

Chapter 1

Grisly pictures of a mutilated female body stared up at him from where his brother had tossed them at his feet it had been a woman now ripped apart. Her remains resembled a plastic baby doll with its arms and legs torn off and haphazardly flung away. Ryder knelt down and gathered up the pictures before turning to his brother.

“You needed something?” Ryder asked.

“How long are you going to ignore Max’s request for help?” Lykar asked waving the pictures he still held at Ryder.

“It’s a mortal issue.” Ryder rose to his feet and handed the pictures back to his brother. He had seen them already. Ryder did not do mortal issues, regardless of the person requesting the help.

Besides, he had not ignored Max’s request. He had looked over the information Max had sent, and he didn’t want anything to do with what was going on. He was sure that Max would be able to figure out what was going on and take care of it. The killing could be mortal, but he doubted it. The entire issue reeked of Other, and he wanted nothing to do with it. Hundreds of years of following his instincts had kept him alive. Although he owed Max, and the injustice of turning his back on a friend clawed at his conscience with sharp talons.

Lykar waved the pictures in Ryder’s face. “A mortal is not capable of doing this ...” He stammered, “This type of torture, mutilation ... it just isn’t right.”

If anything, mortals would be just as capable of this kind of horrifying act as Others, and they both knew it. Ryder raised one eyebrow. “Tell me you’re kidding.” He pushed past Lykar in order to leave the study.

“The Council thinks it is unusual. Something they have never seen before. They are worried the Tribunal will get involved.” Ryder snorted at Lykar’s ominous pronouncement. It is problematic, Ryder thought. But with his mind set, he would not get involved. “The Council does nothing these days unless it benefits them.”

“The last victim was only fourteen.” Lykar’s voice dropped low and solemn, making Ryder hesitate for just a fraction of a second before slamming through the door and into the hall. Lost innocence no longer affected him; the emotion of sentimentality is something an immortal Tracker shouldn’t dwell on.

He didn’t want to get involved. Why did it have to be him? “Because,” his conscience whispered, “Max asked for you.”

“You are the only one who is capable of tracking whatever is doing this.” Max’s words haunted him.

The last victim had only been fourteen, way too young to have her life snuffed in such a brutal manner. Could it be a mortal? Or an Other? Five women in three months. It could be a serial killer. He tried to pull the cold-hearted warrior back into place. Nevertheless, he faltered, leaving him swearing at himself for caring.

“Son of a bitch.” Ryder slammed a fist into the wall, leaving a gaping hole in the paneled wood. Lykar opened the door of the study and looked from the hole in the wall and back to Ryder. A smile played at the corner of his lips.

“Where is Marlee?”

“Just sent her a text. She’ll meet you at the airport.”

“Of course she will.” Ryder rolled his eyes, his annoyance ratcheting up a few notches. “If this is some reckless mortal serial killer, I’m going to tear him to shreds and feed him to Marlee.”

“Whatever.” Lykar shrugged. “Just take care of it before the Tribunal gets involved. There are several different communities of Others in the region.”

Ryder glared at his brother. “And when have the lives of mortals or Others meant anything to me?” Beside his brothers and a select few, Ryder couldn’t give a rat’s ass for anyone else. His brothers often accused him of not having a heart, but it had never paid off to be sentimental, so he just didn’t bother with it.

Lykar stopped him as he headed up the stairs. “Um, by the way, Marlee isn’t happy about this, with the full moon only having been last night. Also, my information says the Council is sending someone else in. If the Council picked him, whoever he is won’t be able to tie his own shoes without help, so I wouldn’t worry about him. Just be aware you might not be alone.”

“No shit,” Ryder muttered, more to himself than to Lykar. Stopping halfway up the stairs, he said, “Tell me why you aren’t doing this.”

Lykar gave him a serious look, “‘Cause, bro, you’re the best.”

Yeah he never failed to complete a track, never brought feelings or emotion into play. If it defined him as heartless, he could live with it. He did his tracks with skill and precision, no feelings involved.

Kyra sat for several minutes after she’d pulled over, waiting for the motorcycle to cool, during which she’d been able to listen, and she hadn’t liked what she heard whispered on the breeze. The air barely rustling within the trees, as if in doing so the trees themselves would be punished. Evil hung in the air like the blade of a guillotine, hovering moments before its plummet through silent air toward its victim’s fragile throat.

Kyra swung one leg over the seat of her Honda VTX and looked out into the woods, the trees so dense she could see only several feet into the thick forest before it closed in, hiding its secrets from peering eyes. The overhanging trees and thick moss covering rocks and roots shrouded the malevolence like a blanket.

She planted her feet into the dirt path and soaked up the senses of the earth below her, taking several deep breaths, trying not to gag from the filth suspended in the air.

Kyra focused all her Elemental powers, blocking out the sounds of screams and the smell of old and fresh blood. The sounds of the surrounding air started to whisper to her, and she shuddered at the pain emanated there. So much pain and loss, years, even centuries choked her. Whoever had perpetrated the killings chose well. Darkness flourished within comfortable surroundings. Surroundings where murder and pain had been committed unfettered. This forest thrived on the darkness and secrets held within its shadows.

Kyra gazed through the thick branches. The sun just peeking through the shroud of branches, creating a halo of light in the exact spot where she stood. She tilted her face up to the sun soaking up the light, pulling it into her chest and deep into her soul. It fueled her power and chased the shadows away.

Holding her hands out, she felt a shiver pass over her as she phased into a smoky and mist. A power Air Elements had giving her the ability to flow with the breeze over the rough earth, letting the air and gentle wind take her where she needed to be. It pulled her forward

around and through some trees, the path uncertain. The air she floated on stopped suddenly. Cold air tickled her nose, sending chills down her spine as she came to a halt.

Her feet settled into the earth as she rematerialized, her biker boots sinking into the moist soil. Everything in her recoiled she wanted nothing more than to pull her feet back as visions of what had passed assaulted her. Shadows of things that had been done: clips, whispered screams, mumbled pleas, and vindictive horrifying laughter, both male and female. Frightening and unclear, without any substance, the horror of it churned her stomach. Kyra was shocked at the state of the problem facing her, it was Other, but now what? Visions assaulted her, feeling as if the horrors had happened to her. Unable to control herself, she doubled over and retched into the bushes, adding to the damage already done to the area. Swearing, she spat and wiped the back of her hand over her mouth. Still nothing moved. Even the air seemed to be holding its breath.

This type of action wouldn't go unnoticed for long by mortals or the Tribunal. Kyra didn't have a lot of time to get information back to the other Elemental Enforcers and the Council. She soaked it up, committing it to memory for her report.

Kyra had learned darkness and a brutalizing type of death would taint a place, would steal the air and life. She looked up through the shadows, trying to find a shred of light. To feed her starved Elemental senses.

"What did this?" she asked the shadows, not expecting an answer. Darkness held and kept its secrets.

When a Shade appeared, Kyra stepped back in surprise, stumbling. The Shade's transparent body bled through the bushes Kyra had just emptied her stomach into. "He comes!" the Shade shrieked, pointing toward the woods behind Kyra. Kyra covered her ears, the shriek loud and overpowering.

Kyra shook herself and examined the woman in front of her. She wore a long white dress, which meant she could be lingering from one hundred years ago, or one of the latest victims. Shades seldom shared why they lingered in the mortal plane. They differed from ghosts, which held memories of people and how they had died. Shades, on the other hand, had substance, knew that they no longer lived. However, something about this Shade made the small hairs at the base of Kyra's neck stand on end.

She looked over her shoulder in the direction the Shade had pointed. Reaching out with her Elemental senses, she sensed something, but couldn't place it. Human or Other? At its current distance, it wouldn't be a threat. Trying to ignore the Shade Kyra moved past her to continue to look for evidence.

The Shade didn't like that and stepped in front of Kyra. "You must run," she wailed, pulling at her curled brown hair hanging in waves around her shoulders. Kyra reached forward and put her hand into the chest of the screeching woman.

"Who did this to you?" Kyra asked the apparition she closed her eyes trying to see what secrets the Shade held. Images assaulted her, nothing she could focus on. Nothing to give her any idea of who or what had happened. Just snatches of pain and dissolution.

"Run!" the Shade screamed, making Kyra jump back in surprise. The Shade shoved her farther into the bushes. Kyra yelped in pain as she fell back into a thick bush, the small branches scratching at her face and neck as she fell back landing on her back.

"Bloody freaking hell," Kyra cursed. Rolling out from beneath the bush, she froze. All her Elemental senses going haywire: the nonhuman, non-Other entity she had sensed miles away now stood in the clearing ahead of her. Power radiated from whatever was no closer than she would have liked to let anyone much less an unknown entity. Kyra knew this meant trouble. She

remained herself there happened to be a murderer in the woods, and she may have just stumbled onto whatever it might be.

Taking shallow breaths, Kyra steeled herself before looking up. Several yards in front of her stood the largest man she'd ever seen. Short dark hair cut close to his scalp, shoulders so broad, Kyra would be unable to wrap her arms around him and touch her fingers in the back. He looked as if he could snap her in half without even trying. Jean-clad legs spread wide in a fighting stance. A black t-shirt stretched over a broad chest. He radiated power, control, and deadly intent.

Kyra pushed herself to her feet and stood and palming the Glock strapped to her back. She didn't pull it out, but if the man made one move toward her, she had no qualms about firing it into his beautiful face. He may not be mortal, but that didn't necessarily mean immortal. The way he looked at her made her want to shoot first and ask questions later.

"Who are you?" He tilted his head at her in such an animalistic way, it gave Kyra the chills.

"Who are you?" she fired back.

He stared at her with black eyes, nostrils flaring. Recognition tickled at the back of her mind, but she pushed it aside. Trying to figure out what type of creature he was didn't rank at the top of her list. The top of her list? Did he want to kill her?

"Can I help you?" she asked in her most adult voice, a voice her brother Eric always laughed at.

A low growl surged from deep within his chest, raising the hackles on the back of her neck. When he did speak, it rumbled, like a thunder cloud. "I only ask once." He stepped forward, sucking up all the air between them; Kyra couldn't control her involuntary step back.

If her brother Eric could see her now, he would laugh his ass off. She couldn't remember the last time she'd backed away from anything, mortal or otherwise. But damn, the guy stood six and a half feet tall and just as broad. Muscles no guy outside of a bodybuilding room should have rippled as he rolled his shoulders. It looked like an involuntary movement. And then he took a breath, drawing in the smells of everything around him. His eyes narrowed as if making up his mind about her. By the look he gave her she had somehow come up on the losing side.

Kyra planted her feet and squared her shoulders, refusing to move another step back. She didn't know of a creature capable of moving with his speed he had moved up on her without her notice and nothing she knew of had that type of ability. She reached out again and faltered when she felt a Lycan moving in fast on their location. Kyra wished she had received a proper invitation to the party this had turned out to be. The only question? Whose side would the Lycan be on? Kyra would bet it wouldn't be hers. It was just the way her day had gone.

Fiona had sent Kyra to find out all she could and bring back information to the Druid Council. The mission did not include stopping the killings. This was to be a simple fact-finding mission. What could be easier? She felt the need to kick something. Why did things just not work out the way they should? The way Kyra wanted them to?

She had been sent to gather information and bring it back to the Enforcers, and then a plan would be made. Kyra hadn't come to fight, but that didn't mean she would back down from a fight it cornered. After all, she had been raised as an Elemental Enforcer. It didn't mean she could retreat until she better understood her foe. It just meant living to fight another day. And she hadn't come to cause more unnecessary deaths. Especially her own.

“So, would you like to tell me what you’re doing here?” she asked, trying to decide if she would shoot him or not. Maybe it would help decipher what type of creature he was. Most importantly, whether or not he could be killed.

The thought whizzed through her brain just as the Lycan stepped through the trees, freezing Kyra in absolute shock. Kyra shook her head, sure she was seeing things. The Lycan, stood around six feet tall, wore skinny jeans, a tight T-shirt that read “I’M THAT BITCH” printed in black across her ample chest, and red stilettos, the heels sinking into the soft earth. She relaxed into a casual stance looking like she totally belonged, as if everyone dressed in such attire while tracking and killing helpless women. Kyra wondered how the hell she traversed the soft earth with those shoes. The Lycan stood with her hands on her hips and looked from Kyra to the man. She didn’t look happy. Kyra could smell the irritation rolling off the woman. Unhappy didn’t begin to encompass the Lycan’s feelings.

“Ry?” the Lycan asked, her painted lips taking on a practiced pout. It made Kyra want to rub her beautiful face in the dirt. Nobody should look as good as this Lycan did at that moment.

“Shut up,” the man growled. The Lycan bristled, but closed her mouth.

“He keeps you on a short leash, doesn’t he?” Kyra asked, knowing Lycan’s had very short fuses. Getting this one riled up would be an easy task and a perfect distraction.

Kyra just telegraphed his launch as he growled low, sending shivers up her spine. She phased out just in time, but still felt the breath of his hands close around her shoulders. When she reappeared several feet back, the woman hunched down into an attack pose, her breathing heavy. Her red fingernails dragging in the soft earth.

“What are you?” the man asked.

“What are *you*?” Kyra threw back.

“I’m your worst nightmare,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. Nightmare isn’t the category she would put him in. His voice resonating deep in her chest. The saner side of her brain marked him dangerous as hell, but she wouldn’t classify him in the nightmare category, but with just enough dark ruggedness to make her think twice about his actual motives.

Kyra let the corners of her mouth turn up. “Cliché’ much? Besides I’ve been told something similar before but ...” She raised a palm to the sky in a shrug. “I just don’t seem to scare that easily.”

“I’m really going to enjoy killing you,” the woman snarled.

“I could say the same to you.” Kyra didn’t even turn to look at the woman, keeping all her attention on the large man several feet away.

Kyra hated to disappoint the woman, but she didn’t have any plans on dying today, or any other day. Instead Kyra pulled her gun out from behind her and pointed it at the woman, her eyes steady on the man.

“My silver bullets say otherwise, sweetheart, so back the hell off.”

The Lycan bared her teeth. “I don’t believe you.” She glared at Kyra before exchanging a look with the man they shared a moment of silent conversation before the Lycan stepped back growling low.

Kyra heard the growl and shook her head as she pulled the trigger, planting a bullet into the dirt within an inch of the Lycan’s left hand. The show of dominance died a quick death as the Lycan saw that Kyra did, in fact, have silver bullets in her gun. When you dealt with immortals of all kinds on a daily basis, you always came prepared for a fight. Silver could hurt and kill a substantial number of Others. Kyra refused to shoot any other kind of bullet.

“Short leash,” Kyra said, again wanting to keep the Lycan on edge because she didn’t yet understand the man in front of her. She needed to keep the pieces of this puzzle moving, and keeping the Lycan pissed would be a good start. As long as she kept the pieces moving, she had different plans for her escape. Once the pieces stopped moving, she hoped to be in an advantageous position.

“Kill her now,” the Lycan snarled between her teeth. Kyra wondered if she would start foaming at the mouth soon if the man didn’t make a move of some kind.

“Are you the one who has been killing the women?” he asked Kyra in a voice that bounced off the inside of Kyra’s skull, making her want to run screaming into the woods. She blinked refocusing on the man in front her. What the hell? She wanted to spill her guts about everything she had seen in her mind’s eye since arriving in the cursed place. Kyra shook her head again and blinked. Clamping her mouth shut around her traitorous tongue, drawing blood in the process.

“What are you?” Kyra asked, her voice sounding weak even to her.

“I’m the one asking the questions. And if you’ll remember, I only ask once. So if you want to answer my questions, now would be a good time.” He leveled the words at her, his black eyes swirling with gray. His words burned into her brain like lava. Kyra felt each word as if it was being etched in her the small lines of her brain making her wince in pain.

The hand holding her gun started to shake and she feared dropping it. Something trickled from her nose, and she realized she was losing this battle. The pieces of the puzzle screeching to a sudden and furious halt. Kyra glared at her two unknown opponents, before using everything she had left to Shift away. Reappearing next to her bike, she wiped the blood from her face and pulled on her helmet.

What type of creature had those abilities? Kyra thought as she climbed onto her bike and took off.

She searched her brain for a species with the power to control someone with voice. But her head hurt and she could barely keep her bike on the road. Nothing came to mind, which only pissed her off more. It disappointed her that this situation would require a call to Fiona for further information before moving forward.

The question seemed to taunt her as she drove down the road, ignoring the posted signs. Kyra felt the urge to wrap her bike around a pole. She had either just made contact with whatever had been killing the women here, or she had stumbled onto something else. She hoped it would be the latter. If these two were the ones doing the killings, Kyra didn’t know if she had enough fire power on her own to stop them.

“You need to get the hell out of there,” Fiona barked into the phone so loud, Kyra almost dropped it. The fact that Fiona was freaked out spurred Kyra into action. She grabbed her saddlebags and threw everything she had into them.

“What is he?” Kyra asked as she packed.

“Tracker,” Fiona said, but the word froze Kyra in her steps.

“But Trackers are extinct.” Kyra breathed the words. She scrambled through everything she knew about Trackers, everything she had learned while in training, which was little. The things she did know, they had an extraordinary sense of taste, touch, and smell.

“The only species with voice compulsion are Trackers. And not even all of them have that ability. I believed them to have died out several thousand years ago.” The last Fiona

mumbled more to herself. Kyra could imagine the look on her face, she would be chewing on the inside of her cheek.

“You can’t fight him alone,” Fiona said.

“Have they been known to be murderers? Monsters who would kill helpless women?” Kyra asked.

“I will need to do some further research. Get moving and come home now.” She grabbed her bag at Fiona’s rushed words and headed for the door. “How long until you are a safe distance?” She barked.

Based on the limited knowledge she had about Trackers, Kyra knew she wouldn’t be able to hide or get away from him. She only hoped she hadn’t been in contact with him long enough for him to get her scent. Maybe he wouldn’t be able to track her because of her ability to Shift. You can’t track something that’s not there, right?

“How long?” Fiona asked again. To Fiona, it would mean enough of a distance so the Tracker couldn’t locate Kyra.

“Give me twenty-four hours. If I need to, I’ll ditch the bike and take a plane.”

“Ditch the bike and get on the damn plane. Forgo everything else. Just get back to the Haven.” Her urgency made Kyra’s head pound harder.

“I’m going, I’m going.” Kyra threw her bag over her shoulder and headed for the door.

With one hand on the doorknob and the other holding the phone, she was lifted off her feet as the door and part of the wall exploded, it picked her up and threw her into the opposite wall of the motel room behind her. She rolled to her side, gasping for air and getting a lung full of smoke and debris.

“What the fuck?” Debris, smoke, and fire rained down all around her. She covered her face and head with her arms.

“Kyra?” Fiona screamed from the phone but rubble and dust made it impossible for Kyra to see where the phone had landed. “KYRA?”

“Do I get to kill her now?” a female voice asked from somewhere over her head.

“Fuck.” Kyra muttered, pulling out one of her guns. She pointed it into the thick smoke, waving it around as she tried to pick out movement. But the edges of her vision started to get fuzzy. She blinked, forcing herself to stay conscious.

“No, not until we have the information we need,” the male from the woods said, somewhere to her right. Kyra scrambled back, hoping the smoke and remnants of the room would camouflage her, hoping for the few more seconds it lasted, they would be as blind as she.

She watched as two figures emerged from the dusty plume. Kyra didn’t hesitate to pull the trigger, and bullets flew at the couple. Her aim off, the three shots went in different directions, going left when they should’ve gone right. She shook her head again trying to hone in on her attackers.

The male shook his head in disgust. “The room is on fire. Get her out of here.”

Kyra snorted smoke and coughed. “No shit, Sherlock. You just blew a hole the size of a train into my room. I hear explosions cause fire.” She snapped lowering her guns as her vision blurred again.

The Lycan kicked the gun out of Kyra’s hand and leaned down so they were face to face. “Hello again.”

“Fuck you,” Kyra spat. At least now every part of her body felt as miserable as her head.

“Tsk, tsk. It will go so much better for you if you just stay quiet,” the woman said, placing her index finger against Kyra’s lips. She pressed until Kyra tasted blood, proving she and her freaky ass companion had complete control. “Now isn’t that better?”

Kyra kept her mouth shut, instead glaring at the woman. The Lycan stood and arched a perfectly shaped brow at her companion. “If looks could kill.”

“You’d have died a hundred years ago,” he quipped before bending down and picking up Kyra. He leaned her against the wall. Kyra couldn’t hear Fiona screaming from the phone any longer and now the old Druid had stopped to listen, to gather any information she could. Fiona never stopped when one of the Elements could be in danger. It defined who she was.

“Are you going to come with us?” the male asked. His voice vibrated over her skin and sunk deep into her brain. At the moment, she would do anything if he would never ever use compulsion on her again.

As she no longer seemed to be in control, Kyra clamped her mouth shut. If the Lycan didn’t want her to speak, she would keep quiet.

“Have it your way.” He leaned close and whispered the next part into her ear, making her shiver for a different reason. “But remember I told you, I only ask once.” She didn’t see what knocked her out. But blackness swept up and swiftly consumed her. Kyra welcomed it, sinking into oblivion.