucing the place up.”

Culver rattled the bucket in his hand. “We'll guard your back, librarian.” The grimace stealing his dimples chilled Daelin's blood.

‘Guard’ struck her as a strange choice of words. Did she need guarding? She scooted past Culver and Starphish into the library, discovering she needed more than guarding. A typhoon had hit it in the night. Books and papers had been thrown into heaps, some towering as tall as thigh high. Her mouth refused to close. “What happened?”

Starphish put an arm around Daelin's shoulders. “The phantom. He came calling for you, man.”

The ghost stealing heads had done this? Why? Because Daelin searched for information on him? Maybe she had stumbled onto something George Hawley didn't want known. Daelin tugged at her collar then chided herself. Ghosts had their place in stories, but she couldn't believe they were real. Then she glanced at the portrait of Cordelia Swit. Right. Reality had a different definition in Settler too.

“The phantom is one angry dude,” Daelin said.

“Yup. The vibe is loud and clear. Right? Yeah... Oh, another murder happened last night. The phantom was seen at the killing before it came here. Glad you had closed up shop, Dae. Wow.” Starphish shook her head slowly.

Did she imply Daelin could have lost her head? Daelin placed a hand over her neck, finding it difficult to swallow. What if he came back? She stared into Cordelia's dark eyes. Cordelia hadn't returned since the first time Daelin had opened the library.

Culver steered Starphish away. With the mess, he could only put an extra step between her and Daelin. “She doesn't need to hear about it.”

If Daelin had landed in the middle of this, whatever this was, she very well did need to know. “Wh-who? Who was killed?”

“Greg of Greg's Pizza 'n Pies. His head is gone.” Starphish twisted away from Culver. “Witnesses saw Earl wrench off Greg's head. Can you imagine it?”

Daelin reached for her desk to steady herself. She didn't want to imagine anything so gruesome.

“It wasn't just Earl.” Starphish picked up a broom, swiping at a particularly long cobweb swooping over their heads. “The phantom used him like a puppet. It's all so existential.”

Oh, this was bad. But wait... “Isn't Earl in jail?” Daelin asked. “How could he run

out into the street and kill somebody if he was locked up?”

“The ghost sprung him,” Starphish said. “Freaky, huh? The ghost calls him some other name, but it isn’t Earl.”

Yeah, far out. Daelin didn’t know what to say, sinking into the chair behind her desk. She opened a drawer to stuff in her bag, surveying the disaster around her. None of this made sense. Daelin had read accounts of ghosts moving objects, but never ripping off heads and causing this level of mess. “Maybe it’s not a ghost, but a demon.”

Starphish gasped. “Maybe that’s how Earl disappeared. Word has it, he was taken down into Hell.” She made a peace sign, patting the air around her with the symbol.

Disappeared? “You’re saying, Earl Blacke vanished?”

“He ran this way, the ghost in hot pursuit then Earl wasn’t seen again. I think the demon ate him.”

“What?” A ghost stealing heads was enough to deal with. Daelin didn’t want to think about man-eating demons.

“No, no,” Culver said, picking up books, piling them. “There aren’t any demons. That’s just nutty.”

“Until I moved here, I would have said the same thing.” Daelin arched a brow. “I’m not a nut.”

“Yeah,” Starphish said, flicking the collar of his shirt. “What are you implying about our groovy new librarian?”

Granted, this discussion had threads of insanity through it. Big fat threads. “No offense taken,” Daelin smiled. Yeah, she needed to nudge her day onto a saner track. Getting to work would do that. “Thank you all for coming to help with this disaster.” She stood, taking papers and books off the floor by her desk, stacking them neatly.

Her new friends followed suit. She organized them to maximize the extra hands, needing them so badly. The gossip ended. Everyone worked as if their job depended on how well they did, not Daelin’s. She puzzled over how to repay their kindness.

Hours passed. Daelin forgot anybody worked with her until she bumped into Culver grabbing for the same mess. He bowed, a gesture from another century.

FastR Burger sent over lunch. On the floor, Daelin sat with her volunteers, enjoying a ham steak sandwich. The books sat in neat stacks ready to be shelved. The cobwebs had been banished and the sole window sparkled. Someone had washed the blinds too. “I couldn’t have done this alone. I owe you all a big party. When I get paid, I’ll throw one at my sister’s place.”

“That’d be groovy,” Starphish said. “Will it be OK with your sister? She’s more the quiet type.”

Charming had always had a serious nature, putting her passions before fun. Those passions had been poured into the Paleo Institute. Sure. That was why Daelin hadn’t heard from her or seen her. “She needs me to remind her there’s more to life than dead things preserved in rocks.” Daelin chuckled. Sharing life with her sister again remained the main reason Daelin had come here. Her desperation aside, she missed being close. “The Paleo Institute must be onto something big to have been gone this long. Huh?”

“The director mentioned something about a super swell new fossil bed earlier this month. Don’t know what kind of dead things they’re finding, though.” Starphish shrugged, blessing the air with a peace sign. She leaned closer. “Maybe that’s what happened to Earl. He misses her. Yeah, that jives. They’re almost inseparable some

days.”

Daelin’s scalp prickled. “You’re suggesting he’s on a killing spree because of the pain of missing my sister?” Really? That made sense?

“Yes.”

“That’s no excuse for murder.” She glanced at Culver. He shrugged. A shrug? What was wrong with these people?

Culver wiped his mouth and mustache. “They were on the fritz actually. I think the ir closeness lately was about breaking up.”

“Were they fighting?” In her heart Daelin knew Earl had something to do with Charming’s disappearance, and now he had disappeared. “Is he violent?”

Rearranging his legs, stretching long instead of crossing, Culver gave her question a good amount of consideration. “He has a bite, is cantankerous and private. Before these murders, I wouldn’t have pegged him as a killer. It’s said it’s always the quiet ones.”

“He seemed so calm,” Daelin whispered. “What would have provoked him?”

Culver stuffed his trash in the empty food bag. “She broke his heart last summer with an intern she fell for.”

“Oh right!” Starphish snapped her fingers. “That Cerin guy. They were really heavy, man. She tried to keep it a secret, but there are no secrets in Settler.”

In a gesture that was almost sexy, Culver bit his lower lip, studying the worn carpet in a color that could only inspire despair. He kept staring. He knew something more.

Daelin watched him. She couldn’t finish her sandwich. Why hadn’t Charming disclosed anything about Cerin or Earl? Had she and her sister grown that far apart, so far Charming couldn’t bother to call and say she was all right? It all needed serious thought. Daelin wanted everybody out so she could think.

A moist towelette cleansed her hands, then she collected the lunch trash. “Thank you all for coming to my rescue. It was lovely of you to give up most of your day.”

“That’s what Settler is about, Dae. Dig?” The plastic tulip dangled precariously from one of Starphish’s braids.

Daelin fixed it. “I do. I get it. However, I can’t take any more time away from what you need to accomplish in your jobs and businesses. So, I’ll take it from here. Besides, it’s me who has to shelve the books. That’s all that’s left.” After a round of hugs and personal thank yous, her eight rescuers left. One by one. Until she stood alone amid mountains of books.

She went to the first stack, shelving the books, putting them in order by the numbers on their spines. Tedious. “I had a farm on the moon and grew the mid of June. We feasted on beams and its radiant glow.” In all the dictionaries, why did she keep singing that song?

A loud thump from the back of the library kept the next line of the song on her tongue. *Bang, bang, bang.* She peered around the shelf. The bang didn’t stop. Had the phantom come to finish her off? She picked up the heaviest book within reach, tiptoeing toward the noise. She passed her desk, the cabinet, the water fountain, and the restroom. The door beside it rattled, a door she had never seen before. The mess must have hidden it, because doors didn’t appear and disappear. “And there’s no such thing as ghosts.”

She glared at Cordelia’s portrait as she went past, gripping the library book tighter. “Hel-hello? Who’s there? Answer me or I call the police.” She should call the police. The phone sat all the way over on her desk, a relic she’d need practice to use with speed. She

grit her teeth and readied to strike. "Are you Hawley?"

"No," a male voice answered. Earl Blacke's voice. "I need to talk to you about George Hawley, though. He's using me. If you don't hear me out, you'll die tonight."

No way. Daelin whirled on her heels, coming nose to nose with a transparent Cordelia Swit. Her head floating five feet off the ground.

"Beware of Hawley." She whispered it so softly, her words could have been the breeze. "He'll kill us all."

In all the dictionaries. Daelin groped for the library keys in her pocket. The brass with the elaborate scrolls had to be for the storage closet. Wald should have mentioned it was a magic storage closet. Her fingers quaked, and she struggled to slide the key into its slot. She paused. Should she listen to a ghost?



Chapter 21

Greg's blood covered Earl in gruesome stains. He hadn't been able to wash, and he didn't dare leave the closet, a safe zone Dante had shown him five years ago when it became evident the rift hated Earl. Earl had activated the seal by pressing points on the doorframe in a precise pattern, like a combination to a safe. Dialing the pattern the first time brought the closet back into reality, the second time took it out of the notice of the world and beyond the senses of those who came from the rift.

He had sat on the pine boards with his knees pulled to his chest, waiting. Hawley had made enough noise to rival a booming mine. As long as Earl didn't touch the door, the closet remained hidden.

The Rifiers, the people in town who protected the world against the horrors of the rift, had battled Haw Shot to exhaustion. Earl had heard it all, had heard the discussion about what to do about the mess and Wald's solution. The gossip and wild stories during the clean up made Earl snicker. Perception had more power than truth when it came to the rumors about himself, Charming, and Cerin.

None of them knew Cerin was Dante's brother, arriving here to combat the same evil Dante had stumbled upon. In the process, Cerin had bewitched Charming with his elegant speeches. He didn't have his brother's skills at concealment, and the guardians of this world had discovered him. Exposed, he and Charming carried on a very public romance to cover his real reasons for being here. If the Rifiers knew the truth about Charming and Cerin, the remaining guardians would be branded as enemies too. Then the threat Dante had come here to mount an offensive against, would come hard and swift.

To protect his girl, the town, and its people, Earl couldn't reveal Charming's romance with Cerin as a sham. He worried the Governors knew she had information on them she shouldn't and traveled the rift to thwart them. Hawley's presence proved they at least suspected.

The library grew quiet except for singing. Daelin had a fair voice, but Earl didn't need a serenade. He needed her to find him. The library wouldn't betray its keeper, wouldn't let him out until she allowed it. She had to see the door and unlock it. Dante had called it the librarian's hex.

Earl placed his palm on the doorknob, making the storage space visible. The edges of the closet became less fuzzy. He pounded on the door until she yanked it open.

"I'm here to help you not harm you." His tongue had always held magic, weaving lies into the truth. It was how he had lived a double life in the 1870s: one as a gentleman, the second as a notorious stagecoach robber. This time he'd used his gift to tell the truth. Daelin had to listen to him, but by the squint of her eyes and the set of her jaw, she'd beat him to a pulp first.

He raised his hands, showing them bare and empty. "I didn't kill Susan and Greg. I swear it on your sister's life." She had to believe him. She had to trust him, yet his faith

in himself slipped. The feel of Greg's tendons popping against his palms wouldn't let him be. Earl swallowed past the lumps in his throat, vowing for the three thousandth time to make Haw Shot pay.

A heavy book in her hands, Daelin smacked it over Earl's head. She did so two more times before he could get a grip on the book and wrestle it out of her hands.

She growled. "What did you do to my sister?" Her voice rattled with a fury to match George Hawley's. "Did you kill her? Starphish and Culver told me the two of you were together, that you were upset she left you for some intern last summer."

Pins and needles popped in his legs and feet, making it a struggle for Earl to stand. "I swear to all I hold dear, I would never harm her. Never. I'd die for your sister."

Daelin crossed her arms. Her height made her formidable. Once the Rifiers trained her, she'd be a fierce opponent, which had to be Dante and Charming's plans for Daelin. If they planned to wage war, they'd need as many allies as they could get. Earl had to make sure Daelin joined the Rifiers without a hitch. It was how he could help his girl.

"Don't tell me something stupid like the ghost did it," Daelin said. "Nonsense belongs in novels." Her jaw stiffened. Irrefutable proof would be all she'd accept.

Earl would have to give up some secrets. "Settler has nonsense at its foundation. The phantom and its vendetta are very real. It's after your sister."

"Then why is it after you?"

If only all of this could be explained without him, but it couldn't. He'd have to let a few things go and trust her with them. "Because it learned of our bond."

"That you're in love with each other?"

The need to atone made him act as foolishly as a devoted lover with Charming. He had to believe it would eventually erase his previous sins. "No. Charming and I are not romantically involved. Never were. Never will be."

"Then why are you so committed to her?"

Half honesty wouldn't satisfy Daelin. Earl sighed and gave her what she needed. "She's the only family I have."

"Family?"

"Distant relations." He wasn't entirely sure how many greats to put before their titles of grandfather and granddaughter. "On her father's side. You and I aren't related."

"Damn the ain'ts, Earl Blacke. None of this makes sense. My sister never told me of you and you're not telling me much."

"I don't know what else to do—"

"Pssst." The whisper came from the stacks.

Daelin whirled. Earl jumped out of the closet in front of her. If Haw Shot had returned, he'd have to go through Earl to get to Daelin.

Daelin pointed at an empty portrait behind the librarian's desk. "It's Cordelia."

If that didn't beat all. He tiptoed to the painting, touching the frame. It tingled with energy much like the waking nerves in his feet. "She's appeared to you before?"

"When I opened the library for the first time, and again just a few moments ago. She showed me the storage closet." Daelin slipped into the stacks, reappearing with a book in her hands.

While standing in front of empty painting, Earl blinked once and Cordelia was suddenly back in it, like she had never left. He had never seen such a thing.

"It's a message for you." Daelin held out the opened book.

A crystal, which resembled a bullet, sat in the hollowed out interior. It came with a folded note sealed with wax. *Earl* scrawled across it.

His fingers broke the seal and unfolded the sheet. *A third pillar will open the gate on cue.* It could only be from Dante and it meant it was time for Daelin to remember.



hapter 22

Daelin plucked a crystal bullet wrapped in copper wire from Earl's palm, holding it up to a fluorescent light flickering garishly from the ceiling. "I'm not sure I can trust you." She crinkled her nose, staring at him until he fidgeted. He didn't appear to be lying. He appeared more like a boy caught stealing a freshly baked pie.

She glanced at Cordelia's portrait. The first librarian. Daelin had a feeling the dead woman was her real boss, the only one she had to please. If so and if Cordelia sanctioned Earl's story, then Daelin had to do what he asked. Out the window, the day mellowed to hues of gold. She'd have to hurry. One, because she had to reach a place on his property before dark. Two, because harboring a fugitive was a felony. She'd give him until morning.

She frowned at the bullet then at him. "I'll give you this one chance. One."

"Find the truth then come straight back." He swallowed hard. "Please."

Without agreeing, she shut the door and locked him inside the closet. The door faded before her eyes, disappearing until she touched it again. How could a door do that? She had no room to question. Here, she embarked on an adventure to prove a ghost murdered people at the insistence of another ghost.

"Keep an eye on things," she said to Cordelia's picture. Did the painting nod? Daelin couldn't be sure. She grabbed her things, closed up the library, and hurried to Charming's cottage. There she changed into worn jeans, heavy socks, and a sweater. In the garage, Daelin found a flashlight.

The dirt lane to Blackes Ranch Resort and Spa twisted through brush and dust. Ten yards past the long winding driveway to the resort, she found the trail leading through the lava fields. The lava crunched like glass under her feet until the path ducked into a thick pine forest. Pine needles and decaying foliage softened the trail. A forestry sign gave information about the volcano, stating the last eruption had happened thirteen hundred years ago resulting in the surrounding obsidian deposits.

"I hope the volcano is dead," she said, venturing past the sign.

A little yellow songbird in the tree ahead answered. *Hwee hwee.*

"I'll take your word for it."

She found the clearing with the obsidian pillars framing a twisted tree. "I hope you're a juniper." She didn't know one tree from another.

Slowly, she examined the clearing, studying the ground, rocks, and foliage. The dirt and tiny plants between the obsidian columns had been burned recently. She knelt, running her hand over the charred ground. It tingled, traveling into her wrist then up into her shoulder, zapping the spot square between her shoulder blades. A glint among the fallen pine needles caught her eye.

"What is it?" She brushed away the needles to discover a vehicle key — silver with a black plastic coating on the end, *Jeep* stamped on it. A piece of cracked clear plastic

dangled from the bent key ring. It had an image embedded in it: Daelin and Cobb in Times Square. Charming had taken it two years ago. Dried blood stained Cobb's smile and dark blotches marred the ground.

"No." Had Charming been hurt? "Where are you?" Daelin rubbed the surface of the mangled key ring then slipped it into her coat pocket. Maybe the clearing had more clues. Daelin crawled around, finding only char, dirt, rocks, and decaying plant matter.

The sun lowered in the sky, deepening the shadows. Daelin zipped up her coat and took out the crystal bullet, holding it before her eyes. What would it tell her about her sister? Earl promised it would reveal much. Anywhere but Settler, Daelin would think he pulled an elaborate joke.

She placed the bullet precisely between the lava pillars. "This is so silly." How could a rock between other rocks do anything? She sat on her heels, shaking her head. Having hiked all the way out here, though, she might as well see it through.

Earl had been adamant she not stay in the clearing once positioning the bullet. She backtracked down the trail to where it veered off up to the overhang, climbing slowly, careful not to twist her ankle. Behind a boulder set away from the edge, she hunched. She had full view of the clearing and the pillars. Daelin waited.

"I should have brought a sandwich." She glanced at the colors splashing the sky, noticing the purples shadowing the Cascades to the west. From up here, she could see Earl's ranch and the town. Lights began to flicker, sending up bright beacons on the shadowed hills.

That wasn't what she had climbed up here to see, however. She focused on the clearing. The darkness deepened. Stars came out. More stars than Daelin had ever seen. "This place can't be real. It's some sort of alternate reality." Right. What else could Settler be? "A freaking rabbit hole."

To expect anything to happen bordered on ridiculous. She was about to give up when lightning erupted along the lava pillars, fingers of blue energy arcing up into the sky. They intertwined, lacing and weaving, until a sphere of blue light burst between the columns.

Cold shot through her veins, twisting her thoughts. She stood outside Dante's office listening to him and Earl talk. They spoke of Charming and danger. They mentioned this doorway. Earl had an object which would lead to Charming. Daelin remembered it all, including how she had been told to forget.

She shook her head. "Damn the ain'ts." Her sister was in danger. Daelin glared in the direction of the library. "What else are you keeping from me Earl Blacke?"

The light between the pillars dissipated, dimming then disappearing like a skyrocket on the Fourth of July. Fishing the flashlight out of her pocket, she switched it on and navigated the trail to the clearing. She pocketed the crystal bullet then returned to town.

Once on the knoll by her sister's house, a bright green light from the direction of the main street caught her attention. Purple and dimmer green flashes accompanied it.

In her gut, she knew more answers awaited. Her feet moved in that direction. She shut off the flashlight, hugging the shadows until she reached the unbelievable scene.

Culver, Trinidad, Wald, Francine, Moses, and Vance battled a ghost with three heads. Sabina stood in the dim recess of the car dealership with a case, whipping out gadgets, tossing them to the others, barking out orders. The others didn't question her. Their fists and kicks flew as instructed, but didn't connect with the ghost. Their arms and

legs went right through it. The phantom radiated light like a moon, glowing a sickly green. Tall and burly, it epitomized what Daelin thought of when hearing, ‘wild west outlaw.’

The phantom lumbered, its heads teetering. Three of them. Its hands covered Culver’s, forcing the postman to twist his cousin Trinidad’s neck.

“Culver stop,” Tiny screamed.

The street lamp’s beam illuminated a device on Tiny’s wrist, one appearing very much like the one Daelin had found in the cabinet in the library. In fact, all the people fighting the ghost wore them and their skin around the devices glowed purple. The forest ranger, Moses, held a modified tape recorder thing. Wald and Trinidad wore aviator goggles with coils wound around the rims. None of the items were props.

The ghost’s gaze swiveled to land on Daelin, so hollow and menacing. She gasped. It dropped Culver and lunged at her. Her hand flew to her throat, then her feet flew. She sprinted toward the library to join Earl in the safe room. She had to reach it. Before she went two feet, the gruesome Haw Shot blocked her path, skidding her to a stop. She stumbled backwards.

Wald jumped between her and the phantom, shooting a purple ray from a crystal gun. Its beam encased the phantom in violet light. The ghost roared. Daelin had never heard such a horrid sound, clapping her hands over her ears. The phantom knocked Wald onto his stomach. He fought for a breath, unable to rise onto his feet.

Those monstrous hands came at Daelin, grabbing for her throat. Its grip languished, thrashing at air. Its hands went right through her. A chill stabbed her where it touched. She pushed at it, shoving the ghost away.

“She affects it,” Wald shouted at the group. “Did you see her drive it back?” He struggled to his feet, clutching at Daelin’s sleeve. “Help us. Nothing we do works.”

Another rabbit hole. She had the skill to fight a ghost. She owed these people for their help with cleaning up the library. But fighting a ghost? The laugh caught on the back of Daelin’s tongue. What could she do? She stared at the heads attached to Haw Shot’s shoulders, the gaping mouths frozen in eternal anguish. Like the worst day of her life on the subway platform with a gun pointed to her head, she couldn’t move.

“Haw, haw.” Those beastly hands glowing in green sliced through her neck. Hawley grimaced and spat. Its spit couldn’t hit her either.

She slapped George Hawley’s cheek. The phantom’s head rattled, threatening to topple. It wasn’t attached as securely as the heads of its recent victims.

“Maybe I can’t kill you, but I can use them to kill everybody else. Haw, haw. That should flush your sister out.”

“You lie.” A poor retort, but the only one she could think of. The ghost would kill the whole town to get to Charming? What had Charming done? It didn’t matter. Daelin couldn’t let a massacre happen. She threw another punch then a kick. The fury for all she had put up with — her childhood, her mother, her former boss, the subway robber — poured out onto George Hawley’s ghost. Daelin pummeled, struck, and slammed.

The ghost backed up. She and her rage followed. “Where’s my sister you piece of turd? Where is she?” She swung blindly, connecting with Susan’s head. The thwack thunked in a sickly way releasing the rancid odor of decay. Daelin’s stomach roiled. Haw Shot’s green glow dimmed.

Culver limped to her side, firing purple rays from the crystal gun. “Hit the heads

again. Attack Susan and Greg.”

Eww. She didn't want to touch rotting body parts on purpose. Was any of this real? Had Earl slipped her a drug? “I can't.” She dropped her fists. “I can't do this.”

“If you don't, others will die. You heard it. Haw Shot isn't bluffing.”

“Haw, haw.” The ghost snatched Culver by the collar and spun him around, slipping its green hands into the postman's, forcing Culver to set his hands on Daelin's neck, twisting.

Choking had a much more personal note to it than a gun. Daelin scratched at Culver's fingers. Light sparked behind her eyelids. The world stopped. Silent. Unmoving. Culver's eyes widened. A plea pooled on his lips. His arms shook, straining, fighting Haw Shot. To no effect.

Damn the ain'ts. She shut her eyes and swung at Susan. The grip on Daelin's neck loosened. OK. Gross as smacking dead things was, it could save her life. Summoning her fury again, she let it go, wailing on the heads of Susan and Greg until Culver's hands dropped from her throat. The phantom backed away. Daelin followed. Susan's head hung by a grisly thread. Daelin grabbed it and pulled, gagging when it came loose. She dropped it, wiping her palms over her jeans.

“Go for Greg's.” Culver moved behind her, staying out of Haw Shot's reach. “Finish this.”

She lunged at Hawley. The ghost wheeled and ran. Before it reached the end of the street, it vanished.

Daelin stared after it. “This can't be real.”



Chapter 23

Arm around her shoulder, Culver guided Daelin home. “It’s afraid of you now. You needn’t worry. You’re safe.” The rhythm of his words had a soothing quality.

His oddness made more sense now. The oddness of the whole town did if they spent most nights battling ghosts that collected heads. Daelin didn’t pull away from him. “I don’t understand any of it, other than Earl Blacke didn’t murder Susan and Greg.” She wrapped her coat tighter.

He squeezed her arm. “I’d like to explain, but to defeat the phantom we need you as you are.”

“Stupid and ignorant?”

Not a hint of mocking stained his features. “Innocent is a better word.”

“OK.” What choice did Daelin have but to accept his lack of an explanation as an explanation. This town had no patch of sanity. What had Charming put her in the middle of? “Ghosts shouldn’t be real. More to the point, Haw Shot isn’t just any ghost.”

“Hmm.” Culver said nothing more, picking up her hand, leading her down Settler’s quiet streets. No trace of the battle with a phantom sullied them. She and Culver walked slowly, she chewing her lower lip.

Climbing up the knoll at the end of Madeline Street proved daunting after a beating. At the top of it, Culver swung her around, pointing at the tiny downtown, singling out an old house, the historical marker of Settler’s founding. “We celebrate Patrick this weekend. His arrival in this region changed everything. You heard of his bizarre home? Have you seen the inside of it?”

A lone light illuminated its weathered clapboards. “No. Somebody mentioned the nutty ancestor thing. Wald, I think.”

“The house in 1872 was like any other house. Summers were normal too. Until 1888. Everything changed that year. Now things happen here every summer that bend one’s reason.”

Like ghosts murdering folks and stealing their heads. Daelin crossed her arms, peering into his face. He remained completely serious. “Most of the town behaves as if they don’t notice. Why aren’t they out here wondering what’s going on?”

“It’s part of life here. Most people have lived here all their lives.” He shrugged. “This is a normal summer night.”

Normal had the most bizarre definition in Settler. “Charming knows better. So do Earl and I.”

The shadow of a smile played across Culver’s mouth. “Charming is one of us, like me, a protector. You saw us all battling Hawley. Earl is Earl. I greeted him when he first came through the gate.” He said it so matter-of-factly.

Of course her sister battled ghosts. And where had Earl come from? “He’s not from here?”

“I’ve said too much. Let’s get you home.” He guided her onto Charming’s porch. He couldn’t stop talking now. She needed more. “So how many of you are there? People who defend against ghosts?”

He studied the pavement under his feet, sliding his hands into his pockets, hiding the strange watch he wore on his wrist and the odd tattoo around it. “You’ll have all the answers shortly, I promise. But not yet. Can you sleep? I could stay if you need company.” His dark gaze sparkled earnestly under the waning moonlight.

“If the phantom is scared of me, I’ll be fine. I need some time to think.” She needed to ditch him and talk to Earl.

“Of course.”

The strange items on Charming’s workbench in the garage made more sense and the item Earl had taken to Dante. Well, sort of. “My sister does what you do. Is that why she’s not here? She’s off battling monsters?”

The ground continued to fascinate Culver. “I really shouldn’t say—”

“Please. I need to know if she’s OK or not.”

He glanced in the direction of the obsidian pillars then met her gaze. “I don’t know, and I don’t know much. After Haw Shot is dealt with, I promise you’ll have your answers. Bargain?”

What? Daelin didn’t want to make deals, she wanted answers. Maybe she had been shot three weeks ago and lay in a coma in the hospital. That made more sense than scaring off a ghost who collected heads. “If you break your word to me, I’ll tear off your head.”

His lips curled into a sweet smile. “I’ll sit on your porch for awhile so you can feel safe.”

“No need. It’ll only keep me up worrying about you.” Daelin let herself into Charming’s cottage and shut the door, spying out the window to make sure Culver left.

Getting closer to finding out what had happened to her sister felt awful, yanking off a rotting head awful. Dirt and ick covered her hands. The rest of her couldn’t be any better. A quick spit bath and change of clothes was all she could manage. She didn’t want to leave Earl in the closet much longer.

She hadn’t expected his silly crystal bullet to lead to a fight with a phantom and the discovery the town had secrets deeper than the thoughts of a philosopher. “In all the dictionaries.”



Chapter 24

Daelin rushed to the library, keeping out of the beams of the street lights, making sure she wasn't seen. By expecting the closet to be where she had last seen it, it materialized. Right. This was Settler after all. She greeted Cordelia and opened the door.

Handing the bullet to Earl, she told him everything in one hurried breath. "I scared away the ghost. Everyone knows you didn't kill Susan and Greg. You don't have to hide anymore."

"I'm cleared of the crime, but I still have what Haw Shot and its master wants."

"Master? Ghosts don't have masters. What you have to do is make a deal with me like Culver did. He promised to tell me everything he knows about Charming after tonight. You'll tell me everything too. You owe me."

"I've told you all I can." Eyes twitching, Earl studied her. "What's tonight?"

"Don't try to change the subject. You're always evading me—"

The front door opened, whisking in a gust of cold. It was still pitch as ink outside. On the chill wind's tail came Sabina Staley. Daelin slammed the closet shut. It didn't fade fast enough.

Sabina tossed two books on Daelin's desk then strode straight over, peering at the vanishing door, adjusting the bubble lenses perched on her long steep nose. "Mr. Blacke, this space is for emergencies only and not for just anyone." She patted Daelin's shoulder. "This is your domain. Take great care with how you use it. Despite the irregularity of your hiding here, I'm glad to run into you, Earl. I can take care of my business twice as fast."

Surprise over disappearing doors or a murderer in the closet didn't mar Sabina's brow. Like Culver had mentioned last night, such events were normal in Settler, and as county commissioner Sabina set the standard. What did she want with Earl?

By holding up her hand, Sabina stopped Daelin from asking. "You had a great accomplishment against Haw Shot. The town needs the both of you to rid us of Hawley's menace. Daelin, you'll finish what you started. Earl will be your bait." Her mouth quirked to one side, perhaps her version of a smile.

The now completely invisible door rattled. There was no point in denying it or playing dumb. Daelin opened the closet. Earl stepped into the library. Bracing one hand on a hip, he stood as a gentleman from another time. Perhaps a clue as to where he came from, or when.

"You're wanting to set a trap for Haw Shot?" Earl asked Sabina.

Her gaze never left his face while she thought it over. She took her time. "Near the gate makes the most sense. Don't you think?"

Earl combed his fingers through his normally finessed curls. They had gone wild since his encounter with the phantom. "Not if that spook is trawling for another head. It told me they increase its powers. Actually, I think it increases the hold the thing inside it

has over its actions.”

Sabina’s lips pursed. “Are you suggesting something controls the phantom? What have you seen?”

“It materialized in my jail cell with Susan’s head on one shoulder, George’s on the other, and a beaked thing where Haw Shot’s head should have been. So I assume there’s a being inside the ghost. Most likely from the rift. That makes the most sense.”

Sense? Daelin didn’t see any sign of it. She couldn’t shut her mouth. The two of them talked about all the strangeness so casually, as if it were mundane and every day. “Rabbit hole.”

Sabina’s features quivered like a bird’s. Her narrow nose and eyes added to the resemblance. “Tonight determines your future in ways you have yet to fathom.” Her fingers summoned Earl forward. “Let’s discuss this outside. She must remain innocent.”

They strode out of the library, standing in front of the window, whispering intently. Daelin tried to read their lips. Periodically she could decipher her name. The rest remained fuzzy except for the gesture mimicking the tearing off of a head. It left no doubt as to meaning. What was so innocent about that?



Chapter 25

Planning to defeat a rift creature with Sabina would make Charming scream. She had stressed over and over how her team couldn't be placed in jeopardy with the Governors. Earl had promised a thousand times.

He took the utmost care in the words he chose with Sabina. When reunited with his girl, he wanted her to be pleased about what he'd done, not disappointed like his wife and daughters. This time would be different.

"The outlaw can't stay." Sabina tugged at Earl's collar. "Neither one. Once you send the other packing, the other has to go too. I'm sure you understand me."

When had she figured out who he had been? He wouldn't own up to it, like he wouldn't own up to another name when arrested in 1883. This version of his bones was Earl Blacke, but not much longer. The things from the other worlds would keep coming to get to Charming and Dante. Earl would have to give up this world to spend the rest of his life in that damned closet.

"I'll be your bait, then I'll go because I choose to." Earl scrunched his brow, mirroring her leer. She needed a good deep look at his notorious side.

She shook a lithe finger at his nose, filling his nostrils with her lilac perfume. "Earl Blacke can stay if he's your true nature."

No one knew his true nature. He had tried to show Charming, but couldn't do it. His nature was to keep himself to himself. "And how many times will you threaten to out me if I stay? Plenty of people heard Hawley call me another name. How do I explain it?"

Her brows rose, getting lost in the ebony frames of her eyeglasses, which encircled a pair of startling green eyes. "Who can take him seriously? If you run off, it's your doing not Settler's, not mine, and not Hawley's. Who would believe you're a man from the 1880s anyway?"

"I don't want to talk about him. I'm not him. Not anymore." He shrugged his shoulders, shoving his past aside. "What do you intend for Daelin? Answer me honestly, and I'll be your sacrificial lamb for Haw Shot."

"You're no innocent. Don't try that on me, and you know what I intend for the new librarian. She'll join her sister and surpass her. Look at her. Undeniably, she'll become one of my best if she sets her mind to it."

To save her sister, Daelin would put every ounce of determination she had into excelling as Sabina's minion. Daelin and the rift were meant to be. "Take good care with her and vow you won't come searching for me."

The corners of her eyes crinkled upwards. "One of these days, you'll sit down in my parlor, and I'll know all of your secrets. Every last one of them."

His jaw stiffened. "Don't be so sure." Her fire and steel would either save this world or doom it.

"When this world is done with me, you'll come." She brushed her snow white curls

behind her ears. "See you at sundown. Right here."

"Fine. Bring Daelin one of your Rifter gadgets to get the gem out of Haw Shot's throat. We're guaranteed a victory if she can remove it."

"I'll send something over."

He watched her walk away then went back inside the library. "Sabina says we'll meet here tonight." Two books sat on the librarian's desk. The top one snagged Earl's attention. *The Notorious of the Wild West*. An old photo of him graced the cover. "No way in this era or the next." He slid the tome off the surface and behind his back, slipping it under his shirt.

Beneath the book on outlaws laid a leather-bound journal, aged, cracked, the robin's egg blue fading to bland. Earl grabbed it as well. It could destroy Daelin's innocence and the only shot at vanquishing the pesky Haw Shot.

"What are you doing?" She reached for the journal before he could hide it away. "I have to log books before you check them out. Library policy."

Having no choice, he handed over the journal so she wouldn't notice the other he hid. His past had no place here. What good would it do? It'd do nothing but cause him grief and get in the way of helping his girl. "Sorry."

Her fingers brushed over the cracked leather, then she checked the spine. "There's no title." The cover wouldn't open. "It's stuck. Hmm." Her brows furrowed. Her fingers pulled at the pages. They didn't budge. "How odd. I'll have to research how to unstick it. What's the title? What's it about?"

How much longer until she accepted odd as routine? Settler had heaped it on since her arrival. "Sabina left it."

"Oh, I'll ask her later." Daelin sat down at her desk, opened the top drawer, and dropped in the book. "Now the deal we discussed earlier, are you ready to promise?"

No. Not even if stagecoaches raced around the west again. "When the time is right. It's not now, Daelin. Honest. In the meantime, I'll tell you something to insure your victory against Haw Shot. Did you notice the jewel in its throat?"

"The bright green patch?" She pointed to her neck. "About there?"

"That's it. It's the key to defeating Hawley. You have to take it from him."

"By sticking my hand down his throat and grabbing it?" She crossed her arms, snickering. "Right."

The library door swung open. Culver strode in, waving. His wrist glowed purple. He reached into his mail pouch. "Sabina sent me. I've just the thing for dislodging jewels from ghosts."



Chapter 26

Daelin stared at the crystal knife in her hand. Copper coils wound around the handle, forming a trigger. A trigger on a knife. She would press it once to power the weapon then press it again when plunging it into Hawley's neck. Her. "Right."

"Put it away until you need it." Earl lounged in the middle of the street in front of the Sparrow Roadhouse. He lay on his back with his hands behind his head, staring up at the sky.

Daelin crouched in the shadows of the dry cleaners with Culver. "I've never killed anyone before."

"It's a ghost." Culver adjusted the strange watch on his wrist. "It's already dead. So, you're not killing it, you're returning it to where it belongs."

She scratched at an itch on the end of her nose. "Which is where?"

"Sabina gave you the book. It'll open when she commands then you'll have your answers." He stared straight down the road as if Daelin didn't kneel beside him.

The book would open on Sabina's orders. The answers would mysteriously appear. The ghost was no ghost. The list of bizarre grew endless. Daelin glared at Earl. Earlier he told her the phantom wasn't exactly a phantom, that another creature controlled it. He couldn't say what kind of creature.

Of course not. No one said a whole lot about anything in this town. How could a ghost be possessed? Didn't they usually do the possessing? "I went insane after the robber shot at me. That's it." She ran her fingertip over the blade. The honed edge sliced her skin, biting with a tang of heat, welling up droplets of blood. Daelin stuck her finger in her mouth.

Culver took the knife. "When Haw shot shows, I'll give it back."

She grabbed at his wrist. The device strapped to it burst with soft flares of gold and aqua, pulsing in time with the tattooed circuitry covering his arm. She marveled at its gentle violet flickers. "What's all this?"

"Later."

Of course.

The rest of the protectors hid up and down Brucker Avenue. Periodically, they flashed signals Culver could interpret. So far, all was quiet. Francine and Tiny squatted in the shadows of the general store. Moses plastered himself like a shadow against the cars at the dealership. Wald concealed himself on the porch of The Sparrow Roadhouse across the street. Vance crouched in the blackened window of an empty storefront ready to pounce. Their ineffectiveness against the ghost last night didn't make their presence comforting. Tumbleweeds could do as much for Daelin.

A coyote howled, piercing the stillness of nightfall, adding to the expectation. Mayhem would come. Pandemonium sparked in a green flash over the manhole cover in front of the mercantile down the avenue. Like a bizarre weed, Haw Shot sprung up from

the depths.

Daelin's breath caught. She reached for the knife. Culver gave it to her.

"When the opportunity arises," he whispered, "don't hesitate. You can't. You might only get one chance."

"No pressure." In all the dictionaries, he had some nerve. Daelin scowled at the phantom.

Like a runaway freight train, Hawley barreled at Earl, pouncing on him, lifting him by his hair into the air. "I hate you, Bart."

Who was Bart? The faint breeze dried Daelin's lips. She gripped the knife tighter.

Earl struggled, kicking his feet, swinging his fists futilely. "This ends tonight, Hawley."

"Haw, haw. If that's the way you want it." Haw Shot slipped its hands into Earl's, swinging him around. "Let's go into the Roadhouse and get us some heads. I need a replacement for Susan's." Greg's bounced sickeningly with Hawley's every twitch.

The ghost pivoted, showing its back to Daelin. She couldn't swallow. Culver nudged her then pushed harder. Daelin stumbled into the street. Oh boy. Did she dare? She raised the knife. Two inches from Hawley's neck, she stepped on a pebble. The soft crunch blared like twenty-seven car horns.

Haw Shot whirled, raising Earl into the air, pitching him straight at her. Earl hit with the force of a boulder, knocking her off her feet. The palms of her hands skidded on the pavement, scraping raw. The knife skittered to the curb.

The Rifiers jumped from the shadows. Haw Shot glided as fast as a blink to the forest ranger, Moses, snatching him off his feet, firing him as a weapon at Daelin. Tall and dark, the man felt like a wall when he slammed into her. The tape recorder device he held clattered to the street, shattering into pieces. Purple and green flashes fizzed around it, then it lay still.

Hawley went after the blond firefighter, Vance. Bulky as a doorway, the firefighter's size didn't slow the ghost down. Haw Shot lifted him as if made of paper and hurled him through the window of the fire station.

Culver dove for the knife, tossing it to Daelin. She missed, reeling to run after it. Screams and curses tore through the night air. Another body landed on top of Daelin. Trinidad. Tiny as she was, hurt as much as Earl and the ranger. Daelin groaned.

"*¡Perdón!*" Tiny's aviator goggles glowed with a purple sheen. "The knife."

Daelin scrambled on all fours, focusing on the weapon and nothing else. It helped her keep a toehold on sanity.

Trinidad kept pace beside her. "Just another foot, *señorita*."

A gust of wind blew Daelin backwards, only it wasn't wind. The phantom stood in her path, howling. It held a struggling Wald, slamming him down in front of her, not letting him up, not letting her pass, moving Wald to block her anyway she turned.

"You must weaken the ghost," Trinidad whispered in her ear. "Attack Greg's head."

Ugh. The skin sloughed, shifting. The ghost's green glow didn't hide Greg's unhealthy gray complexion. Why couldn't she kick Hawley in the crotch? It'd be less disgusting. "For Charming." No other reason could convince Daelin to do this. Swallowing the rising bile, she leaped onto her feet, springing at Haw Shot, her hands outstretched. She flew into Wald with a thud, cracking her forehead against his. Splotches of light sparked in her eyes. She gasped. Wald clutched at her, pushing her over him.

Right. Only one chance. She couldn't give up. With her nails she slashed at Greg's head.

Blood ran in a torrent from Earl's nose. He hobbled behind the ghost, reaching for the knife. Haw Shot cuffed him, driving Earl's chin up into his skull. Earl fell. He fell on the knife, groping for a grip. Finding the handle, he picked it up and slid it across the pavement.

Daelin bent to catch it. Hawley kicked Earl at her. She ducked, but he slammed into her shoulder. Her fingers opened of their own accord, dropping the blade.

Earl panted, rolling to get beside her. "Use my back to get over Wald. Sink the blade into Hawley's throat." He struggled onto all fours.

Haw Shot had Wald's hands wrapped around Wald's throat. His complexion shifted to an unnatural shade. If she hesitated, he wouldn't get another breath. She seized the blade and jumped onto Earl's back, pressing the knife's trigger. Launching herself over Wald at the phantom, Daelin squeezed the trigger again, sinking the blade into Hawley's throat. She clung to its shoulders, digging at the glowing gem in its throat. The crystal jiggled then popped. She dove for it, catching it before it hit the pavement, slamming into the curb face first. The pain flashed so brilliantly.

The world went green, completely green. The color radiated from thick mist, billowing, swirling. A pair of feet materialized in it then a pair of legs.

An instant later, Charming stood before her. "We don't have much time." Despite the green tint, the vibrancy of her strawberry-hued hair leaked through at the edges. Straight and shoulder length, her hair framed an oval face, the only traits besides a similarly shaped nose she shared with Daelin.

Daelin struggled to sit up, reaching for Charming's bruised cheek, brushing against cool mist. "Oh, it's wonderful to see you. It is you? I saw the blood in the clearing. Look at all the blood on me. Are we dead?"

Serious Charming smiled so sadly. "No, we're not dead."

How could that be bad news? Daelin didn't know if she could handle all green all the time if this was the Afterlife.

"Then what is this place? I imagined catching up on your chaise in the cottage, giggling. That's why I came to Settler."

Charming had thinner lips and brows, everything a daintier version when compared to Daelin. "I can't be in Settler right now. I'm sorry. The crystal you dislodged from the ghost brought you here." Her fingernails had been torn ragged. Patches on her arms were dark as shadow.

"Did Haw Shot hurt you?" Daelin gently reached for her sister's arm, touching mist and light, like Earl couldn't touch the phantom. Earl. "Your friends claim the ghost was possessed. You? Were you trapped inside it?"

"No. Cerin granted me some time to contact you. I've been waiting for an opportunity." Opening her palm, she revealed a crystal as glowing as Daelin's. "We're between worlds. The jewel in your hand brought you here. When we let go, we leave."

Gripping hers more tightly, Daelin inhaled sharply. "People say you're in love with Cerin. Earl says it's a sham."

"Trust Earl. Always." An edge that had never previously existed narrowed Charming's eyes and stiffened her jaw. "But know this, his promises to me come first."

"He says you're family." Not by Daelin's definition of family. Earl wasn't part of the

memories of her sensitive little sister, their mischievous brother, and herself hanging out on buses and in bars, stealing maraschino cherries and sugar cubes, playing hide and seek, shrieking with laughter. Earl hadn't been there.

"He keeps me safe, Dae. He's a good man."

The effect Earl had over Charming showed, especially in the gaze. Oh. They had the same eyes. It didn't matter. He was a stranger. Daelin had to remind her sister. "He's not from our world. Culver told me."

"He's very much from our world just a different time. That's all I can say without breaking my word. I can't risk him doing the same to me. There's too much at stake."

More cryptic answers. Daelin wanted to shake her, expecting better from her sister. "Tell me what's going on. What's hunting you?"

"In time, but not yet. For now, trust me. Trust Earl. Trust Dante. All else must remain a secret." She didn't blink or stutter, so certain about it all.

"You've dragged me into secrets within mysteries." It didn't matter. Daelin knew Charming wouldn't ask for help without a good reason. Charming knew Daelin would never say no without a good reason. "Tell me you're all right." If Daelin knew that, she could promise a moon castle carved from green cheese.

"I am, and I'm counting on you. Before you sign the journal Sabina left you, you must see Dante. Have you met him?" Charming's gaze bore strong into Daelin's, her demeanor growing more serious.

Daelin sat up straighter. "I did. He made me forget—"

"You have to forget again. Or you can't help me. I so desperately need you." Her voice cracked. She drew in a deep breath. "Will you go to him?"

"I'll stand by you no matter what. No matter murderous ghosts and crazy neighbors. You know this is all a little crazy?"

Her head fell back, and Charming laughed until she hiccupped, like when they had drawn pictures on their mother's arms when she refused to get up in the morning. "You've always had a way with words. A little?"

A smile stole over Daelin. She couldn't stop it. "OK, a lot crazy. I wish I could hug you. We've been apart too long. Can I use this jewel to visit you again?"

"First, use it to get to Dante. Earl can help. Then give the gem up, give it to Earl. It's the only way to protect him from the rift. It's hunting him."

Earl again. "Who is he? A half brother?"

Charming's misty fingers breezed past Daelin's temple, a chilled kiss. "That's his secret to reveal not mine." The sound of rustling leaves gusted through the fog. Her gaze darted behind her. "I have to go."

The mist thinned. Charming vanished with it. Alone again. Daelin felt emptier than on the worst day of her life. She only had one sister, a sister who chased after... Daelin had no idea after what.

The faint imprint of Settler showed behind the green light. As if time had stopped, Earl and Wald lay on the street, mouths outstretched with hurt. Culver lunged toward the curb Daelin had smashed into.

She crawled into the library to grab paper and pen. She scribbled a note, made her way to Earl, and stuffed it in her pocket. *Be at the closet in the morning. We have to go see the wizard.* "I wish you didn't have to go," she whispered, planting a soft kiss on his battered cheek. For his devotion to Charming, he deserved Daelin's loyalty.

She placed the gem in his hand and let go. The green light disappeared and so did Earl. The town swirled, her thoughts swam, the throbbing in her head whirled.

Culver scurried over, brushing hair out of her bruised and bloodied face. "Be still." He rolled up his jacket, sliding it under her head. "Tiny, toss me the first aid kit."

He and his cousin fought rift creatures all the time, accepting the strange as normal. Would Daelin become like them? She thought she had seen it all in New York. Not by a fat novel.



Chapter 27

Haw Shot's gem worked similarly to Dante's closet, placing Earl out of all worlds, stopping the passage of time in Settler. The green tint distorted the town with bubbles, pits, and squeezes. It took away the pain knifing through his back, tingling his fingers and toes.

Tonight proved Daelin would be all right without him. He worried less about her than Charming. Charming had the same smarts, but not the same bite. He was glad of it, glad his defective self hadn't tainted his descendants.

Earl could travel through the town held in suspension, something he couldn't do in the closet. The scene in front of the Roadhouse had all the drama of a painting. Blood stained faces. Sabina's mouth frozen in a scream. Trinidad's weapon shot into infinity with as much effect as dust. Culver huddled over Daelin, tenderly dressing her wounds.

Earl saluted her. Daelin had done as well as a seasoned infantryman. She'd never be the same, but she'd be all right. Maybe. Earl still hadn't found his way free from the brutality he had embraced in the 1860s. Now Charming begged for him to do it again. The enemy wasn't human this time, making it easier to deal with, yet he hadn't decided about it. "I'll end up in the asylum stealing pills."

After retrieving the book on outlaws from where he had hid it in the library closet and bowing to Cordelia, he journeyed out to his ranch, fuming. The phantom had shot off its dead mouth, whispering things from the grave that pointed anyone with two brain cells to Earl's past. Daelin would figure it out. Sabina would make sure of it. Then the town would never see past his notorious history, never again allow him to be who had become, never permit him to become who he had yet to be. If burning the book in his hands would do any good, he'd torch it right now.

His only hope was to become Earl or someone new, someone different, someone whom no one could ever believe was a stagecoach robber. When he figured out how to be different, how to grow into his new name, then maybe he'd come home. Was this home?

The sprawling resort of a house had a pull on his heart nowhere else had. He stood in front of it, poking at the nuances it stirred in his soul. It meant a lot, but wasn't everything. He walked inside.

Last year he had drawn up papers to put Wilma and Scott in charge of the ranch in case of an emergency. The green light made it difficult to see clearly. In his private office, Earl fished around clumsily in his desk for a pen then let go of the ghost stone. Guests hadn't arrived, his employees were asleep in their homes miles away, the Rifiers remained in town stopped in time. They couldn't get here fast enough. No one would see him. He set the jewel on the desk within easy reach then continued his work.

He signed the papers and jotted a quick note, a lie about a sick relative. He wrote a second listing Wilma's good points to insure the ranch's future. Then he tore it up and threw it in the trash. He had written similar to his wife, never really meaning it.

Repeating the pattern he needed to change wouldn't get him anywhere.

He picked up the crystal and returned to between worlds. How many worlds were there? Were they like this one? Traveling the rift would be fascinating. Earl didn't think he wanted his life to get that interesting, though. He'd had enough of interesting.

Outside and inside felt no different when the ghost stone was activated. He set the papers on Wilma's desk, then he headed to the garage. The pickup gleamed in green instead of gold, but it still shone. He pulled out of the garage and followed a dirt track across his property to the little house where Scott and his family lived. Earl set the gem on the dashboard, hopped out, and knocked on the door. A sleepy little girl answered, rubbing her eyes.

She reminded him of his baby Ida. According to the records he had found, she hadn't lived long after marrying. Earl hoped her husband had been good to her. He squatted to meet Scott's girl eye to eye, smiling. "Go get your papa, princess."

A moment later, Scott sauntered outside, thumbs hooked through his belt loops. "Is the herd sick? Wolves?"

Earl gently shut the door. "Nothing is wrong. The cattle are fine. The horses too. I have to go away for awhile. You and Wilma will manage fine?"

"Sure." Scott squinted. "You on the run? How'd you get so beat up?"

"No, I've been cleared of the murders. I helped catch the real killer. It all made me realize I have to take care of some things so I can move forward."

"Will you ever come home?" Scott's eyes widened, the tint of sleep leaving his features.

"Honestly, I don't know. I hope so. Will you do one last job for me? Park the pickup in front of the mercantile at sunrise?"

Scott crossed his burly arms, which made his neck more square than usual. "*Si*. Do you just want me to leave the truck there?"

Friends like Scott were rare. A plus in Settler's favor. Earl smiled. "You'll drive to Bend." Earl gave him the exact instructions then the truck keys.

He waited until Scott went inside before returning to between worlds. In a haze of green, he hobbled through the brush to a cleft of lava dividing his land. He hopped onto a little ledge a mere two feet down. On it he sat, placing the crystal beside him.

The physical world assaulted him. Pain. Cold. Agony. Gingerly, he felt along his jaw line. He'd be all right. He'd stop in the spa for some healing supplies. Medicine had improved by a mother lode since 1888. From his pocket he slid out the burner phone, pressing Dante's number.

Dante didn't sound sleepy. "Is Charming back? Cerin?"

"No, things are still like a heist gone left with your old friends. Very left. I can't be Earl anymore."

"Should I quit being Dan?"

"Yes, but not until after Daelin comes to you. I'm sending her with Scott at sunup. She needs to forget again." Earl told him the story of Haw Shot. "Sabina gave her the oath, and Daelin's association with us will mark her as an enemy as much as her sister and you are."

"She's no use to us if she doesn't learn to fight the things that come through the rift. I'll return her unharmed. Swear it. How are you going to get her here unseen?"

Earl explained the crystal.

“Fascinating technology,” Dante said. “I’ll study it and come up with something better for you.”

“You can keep it. I’m going to disappear.”

“Don’t you want to know what Charming’s crystal disc does?”

“Let me guess, I have to come to you to find out.”

“We both need to keep our heads low. Why not disappear together?”

For awhile, Earl could stand the company. Leaning back against the rough rock, he thought about a new name and who the next version of himself should be.



Chapter 28

The throbbing in her face, OK everywhere, kept Daelin wide awake, that and what she had done. She had battled and defeated a ghost. “In all the dictionaries.” She hadn’t expected life in Settler to be filled with monsters and secrets.

Relentless, the pain squeezed and tormented, getting worse instead of better. She pushed herself off the chaise and shuffled to the washroom to get more pain relievers. She doubted the entire bottle would help. Her reflection stopped her, a complexion of scrapes, bruises, and swelling. The robber in the subway hadn’t done half as much damage. If she encountered a thug again, she’d take him on, wail on his head, give him a taste of defeat.

“Right. Mild-mannered librarian has a different definition here too.” Yeah, like fancy, normal, and weird.

She padded to the kitchen to make a sandwich, pausing to stare at the photo of Earl and Charming. Could he be trusted? He held Charming’s life in his hands. Daelin’s too, because life without Charming would be wrong, terribly wrong.

If she waited until morning, she might not find a quiet minute to have a meaningful conversation with him. She washed up and put on clean jeans and a sweater. Needing to feel a little girly, she slipped on her ballerina flats with the gold and pink flowers.

The chilled air outside slapped her, reviving her better than seven cups of strong coffee. A box on the porch caught her attention. It was from Cobb. She tore it open and pocketed her new phone.

Half way down Madeline Street she regretted not driving her sister’s Jeep. Her muscles stiffened, screaming, roaring about her injuries at a higher volume than earlier. Every half block, she had to stop to let the pain settle. Somehow she made it to the library before sunrise and without being seen.

The silver key let her in, and she locked the door behind her. Leaving the blinds down and the lights off, she used her hands to navigate past her desk and the restroom to the closet. Earl sat on the floor inside it, the gem beside him, looking as bad as Daelin felt.

“I made arrangements with Scott to get you to Bend. He’ll be in front of the mercantile at sunup. Dante is expecting you.”

“Why do I have to forget again? The extra information doesn’t make sense of all this.”

“The leather journal Sabina left you will open now. At the end is an oath where you swear to stand against all enemies of the Governors. They’re the folks who regulate the portal and set the rules. Your sister broke almost all of their rules and you know it. With that knowledge and knowing Dante, you’ll be rejected by the Governors. If you have no memory, then you can join.” He rubbed at his shoulder. His shirt had torn and a dark

bruise showed. “You don’t have to forget everything, just what you overheard at the sandwich shop, seeing the portal open because that triggers remembering what you overheard Dante and I say, you can’t remember ever meeting Dante, and you’ll have to forget seeing your sister tonight.”

The last item on his list made Daelin frown most. She didn’t want to forget her sister in need of her help. “Why would I want to join a group that considers my sister an enemy?”

“Because you can’t help her if you don’t.” He shifted his legs, groaning. “The other Rifters are her friends. If they know what she knows, they’ll be put in the same peril. They’re not her enemies. It’s the people on the other side. You get it?”

“I think so.” Daelin winced with him, knowing exactly what he felt. “I’ve some pain reliever—”

“Got my own. Start reading the journal. I’ll holler when it’s time to go.”

She limped to her desk, opened the drawer, and took out the leather-bound journal. It fell open at her touch, no sign it had ever been stuck. She fished Charming’s flashlight out of her coat pocket.

Cursive letters ran across the pages. *20th Day of June, 1888. Lightning erupted near the volcanic core, shaking the house. I handed Lilah the shotgun before going out to investigate. The lantern and my rifle kept me company along the trail, which the locals keep clear. They say the volcano’s core is sacred ground. A native called Chuck told me so. Chuck! I’m not sure I should believe him. He loves to tell jokes.*

Oh, by the way, on the trail I met a thing, some sort of creature. It resembled a man with blue-silver skin and silver leaves for hair.

The entry ended there. Daelin read several more pages. Patrick Swit had an annoying habit of writing at length about trivial things and the bare minimum of what mattered, like creatures who traveled here from other worlds. “You’d never be published, old man, except the subject matter is fascinating.”

The next several entries revealed the creatures, mostly unfriendly, came through a gateway that formed between two obsidian pillars near the volcanic core. The natives had legends of it in their lore, *Grove of the Gods*, but reported the rift had been silent for hundreds of years.

Patrick suspected the junction hadn’t always been on this world or in Settler. He surmised the other worlds were places of imagination since he couldn’t travel to them, but their residents could travel here. *They are all born of nightmares. Thankfully, the rift only opens in the summer months. Why they have to impede on our short season of great weather is irksome as a bee in my shirt.*

He wrote nothing more about his theories, getting lost in the details of summer before laying out his plan of how to protect this world from the others. The Rifters. At the end was a simple oath. *I swear to guard and protect this world from all enemies who mean it harm and from all things born of the rift. To unswear is to die.*

From 1892 until present day names filled the lines. Only one blank space remained, right under the signature of Charming Moon Knight. Her name glared in red like the others, as if signed in blood. If Charming hadn’t of pleaded for her help, Daelin would walk away, would leave Settler and never come back.

Earl rolled Haw Shot’s crystal across the floor. “It’s time to go.”

Closing the cover, she set the book in her desk drawer. “It stirs up more questions

than it answers. Did my sister unswear the oath? Will I be her enemy?"

"Charming wants you to be a Rifter. Either you trust her or you don't. See you when you get back."

"Do it," Cordelia whispered.

Daelin glanced at the portrait. The first librarian smiled today, and her signature had been scrawled under the oath. Otherwise, listening to ghosts made no sense. It didn't matter. She couldn't leave her sister in peril.

She grabbed the jewel and tiptoed outside. The gem stemmed the pain, making her giddy. She locked up and made her way two blocks down to the mercantile. The pickup sat in front as Earl had promised. She climbed into the truck bed under the tarp and let go of the jewel. Earl had explained how it suspended time. She tapped on the window to signal Scott.

The truck rumbled down the road. Daelin watched the sky pass. Outside of town, Scott pulled over and helped her into the cab. She put the seat down so she couldn't be seen if anyone passed by. Any car on this road most likely belonged to a resident of Settler.

Scott wore a cowboy hat as brown as his complexion. It made his body appear more square. He spoke of cattle and horses then sang with the radio. When they reached Bend, the truck slowed in front of Dante's sandwich shop. Daelin grabbed the gem, stopping time. For awhile she stared at cars and drivers that didn't move. She made faces at a few and considered messing with some people. Fun wasn't on the agenda, though. Saving family and worlds was.

The Inferno Grill sign said *Closed*, yet the door yielded to her touch. Dante sat at the customer table nearest the counter, reading the local paper. She set the jewel down in front of him.

"We meet again," she said. "If Charming didn't swear I could trust you, I think I'd knock you into the next county."

A smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Quit tempting me. Turn the lock then meet me in my office." He picked up the gem and disappeared.

The three deadbolts slid easily into place. Daelin frowned, unsure whether Dante stood in front of her or had gone to Timbuktu. "You can't keep the ghost stone." She found him in his office. He reappeared sitting cross legged on his messy desk piled with bills and newspapers.

"I know. I won't deny Earl his escape." His dirty blond hair curled at the ends, brushing against his toned shoulders. His cool blue eyes raked over her toe to head.

She ran a hand over her dark straight strands, the same length as his, only her ends didn't have adorable curls. "Escape? Where will he go?"

He scooted to the edge of the desk, papers flying, placing his booted feet on the floor. "Where he can't be found. Same for me. Earl and Dan will disappear just like your memories of us and your sister. You disappointed by that?"

As if he were a male Siren, she couldn't help but move closer. Maybe he was. He wasn't from this world. "I need to remember Charming is all right."

He tugged at his white button-down shirt, pulling it away from his throat. "Sorry. The oath will reject you with the slightest glimpse of that memory. It's only temporary."

She perched beside him on the edge of the desk. "The oath will? You talk as if it's alive. What are the other worlds? Aliens? Where are you from?"

“When the time comes, I’ll tell you everything. Absolutely everything. You have my sworn word. You can’t know now. The less of your memories I have to suspend, the better.” He stood and pulled her against him. He waved his bracelet before her eyes. The stones sparked blue. “Are you ready? You’re awful tense.”

“It’s not so easy. It’s my mind and my sister’s life.”

“I’m not taking away your mind, just a few select memories: your overhearing Earl and I, the whole bullet and the gate evening, seeing Charming after defeating the ghost, and most of what happened after defeating the ghost. You’ll think you fell asleep in the library reading Patrick Swit’s journal. Please agree. Way more is on the line, Darlin Dae Long. You need to trust me or we’re all done. That includes your sister.”

She stared into his blue eyes. They shifted to yellow. “I understand.”

Tenderly, he brushed her hair behind her ear. “You don’t fully, but you will soon.”

“I will do whatever it takes to help Charming.”

“So will I. Give me your hand. When you see my face again, I’ll return your memories.”

What choice did she have? Daelin gave him her hand.



The honk of a horn shook Daelin awake. She blinked at stacks of books and at the journal she had used as a pillow.

Earl stood in the doorway, his back to her, waving. “Thanks for the ride, Scott.”

“You vanished last night.” Deep down she wasn’t surprised to see him. Perhaps because he had so mysteriously appeared in the library closet. She glanced at it. The door stood as solid as any other, as if whatever magic it had housed had dissipated with Haw Shot’s phantom.

Dressed in a khaki shirt and jeans, Earl tipped the brim of his brown cowboy hat. “You were in good hands. There was no need for me to stick around. I needed time to think.”

Odd Culver, who didn’t seem so strange anymore, had tended to her and seen her home. How could anything appear bizarre after last night? She had killed a ghost and punched lifeless heads. “It wasn’t a nightmare? Am I still in a coma?”

His eyes narrowed. “Afraid not. It’s life in Settler, dar... Daelin.” He came closer, smiling in a lumpy way. “I owe you my life for clearing my name.” Swelling distorted his nose and eyes. Bruises marred his lips. He had risked himself so she could sink a knife into Haw Shot.

Her fingertips patted over her aching cheeks. She couldn’t look any better. “What happened to the crystal in the ghost’s neck?”

“Someday I’m sure your new colleagues will tell you.” His bruised chin nodded at the journal on her desk.

Instinctively, Daelin placed her hands over it and shut the cover. “They don’t seem to like you much. Does that mean we can’t be friends?”

“Your new colleagues don’t like me because I’m a thing from the rift.”

“Culver mentioned it.” Did the whole town come from another world? It would explain a lot.

“The portal sent me here from another time. The Rifiers don’t know what to think other than they don’t trust me.”

Daelin had some reservations of her own, but felt she could rely on Earl. She couldn’t name why. “Should they trust you?”

“You and your sister can depend on me.” With finesse, he made a sweeping bow. “Until we meet again.” His hand clasped over the green jewel on his belt buckle, and he disappeared.

Hawley’s jewel! Daelin jumped onto her feet, limping to where Earl had stood. She waved her arms over the area then the whole library, finding no trace of him. She opened the storage closet, staring at books, paper, and cleaning supplies. “Huh.” She shut the door, leaning against it, knowing she had seen the last of Earl Blacke until he wanted to be found.

“What am I doing? A secret society that protects this world from others filled with monsters. Really?”

Cordelia Swit climbed out of her painting to stand before Daelin. “There is no bigger monster than not believing in yourself.”

Advice from a ghost. Life in Settler wasn’t boring. “You were a Rifter. Should I join?”

“I’m still a Rifter. We protect Settler. Sign the oath and become my ally. The world needs you.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You’ll see me no more, and you’ll spend the rest of your life wondering about the rift.”

True. “Curiosity kills, they say.”

“Once unleashed, curiosity can’t be caged.”

The phone from the 1980s on the librarian’s desk rang. After three botched attempts, Daelin picked it up correctly. “Caslow County Library.”

“Hey, Wald here. It’s time to return the journal to Sabina. Can you come over?”

The library had no guests. Cordelia returned to her portrait. “Yes.”

“Bring it to Sabina.” He hung up.

“Save the world,” Cordelia whispered.

Daelin had fought a good fight last night. “I defeated a ghost who collected heads.” Right. She stood tall. The journal in hand, she left the library.

Crisp air with the aromas of cedar, pine, sage, and juniper sated her inhales. Snow-capped mountains greeted her with stunning majesty, a sight that still surprised her. She liked it much better than the canyons of skyscrapers in the city. She strode around the corner and started up the walkway to the county offices.

Sabina waited at the entrance holding out a fancy bronze pen with wires and gears on it. “I’m so pleased you’re joining us.”

In all the ways Daelin had expected her life to change by moving to this remote town, she had never expected to become a slayer of ghosts, a protector of worlds. Not in all the dictionaries.

The End



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◆About M. Pax

M. Pax-- Fantasy, science fiction, and the weird beckons to me, and I blame Oregon, a source of endless inspiration. I doцент at Pine Mountain Observatory in the summers and have a cat who has a crush on Mr. Spock. You can find out more by visiting my website: mpaxauthor.com

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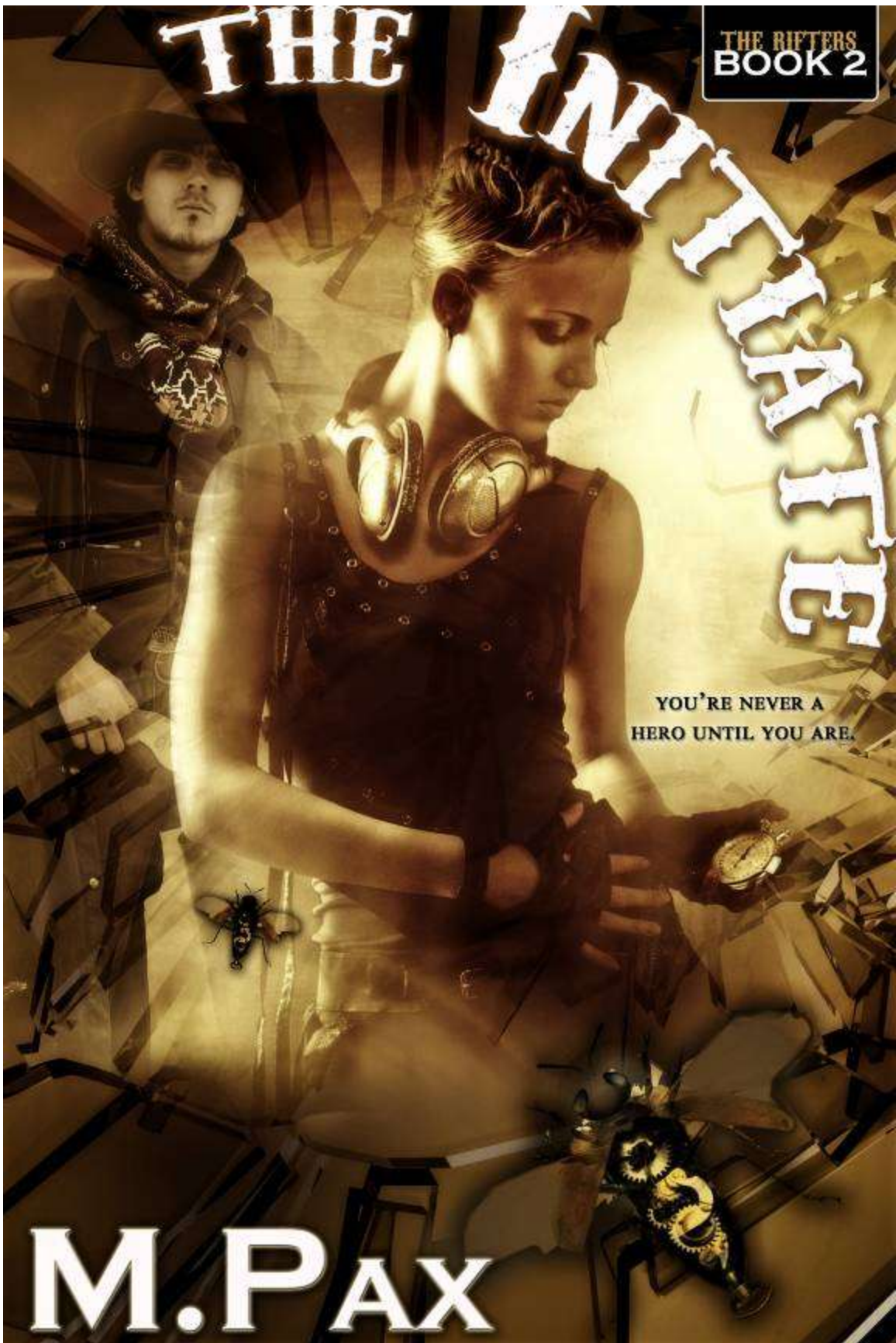
For Oregonians — although Settler is based on places I've visited, it is fictionalized and I took some liberties to create the ideal setting. Therefore, some details will ring true and some are not the same as reality.

Sneak Peek: The Initiate, Rifiers Book 2

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You're Never a Hero Until You Are



THE

THE RIFTERS
BOOK 2

RIFTERS

YOU'RE NEVER A
HERO UNTIL YOU ARE.

M.P. PAX

A junction erupts between the worlds in Settler, Oregon, a rift from which horrors attack our world. The Rifters defend us.

To trust unquestioningly is the first lesson Daelin Long must learn as the newest Initiate of the Rifters.

Her first day is a disaster. To protect her missing sister, Daelin finds it necessary to lie, causing her to fail at her lessons. Worse, the rock sample she digs up near the rift flies away and grows into a swarm of carnivorous bees.

While she struggles, Earl Blacke grapples with his troubles, running far and fast from Settler, Oregon. He must atone for his past before he can have a future. If he can succeed at gold mining and love, two things he previously failed at, perhaps he can salvage his soul. Before he can find out, Daelin's sister calls for help, forcing him back to Settler.

There, he and Daelin must work together to preserve family, the town, and tomorrow. They must believe in themselves and each other before there is nothing left to save.

The Initiate

Rifters Book 2

by M. Pax

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CHAPTER 1

Ink burrowed under her skin, blue and purple snakes, the needle nipping incessantly forming stained windows. Daelin Long grit her teeth, thinking of old times, of stealing maraschino cherries from the parade of bars her mother had worked at, running off with her younger sister and brother, squealing and shrieking out into the night, all to get her mind off the pain. The ink gripped, searing, chewing up a more innocent version of herself, one that didn't know about the horrors lurking in the woods.

Sabina Staley, Daelin's new boss, sneered at the glowing pigments working their way into Daelin's hand, managing the needle and ink. "Just a little more. Glad you're not being a baby." She yanked Daelin's wrist straight, her black bubble-framed eyeglasses sliding down her steep nose, her green eyes glinting under the glaring utility light. "You're off to a fine start in the Rifters and will be standing beside your sister in no time." Her lips pursed as they usually did.

Praise. Daelin might not ever get used to it. Mostly she ached to get close to her sister again. They'd grown apart, evident by the secret life Charming led. "It's not every day a girl gets to behead a ghost."

“You’re not a girl. You’re a thirty-year-old, six-foot woman with a healthy wallop.”

“Not yet. I’ve another year until thirty.” The single brash bulb in the task lamp hanging from the ceiling blinded Daelin to the curiosities beyond the recliner she lay in. Shelves of leather-bound journals locked by crystal clasps. Cabinets of gadgets constructed from crystals, coils, and gears. Aviator goggles rimmed with inductor coils winked, creating enigmas within mysteries.

Daelin had sworn an oath to protect the world against monsters, the same one her sister swore. Charming remained missing, presumably on a dig with the Paleo Institute, but the reason didn’t sit easy in Daelin’s mind. She couldn’t name why. A wild four days involving phantoms and murders had passed since Daelin had moved to the dinky wilderness town of Settler, Oregon, from New York City. Her sister had persuaded her to take the county librarian position. Not that it took much convincing. Shaken after being laid off, robbed on the subway platform where she lost her severely needed severance pay, Daelin had no choice but to accept.

She had traded in skyscrapers for snowcapped mountains, the stench of the forgotten for the heady scents of juniper, sage, pine, and cedar, and the turbulent East and Hudson Rivers for placid twin lakes that reflected the majesty of nature, nothing but nature.

Settler sat inside the crater of a dormant caldera. Two craggy peaks marked the crater to the west. To the east, the crater walls had eroded to pine-covered ridges. Gold and East Lakes reflected the mountainous terrain and forest as well as the cinder cone that divided the two calm bodies of water. The town had tucked itself between the twin lakes and the twin peaks. Farther to the west the snowcapped Cascades rose, adding to the stunning vista Settler already claimed.

The town hovered at a population of one thousand residents. In the summer months, creatures visited from other worlds, intending to stay and feed upon this one. The tattoo ushered in a responsibility for them, making it part of Daelin’s job to defend against those threats, to protect the town and its people, and by doing so protect the world. “In all the dictionaries,” she whispered. She hadn’t imagined managing a rural county library to be so exciting and deadly.

Grabbing a cup of copper ink, Sabina dipped in the needle and added dots and lines, filling in the glass-like cobalt and violet panels with a maze of circuitry. The metallic ink leached under Daelin’s skin, crawling into crevices her thoughts had never reached, urging her to shriek.

She held back the scream, swallowing until it dissolved to a tremble. “How does the tattoo make me a Rifter?” she asked, speaking through clenched teeth.

“They’re permanent circuits that draw the energy from the gateway. The energy interacts with Rifter-sanctioned equipment, boosting its effectiveness. The panels also remember your training to make you faster, stronger, sharper. As you progress through the ranks, your tattoo will grow, revealing your standing to all other Rifters.” Sabina’s snow white curls fell over her brow. With the back of her papery wrist, she swept them out of the way. “Those of this world and not. You’ll be a great temptation to the nefarious creatures, a weakness to be exploited. Be very aware of that.”

Great. She’d be creature bait. Daelin would learn as much as she could as fast as she could to get this phase over with. “I don’t see your tattoo.”

“It’s only visible when wearing the transputer. When I’m done, yours will do the same.”

“The device resembling a watch?” Daelin had seen the Rifiers wearing them last night when she helped them defeat a murderous ghost. Yeah, her whole idea of normal had changed since moving to Settler.

“It’s a bracer. You’ll get one and a journal in which to keep your notes.” She shrugged at the shelves beyond the glare of the light. “Listen, the rift is overwhelming. If I tell you everything now, you’ll drown. Your fellow Rifiers and I will dish information slowly, as you need to know it. We’ll never leave you floundering without a paddle. All right?”

“OK.” What else could Daelin say? She didn’t know what to demand, only knew she had sworn to become a guardian of Settler.

Reading an old journal by Patrick Swit, the founder of the town and the Rifiers, was how Daelin had been given the oath, *I swear to guard and protect this world from all enemies who mean it harm and from all things born of the rift. To unswear is to die.*

The list of protectors dated back to 1892. Currently, nine Settler residents made up the elite team, including herself and her sister. Daelin hoped it would bring her and Charming closer, a sharing of their adult lives to strengthen the bonds formed in youth. If her sister ever came back to town. Taking off without a word wasn’t like her.

With the completion of each circuit, the bruises and scrapes covering Daelin’s body from the encounter with the phantom eased. Her lips moved more freely, the stiffness in her face and legs faded as if she’d been dunked in a pool of pain relievers. “Ahh.” She shut her eyes.

Swabbing over the tattoo, Sabina cleaned Daelin’s hand and wrist then wrapped it. She pointed at the door. “Wald will mentor you through the initial phase of the Rifiers. See him on your way out.”

The pledge Daelin had signed in Patrick Swit’s journal, the book explaining the origins of the Rifiers, lay open beside the inks. Her signature looped below her sister’s. All the names had been scrawled in scratchy red. The color of blood, the color of warning and danger. The warning leaped from the page, pinching along her spine. The unsettled feeling grew and knotted her brow. Daelin sat up. The vinyl chair squeaked.

Sabina set the tattoo gun down, rising onto her feet, standing almost as tall as Daelin. “For now, your primary duty is to learn and to train.” Her long face mirrored her long nose. She gave Daelin a quick hug. “I’m glad to have you with us. There’s nothing to worry about. Everyone will see to it you’re trained well. Don’t be afraid to ask us questions, however, don’t question orders in this phase. It will keep you alive, and I’d prefer that outcome. Lesson one, what you must ingrain into your core, is to trust your fellow Rifiers without question.”

Strands of Daelin’s black hair had broken loose during the procedure. She pulled out her hair stick, combed her fingers through her shoulder-length tresses, then twirled them back into presentable with the stick. “Understood.”

“The library closes at four o’clock sharp during the summer. I suggest you take naps before your Rifter duties, which start at sundown.”

“Yes, Ms. Staley.” Daelin straightened her sweater and jeans. The nights here resembled winter, not caring it was late June.

“Call me Sabina. It’s my preference, like you don’t wish to be called Darlin.”

Why had her mother named her Darlin Dae Long? The name cursed her from birth with silliness that prevented her from making a serious first impression. “Noted.”

“Now go.”

Daelin pushed herself off the recliner, much like a dentist’s chair, and hobbled out of the concealed room in Sabina’s office suite, limping less than earlier, exiting through a painting of a fog-smothered forest, which opened like a vault into the county commissioner’s official office. She traveled down two flights of stairs, watching her gold and pink flowered ballerina flats to make sure she didn’t trip down the granite steps. The interior of the county building recalled bygone eras, a homage to decades and centuries forgotten by the big cities. White tile covered the walls. Tan and ivory speckled granite squares made up the floor.

Double wooden doors across the foyer opened to the reception area. Inside, a counter constructed from blond paneling separated visitors from staff. In this case, one man, Wald Macadam, Sabina’s indispensable third hand. Ivory linoleum graced the countertop and a silver bell.

Wald didn’t sit at his desk in front of the typewriter. Yeah, a typewriter. The outmoded machine went with the rotary phone, apparently a set Caslow County couldn’t do without. Daelin slapped the bell.

From behind a wall, Wald limped, wiping crumbs from his lips, his face as bruised as hers. He had joined the Rifiers ten years ago according to the date scribbled next to his signature under the oath. He must have still been in high school. What had he defended the world against in that time?

The ghost she had battled last night had used Wald as a shield and a weapon in an attempt to defeat her, slamming him down as a roadblock to thwart her, chucking him as a cannonball to hurt her. It had hurt Wald worse.

His sparkly hazel gaze smiled at the bandage on her wrist then rose to stare into her intentions. She didn’t quite know what they were, so didn’t know what he learned.

“I’ll pick you up at your place at 9:30 p.m.,” he said.

It sounded like a date. He smoothed the shorn hair around his ears, an uninspiring medium brown. The top was longer, mussed in stylishly messy waves, much like Earl Blacke’s, a man connected to Daelin’s sister and her disappearance, a man with a million secrets. What could be more secretive than a team of people who protected this world from creatures that came through a doorway of light in the woods? Daelin doubted she’d ever understand Earl or all the bizarre nuances of Settler.

“Try to get a nap,” Wald said. “It’ll be a long night. Either something will greet us from the other side or we’ll greet the sun.”

What a date it would be out under the moon waiting for doom, and she had never lived anywhere so obsessed with napping. “Should I bring anything?” For certain, she’d wear her winter clothes. Despite it being the end of June, Settler had yet to get the memo summer had started. Sitting at four thousand feet above sea level, the area only had two seasons: a long winter and August. August hadn’t quite arrived, although some afternoons hinted it might show up soon.

Wald wore slacks in a darker shade of gray than his cardigan and a black button-down shirt. His hazel eyes were slightly obscured by the swelling of his eyelids and cheeks. “No. I’ll bring everything we’ll need. The tattoo will help your injuries heal faster. That was some battle, huh?”

She reached out and patted the yellowing on his swollen cheek. “Your bruises don’t look as fresh as mine.”

“The tattoo.” He held his arm up. “I’ve been with the Rifiers awhile. You were really brave. Bet you move up in the ranks quick.”

As long as she reconnected with Charming, Daelin didn’t care about the rest. “See you later then.”

She left the Caslow County offices, a three-story brick structure resembling a Victorian house complete with a steeple, the tallest building in town. Daelin checked her watch, ten to four. Instead of turning left at the corner to return to the library, she went right, traveling down Brucker Avenue, the main thoroughfare decorated for the founders day festivities that started tomorrow, Swit Days. At one end of the main street sat the fossil dig, at the other East Lake.

Between the natural landmarks, booths dotted the center of the street trimmed with clashes of music, splashes of vibrancy, and the scents of cotton candy and popcorn. Daelin waved at the shop owners she knew setting out specials on tables in front of their businesses. Downtown. Right. The rare storefront rose higher than one story.

Daelin’s new phone buzzed, the latest model everyone in the city had slept three days in line to get. It had been sent overnight by her brother. She pulled it out of her bag, checking the number, her brother’s. “Hey, Cobb. How are things in Atlanta?”

“Same as yesterday.” Cobra Moondae Buckley. He had the same troubles with his name as his sisters.

Their mother loved bizarre names. Darlin Dae Long, Charming Moon Knight, and Cobra Moondae Buckley. None of them had the same father. Their mother played drums in rock bands, loving music, loving her groupies. The chaos had created a strong bond between Daelin and her siblings, one she cherished.

Cobb’s normally sarcastic tones deepened, becoming serious. “I was able to get the location of Charming’s phone. I’m texting you the coordinates, which you can plug into your GPS app. It’ll get you within a yard of Charming. Umm...” he blew out a loud breath. “Look, is she all right? What’s going on?”

“She’s out on a dig with the Paleo Institute. I want to pop in and say hi. That’s all.” Daelin halted in the middle of her commute, an eight block walk. What else could she tell him? She couldn’t tell him about the doorway to other worlds in the woods. She couldn’t tell him that both of his sisters now hunted monsters. “So where?”

“Her phone isn’t out of town. Don’t you think that’s weird?” Cobb worked as an intern at a communications company.

Daelin tugged her sweater tighter against an icy breeze. “Maybe she dropped it.”

“According to the coordinates and an internet map of Settler, her phone is inside Blacke’s Ranch Resort and Spa. You know where and what that is?”

Yes, she did. Earl Blacke had disappeared the morning after the fight with the ghost. He claimed to have told Daelin everything he could about Charming. She had suspected what he could say and all he knew weren’t the same. Now she had proof.

Chapter 2

“Blake Barth? Really? That’s the name you’re using now? A cat could come up with

something more original.”

Earl Blacke — the name he was last known by — didn’t wheel around, didn’t bother to answer Dante. With a pack strapped to his back and a good pair of boots, he didn’t need what Dante came to offer. What Earl needed was to decide who he was, who he was going to be, and find a purpose for himself. Dante couldn’t give that to him.

“Midlife crises don’t start until after forty in this century. You don’t hit thirty until September, so you’ve got over a decade to go until this is appropriate. Or maybe you’re getting your Zen on, huh? There’s an old television show I saw on the internet about a dude roaming the country with a bedroll searching for his Zen.” Dante yipped at Earl’s heels like a drunken miner down on his luck.

With forty years of his life to live over, Earl didn’t fret about his age anymore. “There’s nothing wrong with Zen. What do you know about it? You know less about this time and place than I do.” At least, Earl was human. Dante couldn’t claim that despite appearing like one.

“You can’t stay out here in the open, and you know it. They’ll find you, they’ll hunt you.” The concern had more to do with preserving his hide than Earl’s.

In 1888, Earl had left Northern California to escape his life gone wrong. He had ended up camping outside of Settler and had entered the rift in the woods when it burst open, not knowing what it was. It had spit him out in this century and returned his youth. The rift hadn’t let him near it since, otherwise he’d go through it now, hoping it’d give him a third lease on life.

The Cascades had faded to faint purple nuggets strung along the distant horizon. Earl headed east. He didn’t know where other than away from Settler, his past, war, and the possibility he might spill Charming’s secrets. He had promised not to, and he’d keep his vow. “The Rifiers will prevent the hunters from leaving Settler.”

“So you hope. The other side will send nastier and nastier stuff until nothing can resist. They will eradicate us before we can mount an offensive. Your only choice is to leave this world.”

“Your offensive, your mounting. Not mine. Get it straight.” Earl reeled around, facing a man who could be his brother. They appeared about the same age, had the same medium athletic builds, the same cold blue eyes, the same stylish shadows of beards, and blond hair. Dante’s had more brown in it than Earl’s and had more length. Earl had more curl to his. “You’re only counting noble choices. Do you know where noble got me?”

“Here we go. Are you going to tell me about how the war used you up and spat you out again?” Like Earl, Dante wore faded blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a khaki button-down shirt. Unlike Earl, he didn’t wear a hat.

Lowering the brim of his brown cowboy hat, Earl put Dante out of his sight. “There’s no love for the soldier after battles are done. Society has no use for trained thugs and killers. The soldier forgets how to live with peace and kindness.”

Dust kicked up in a dirty cloud under Dante’s feet. He moved closer, poking Earl’s hat up, staring into Earl’s rotting soul. “Some worlds have figured out how to make the transition for their fighters. I could introduce you to their reformers.”

He shrugged out of Dante’s reach. “Just let me alone. I have to figure this out for myself.”

Dante squinted. “The self pity does nothing for you.”

“It’s not pity, it’s figuring. Something you don’t know much about.”

Arriving here with an honorable cause, Dante hadn't given the maneuver against his peers the consideration he ought. Now the Governors of the rift would hunt him until he disappeared from all worlds. He hadn't figured on that and had recruited Charming to get to Earl. Yesterday he had confessed he needed Earl as his general. No way would Earl agree.

Dante's eyes rolled up toward the cloudless sky. "How do you figure that?"

"Oh, shut it." Earl stepped around him, continuing across the dusty plains stretching between the buttes.

"Don't you think running out on Charming repeats your old ways, the ones you want to change?"

"I did change. I did right by her."

"Yet you're leaving."

"Maybe I'll come back. I didn't kill Earl Blacke. If for no other reason, it's best to put some distance between me and the idiot ghost who kept calling me Bart. People might figure out who I really am."

"It's easy to explain the resemblance to anyone but the Rifiers. Most of them already know, so why do you care? People have doppelgangers in every age. I've seen it online with celebrities and photos from the 1800's. You're running from fools gold, you fool. And you need to get this straight, you didn't kill your other personas, you abandoned them. A distinct pattern."

"Which is none of your business."

"You didn't pop out of the rift into this century on any whim, my black-hearted friend. I pried you loose from nonexistence, a place between worlds worse than any other."

Earl shook his head. Dante was more stubborn than a miner who had found a speck of gold amid a heap of worthless rock. "And I suppose you lured me into the gate in 1888?"

Undaunted, Dante kept pace beside Earl. "No. You shouldn't have been able to enter at all. That's what's special about you, why I can't let you go."

"You have no choice in the matter." Earl pressed his lips firmly together, refusing to glance at Dante.

"I'll let you have some time to sort yourself out. You'll come round to my way of things. You have no choice in the matter."

Oh, yes he did. Earl furrowed his brow into a snarl, directing it at the horizon and a puff of dirt. Dante had vanished, but not for long. Before he returned with more taunting, Earl would get good and lost. He veered north, picking up the pace.

Chapter 3

"I curse you, Earl Blacke." Daelin marched up the knoll on Madeline Street, past her sister's tiny cottage, which had become her home, across the field of brush toward a dirt road leading to Blacke's Ranch Resort and Spa. It sat behind the lava flow, hidden from town, in a world of its own.

Fists balled, she skirted through bramble snatching at her slacks, snagging her sweater, urging her to head back. She didn't, ignoring the dust coating her shoes and the stones wanting to twist her ankle.

On the winding drive up to the ranch house, Daelin's temper gave way to the frosty breeze blowing down from the peaks. Gold and Swit Peaks made for natural air conditioners, so did the Cascades farther to the west. The cool peaks also worked well at drying out lips.

She slowed to a stumble, fishing a lip balm out of her bag, discovering the key to her sister's Jeep. Daelin remembered finding the mangled keychain in the woods, but not exactly where. Trying to recall made her head ache. The plastic frame holding a mini photo of herself and her brother had been cracked and coated in blood. Right. One reason warnings kept pricking her spine, why finding the phone was urgent, why Daelin had a twisted gut. It bolstered her resolve, and she stomped up to the house.

Guests of the ranch relaxed on lawn chairs set out on the grand porch. Draped in blankets, they sipped hot drinks and drank in the magnificent scenery — the mountains, the lakes, the deer grazing a few yards away.

Scott Zayas, one of the managers of the resort, led four saddled horses down the driveway toward the guests. Spotting Daelin, he stopped. Square and brown, he barely reached her shoulder, the top of his cowboy hat included.

“¡Hola! *Señorita* Long. What brings you out this way?” Hints of wisdom graced his eyes and mouth in feathering lines.

Standing in front of him, she felt stupid. What did he know about Earl's tricks and Charming's fate? Most likely nothing. Most likely Daelin hiked out here for nothing. What did she suspect Earl of? He had fought the ghost with as much energy as she had, sacrificing himself to give her a clear shot at victory, yet he was all snarled up with the same uneasy feelings Daelin had about her sister.

She tugged at her lower lip. If Earl hid something, Scott Zayas would know. The townspeople said Earl and Scott were tight. “I heard from my sister.” She searched Scott's eyes and mouth for a reaction.

He twitched to shoo away a moth fluttering in his face. His expression otherwise didn't change. “Did she say what the Paleo Institute found? Must be something good for them to have been out this long.”

“Some long Latin words I could never hope to pronounce again.” Daelin laughed then gestured at the stately manor. Constructed from great cedar planks, glass, and stone, the house harmonized with the beauty around it, reflecting majesty in its enormous spotless windows. She wondered what Earl had done to get all of his money. “What I can repeat without garbling it is she left her phone here. She said in the house.”

Scott nodded. “She's always visiting *Señor* Earl when she's around.”

The horses shuffled behind him. One sporting a blue splotchy coat extended its snout to determine whether Daelin had any apples or carrots. She took a step back.

“Go on in. Mist is in the lobby and will lend you a hand,” he said.

Would it be so easy to get her hands on Charming's phone? Maybe Earl had nothing to hide. “Thank you, Scott.”

“Glad to be of use. Neighbors should help each other, and I know you helped the boss beat that murder rap.”

The ghost had used Earl like a puppet, forcing him to twist off heads and kill two

townspeople. For the first victim, the excuse of ‘a spook possessed me and made me do it’, sounded too silly for reason, even reason in Settler. For the second poor soul, witnesses had seen the phantom use Earl as the murder weapon. The ghost had proved Earl’s innocence more than Daelin.

She smiled stupidly, unsure what to say, deciding to quit talking about murderous ghosts. A little bit of normal was always welcome in this town. “Thank you. It shouldn’t take me long to find her phone.”

He jerked his head toward the horses. “Want to come riding with us? I can saddle another.”

She skirted around the beasts. “No, I’m good.”

“You’re just like the boss, avoiding the horses.” Scott laughed then clucked at his hooved friends. They followed him across the lawn.

Two massive doors, one glass the other pine, made up the front entry. Inside sat a young woman, no older than nineteen, with a steep-planed face. Her skin, hair, and eyes all had the same shade of dark brown. Wearing a turquoise tunic that flowed past her knees and tan leggings, she made a pretty picture framed by the doorway.

Faded red leather graced the couches, loveseats, and ottomans arranged in the center of the parlor for optimal conversation. The back wall was all windows. Water poured down them in a waterfall cascading into an indoor bed of river rocks. A herd of bronze mustangs galloped in front of it. The mirror of East Lake stretched beyond it outside, adding its hush of majesty. Monitors on the left wall displayed all the activities a guest could enjoy around Settler, and a desk with stacks of brochures and a computer sat under them. Greenery accented cedar and glass tables. Corridors branched off both sides of the room.

Beside the young woman on the couch sat a cell phone and laptop. She checked the phone then glanced up. Standing before Daelin reached the porch, the young woman smiled as if she drank the sun. “Welcome to Blacke’s Ranch Resort and Spa. I’m Mist Rider. Did Charming say where she left her phone?”

Scott must have texted. Cowboys with cell phones. The idea twitched Daelin’s sour mood into a more pleasant one. “Hi.” She introduced herself. “I was able to get coordinates to get us within a yard.” She checked the GPS app on her phone then pointed. “That way.”

Taking the left corridor off the lobby, Daelin navigated it to a metal door. The door had a discreet *Private* sign adhered to it. “In there. Let me call to be sure.” She dialed her sister’s number, pressing her ear to the door. Mist did the same. A faint roar came from inside.

“The growl is your sister’s phone. Mr. Earl is always nagging at her to change it, says dinosaurs in this day and age are disturbing.”

On that Daelin would agree with him. A loud chirping beep followed the bellow, a sign Charming’s phone was dying. Daelin tried the knob. It didn’t budge. “Do you have the key?”

Mist shook her head. “Scott does. Let me go get him.” She strode down the hallway and hung a right. A few moments later Scott Zayas sauntered toward Daelin.

“That’s his private office,” he said.

“I just want to get my sister’s phone. You can stay the whole time.” She wished he wouldn’t. Earl had to keep secrets in there, and she wanted the time to unbury them.

“*Está bien.*” He unlocked the office and let her in, following her to Earl’s desk.

She dialed Charming’s phone again. The ringtone roared weakly, definitely coming from inside the desk. Daelin tried each drawer in turn, Scott peering over her shoulder.

In the top center drawer she noted a book on wild west outlaws. The photo on the cover reminded her of someone, but she couldn’t say who. With the book were some military patches and old photos. Earl didn’t strike her as ex military. What were those about? Scott gave her no time to dwell on the unearthed treasures.

In the top drawer on the right side of the desk, she found a laptop and power cords. A look at Earl’s computer could tell her a lot if Scott would leave her alone with it. No such luck.

The next drawer down contained a journal with a crystal clasp and a transputer, Rifter equipment. Earl’s name hadn’t been on the list in Patrick Swit’s journal. What if they were Charming’s things? Why would he have them? He had her phone. What had he done? Scott coughed over her shoulder. She’d have to think about it later, opening the last drawer.

Her sister’s phone lay on top of a file folder labeled *Daelin*. Why would Earl keep a file on her? She reached for it, needing to get a peek.

“That’s Charming’s there.” Pointing, Scott bumped against her arm.

Daelin couldn’t touch the file without him noticing. She’d have to figure out a way to get back in here and see what Earl Blacke had been up to.

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