



THE RIFTERS

M. Pax

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



CHAPTER 1

Earl Blackce 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 gribbets 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.

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