

## Chapter One

### Stranger Danger

*Fate is a twisted bitch!* Tierney leaned into the wind, her legs hugging her shiny new Ducati as she raced down the highway. Forest whipped past in a blur and high above dark clouds hummed with the promise of snow. Washington state at this time of year was dismal, as proven by the misty rain that made the roads slick and perilous. In keeping with her volatile mood, Tierney accelerated around the next curve, seeking escape from the fear that threatened to overtake her.

Yet no matter what she did, the chill wind and fast ride failed to ease her stress. Nausea churned, unrelenting, over her first-ever vision. Images of her dad—a fallen angel—surrounded by black-robed figures flashed through her mind on repeat.

Had their enemy—the Ilyium—finally found them?

Gah! She should be used to the horrors of life, after all, that’s what brought them through a magical portal to earth fourteen years ago when she was only seven.

“Mind on the job, mind on the job,” she repeated the mantra. As a private investigator in her family business, there was never any end to the work. Of course, that was due to the fact they were so successful at what they did. They didn’t need the money by any means, but working kept them busy and appeased their supernatural need to help others.

A lot of it was mundane shit. Investigating cheating wives and husbands, business partners . . . But they also tracked missing spouses, runaway teens, and abducted children. The satisfaction of finding and bringing a child home to frantic parents helped balance the more horrific cases that ate at them. The ones that drove sorrow into their souls and filled them with anger—the murderers and child molesters.

Tierney inhaled the scent of pine as she exited the highway to a tree-lined, rutted track. The sight of fresh tire tracks made her grin. Her hunch just might pay off. It’d be good to close another case.

If Shay’s really here.

Her grin faded as she rode under a canopy of foliage which blocked the darkening sky. The eerie, dark forest set her dragon senses crawling with unease.

Born of a dracones and a fallen, she’d spent her life in her human form, with the dragon inside her itching to get out. Now that she’d turned twenty-one she was due to go through her awakening. Well, in the next twelve months. Hopefully, and if she survived.

She pushed the fear of her transition aside and thought of shifting into her dragon form at will. “Then I’ll kick ass on a much larger scale.” She chuckled at the pun.

Plus, she’d have much better control of her abilities.

She briefly wondered what all she’d be able to do after she survived her dragon. Would foresight become one of her gifts?

Though after the terrifying glimpse she’d gotten into the future she wasn’t so sure it would be a gift. How had her mother handled it and not gone insane?

Yeah, some of them were definitely curses. Though not all.

As far back as she could remember, Tierney possessed enhanced empathy. When she’d been little it had been very confusing, until her mother showed her how to use her ability to

calm or soothe others. It had sure come in handy after the attack on their village.

Her friend Jax had been such a mess, but she'd managed to pull him from the dark.

Just the thought of Jax set her on edge, and she wished for the days when they were kids.

Senses screaming that she wasn't alone, Tierney slowed her Ducati and searched both sides of the dense forest. Sure, she was immortal and healed extremely fast, but still she gave herself a mental shake when no one popped out of the shadows. Enough with the paranoia already.

Soothed by the thundering of her bike, the trees thinned out and she rumbled into a spacious clearing. *Huh, go figure.* The green Saab she'd been looking for, along with a blue Chevy pickup, sat in front of a faded, plank-board hunting shack.

The door to the shack swung open as she pulled up and stopped beside the two vehicles. Daniel, whom she recognized from the investigation files, stepped out onto the rickety porch. His eyes were wide with panic as he held a gun up in shaking hands. *Great, just what I need, a gun-toting idiot with no clue how to use the thing.*

Tierney set the kickstand and climbed off the bike.

"Who are you? This is private property, you're trespassing." Daniel glared at her and she had to resist the urge to rip the gun out of his hand. *Didn't anyone ever tell you not to point a gun at someone unless you plan to use it?* She shoved her annoyance away. His short blond hair, and sweet baby-face made his attempt to appear menacing fail big time.

Though she had been itching for a fight, now really wasn't the time. With an eye on the nine-millimeter Beretta in his hand, she pulled off her helmet and pushed her long black hair out of her face as she strode forward. She stopped a few feet from the shack. "The safety's on."

"Wha—?" Daniel glanced at the gun with dismay, before looking back at her with clueless brown eyes.

"Shay," Tierney called, ignoring baby-face as she looked toward the door.

"Leave her alone, go away," Daniel said, panic tingeing his voice.

Tierney sighed, not in the mood. "Chill, I just want to talk to her."

Though she usually kept her mental shields up around humans—a precaution to prevent her from going crazy over their haphazard thoughts—she now lowered them and accessed her ability to read minds. *How did this woman find us? I love Shay, I can't lose her.* Daniel's thoughts screamed in her head.

Tierney tuned him out and zeroed in on Shay inside the shack. *Why can't my parents leave me alone?*

"Shay, you need to come out and talk or I'll tell your parents where you are," Tierney called to her.

A moment later the door creaked open and Shay emerged to stand beside Daniel.

Tierney bit back a smile. The recent photo Shay's parents had handed over of their daughter depicted a stylish, but shy, slender young woman with long brown hair, and brown doe eyes.

The young woman in front of Tierney now, looked anything but stylish or shy. She wore a tight pink t-shirt, crisp blue jeans, and rubber mud boots a couple sizes too large. Her long hair had been cut into a shoulder-length bob with blond highlights, and there was an air of stubbornness to her.

"Go back inside," Daniel said to her.

Shay ignored him and focused on Tierney. "W-who are you? What do you want?" Her gaze quickly darted around the clearing before coming back to Tierney. *Is she alone? Are my parents here as well? How did she find me? Damn this bra itches ...*

Tierney wanted to roll her eyes but didn't. "Yes, I'm alone. My name is Tierney. Your parents hired me to find you."

Anger lit Shay's face momentarily, before a blank mask slid into place.

Daniel glared at Tierney. *Why can't anyone leave us alone? I won't let her take Shay.* "She's not going anywhere."

Shay shook her head. "No, I-I won't go back." *I always obey my parents. I do everything they want, but for once I want something they don't. I'm not doing it, not this time.*

Again, Tierney bit back a grin. Shay had likely never defied her parents' wishes in her life, until now. "Shay, you need to talk to them."

"My dad arranged a marriage for me, and my mother is just going along with it even though she knows this isn't what I want. Do you have any idea what that's like, knowing you have no say in what happens to you?" Shay asked. *I refuse to marry the arrogant ass they picked out. Geez, the guy thinks he's God's gift to women. Besides, I love Daniel.*

Tierney sighed. No, she really didn't have any idea. Her father would never do such a thing, and her mother had died when she was seven, along with her little brother. But Tierney didn't say that and she really needed to get going. "Not my business, but, you're twenty, right?"

Shay nodded.

"Aren't you old enough to decide who you marry?"

Shay nodded again.

"So stand up to them, or not." Tierney shrugged. "I'll give you until noon tomorrow to contact them before I tell them I've found you."

"Ah, all right." Shay blinked in surprise.

Tierney narrowed her eyes. "If you run again, I'll find you, and I won't be happy," she said, careful of her wording. Certain words tended to bind her to them.

"I won't," Shay promised.

Daniel pursed his lips but nodded as well.

"Treat her well, Daniel." Tierney shot the guy a last warning look before walking back to her bike.

"Thank you," Shay said. *I can do this ...*

Tierney grinned at Shay's resolve to fight for what she wanted. It may be her job to find people, but she couldn't stand overbearing parents that ran their children's lives for no other reason than to be controlling.

Tierney climbed on her bike and checked her phone. After finding no new calls or texts, she put on her helmet and started the Ducati. With a last glance back at the now empty porch, she headed back the way she'd come. *Damn. Where are you Dad? It's been seven days.*

Zander was supposed to be gone only two.

Worried sick, she absently scanned her surroundings until a sudden, eerie cold claimed her and everything wavered. Frowning, she braked hard, set her foot down and looked around. A faint light circled the ground in front of her as if a flashlight were illuminating the way. *What the fuck?* She watched the light for a moment before raising her eyes to the darkening sky.

Tierney blinked as it suddenly turned wavy, then like one picture superimposed over another, it lightened. Another set of lighter, fluffier clouds appeared, along with the faint silhouette of a bird. The more she focused, the clearer it became.

A large, black, ghost-like raven, it circled above her head once, twice and a third time. Tierney shivered at the feeling that it was watching her. Then suddenly everything returned to normal—no sign of the bird. And she was no longer cold. *Fabulous, now I'm imagining*

*things!* With a scowl she gave the bike some gas and refocused on the dirt track.

A male voice filled her head. Sami. *“Tierney. Where the hell are you?”* One of her best friends, he was like a beloved brother.

*“Sorry, I’m on my way home. You hear anything from Dad or Jax?”* She looked both ways before turning onto the highway.

*“Nothing on Dad, and Jax texted. He’s running late.”*

*Huh, no surprise, wonder if he’ll even show ... “All right, thanks, Sami.”*

Tierney cut the telepathic connection, then swore impatiently when she ended up behind a slow old man, driving a rusty pickup truck. A steady stream of oncoming cars came toward her in the other lane. Finally, when the last vehicle went by, she sucked in a breath, exhaled, and gunned the Ducati.

She blew past the truck and kept going. Acid churned in her gut as she worried over her dad, Sami, and his brother Jax.

If the Ilyium really had found them, and after her vision she had no doubt, then they were all in danger.

A thousand years their vicious enemy had pursued them on Tartaria, killing any and all dracones and fallen they could find, until their numbers had dwindled so substantially they’d been forced to flee.

There’d been many other worlds they could have gone to, but Tierney’s dad chose earth for them.

A world filled with humans, and a place where they had to zealously guard their secret.

“Why can’t the people here know who we are?” Tierney had asked when they exited the portal to earth.

“The humans wouldn’t take it well if they found out what we are, what we could do, and we don’t need any more enemies.”

“Then why come here?” one of the other fallen had asked, gazing around suspiciously.

Her dad hadn’t answered, but Tierney remembered a conversation she’d overheard between her parents. Her mother had said earth was where they needed to go.

It had all been good, until last month. She silently swore when she thought about the two, well-hidden, fallen males who had recently been murdered. The count was now down to seventy-five fallen, and fifty-three dracones in this world, at least that her dad knew about. The recent murders stunned them, then they found evidence at the scene which led them to believe either a fallen, or dracones, had betrayed them. He or she might even be helping the Ilyium.

When her dad said he needed to go to Olympia for a meeting, she didn’t think anything of it. It wasn’t fur, and he often went on business trips. But when he mentioned he was to meet someone claiming to have information about the traitor, his words filled her with dread. A moment later everything went black.

Zander knelt in a shiny, dark pool of blood.

Black-robed figures wielding swords surrounded him.

They danced. Chanted. Swayed in a horrid swirl of images.

Then a sword swung at her dad’s head.

When Tierney opened her eyes, she was on the floor in her dad’s arms. She began to shake. “Holy demons.” Horrified, she pushed to her feet. “You can’t go!”

Zander sighed, stood and pulled her into a hug. “I love you, but until this traitor is caught, you’re not safe.”

Tierney could feel his regret, but still she pulled away, spine stiffening in resolve. “Well, I’ll come with you—”

Zander shook his head.

“At least take one of us,” she insisted.

“No.” End of discussion.

He left and Tierney’s dread worsened. She couldn’t eat, and a recurring nightmare of her vision kept her from sleeping. When she did sleep, images of the sword swinging would startle her awake.

She dove into all their current cases, but it didn’t help.

The night he left, Tierney called her dad’s phone. He didn’t answer. Then she called the hotel in Olympia where Zander was supposed to be staying.

He never checked in.

Sami tried to track his car but the Lo-Jack was disabled.

His cell continued to go straight to voice mail.

They filed a Missing Person’s Report with the Olympia PD—who they sometimes worked with, but Tierney wasn’t holding her breath. The Ilyium had her dad, and it wasn’t like she could tell the police that. Then she’d have to explain that the Ilyium were druid witches who hunted them because they were immortal beings with abilities.

Tierney shoved thoughts of her dad away as her earlier unease, a sense of being spied upon, grew stronger. A quick glance in her side mirror showed a large, black Escalade hot on her tail. *Jackass!* Attention back on the road, she gunned the bike and shot forward.

The black behemoth caught up, making her growl. What’s this creep’s problem?

A menacing voice drifted through her head. “*Nice ass.*”

A chill shot through her. “*Who are you?*” Her instincts screamed to get away, but she was too stubborn to listen.

“*Someone who’s been waiting a long time for you.*”

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