

## CHAPTER 1

On Callista Raleigh's last night in the only home she'd ever known, she awoke to find her nightmares reality: He had come.

At first she discounted her unease. It was her wont, this past year, to awake with pounding heart and dry mouth, suffering again that dread that had no name and no face--save one.

The enemy.

She sat upright, clutching the covers. "Who is there?"

Silence. She peered into the gloom, her breath frosting her nose and ears. She shifted her hips on the hard-packed feather mattress. This month past, there had been no servants to fluff mattresses or even cook. She was alone in the house with her ailing stepfather and drunken half brother. However, Cerberus, her mastiff, guarded the entry. She listened intently, but he wasn't barking.

What had awakened her?

Wind whistled through rotten casements and groaned down empty corridors. Tomorrow their very beds would be sold; no wonder her nerves were on edge.

Still, her gaze returned to the fraying draperies tossing like lost souls in the darkness. A man could easily hide in them. Did this...beast lurk there, preparing to exact his ultimate revenge?

"Nonsense! No more gothic novels for you, my girl." The sound of her own voice reassured Callista.

Another loose roof tile or window shutter had rattled. She pulled the covers to her nose and shut her eyes, courting sleep for their move to the tenant cottage the next day--a move she would have to manage. She was good at managing, she thought bitterly. She'd learned to do so the hard way while the unentailed estate that had been in her mother's family for ten generations fell to rack and ruin.

Her former estate, she corrected herself grimly. Lurid images of dragons spitting fire and knights wielding flaming swords fought endless battles in her mind.

If only she could face their tormentor. Surely the beast ravaging her sleep and sanity would turn out only to be a man, if an evil one, should he face them at last. But her stepfather refused to share his suspicions.

However, he could not deny the fear in his eyes....

Only this evening, they'd argued about it. "Callista," he'd warned in the bare study, "he hates me too much to watch me suffer from afar. He will come. Soon. Almost, I look forward to meeting him."

Callista had admired her own control as she calmly set her stepfather's tray on a packing crate. She'd made the soup from the last vegetables and the bones of the hen a kindly tenant had given them. She'd stretched the scrawny chicken into meals for a week. Now even the bones were boiled dry.

She neatly aligned the wooden spoon beside the chipped bowl. "Perhaps I could heed your warnings better if you supplied me a name."

Henry Albert Stanton, Earl of Swanlea, shoved the tray away. The crate wobbled; the tray clattered to the floor. Soup splatters made a starburst pattern on the marble, washing enough of the grit away to hint of its once-fine quality. "I cannot drink this swill. Not fit for swine, much less nobility."

Once again, he prevaricated. She glared at him.

He leaned his head back wearily. "The only man who could hate me enough to do this is dead. Or so t'is said."

"I am two and twenty, past the age for coddling. Who was--or is--this man?"

He turned away to brood into the fire. His powdered and peruked head sat arrogantly on his stooped shoulders. The famed Yellow Rose, set in a stickpin, glittered at his throat. The priceless canary yellow diamond in a double rose cut was as big as a prune. He'd never sell it, no matter if their ribs caved in.

How could she blame him? She knew what memories the stone held from the time when, as a young man, he'd brought it back from India. It was far more precious than the thousands of pounds it would yield at auction, despite the ugly secrets surrounding its acquisition or the legendary curse it supposedly bore.

She looked at the emerald on her finger and thought of her race horse Paris. She couldn't bear to sell him. Not yet. They had a place to live, at least. But how could she help them out of this devilish fix if her stepfather insisted on protecting her?

Pleas had availed her nothing, so she held her tongue by biting it. Attacking one another would serve his purpose, not theirs. She knelt and picked up the broken crockery and wooden spoon.

Her stepfather brought his open palm down on the empty crate, making it screech against the floor. "Damn his miserable soul to hell! Somehow he will pay for this."

Callista stacked the dishes back on the tray. "I should think you would tire of vengeance. The trouble with asking for one's pound of flesh is that only bones are left behind."

The earl followed her gaze to the pot, where white chicken bones had floated to the top. But he, apparently, saw the analogy differently. "Curse him, that's all he intends to leave us--bones."

Sighing, Callista returned to her own soup and forced herself to pick up her spoon. One member of this family had to be practical. As usual, it was she. "What have you done, to make someone hate you enough to systematically ruin you with the company?" She sipped daintily.

"I do not know, I tell you," he blustered. "Water under the bridge anyway. Besides, the British East India Company has little use for old employees. Once I was too ill to rule those blasted heathens, my time was numbered."

"Your fortune was not. Nor was my own." Callista bit her lip, regretting the retort. He'd not squandered their money; it had been spirited away by a man as evil as his influence.

A patrician white hand squeezed the lap robe. "Anyone can pick bad investments. Especially when they're so tantalizing."

Callista took her last sip. "As you say, it is water under the bridge. Our only remaining decision is simple: What do we do now?"

Henry checked his pocket watch. "Damn the boy, where is he?"

Callista stiffened. "You surely will not agree to Simon's idiotic notion!"

"If we can raise the money, this may do the trick. Eventually. I've never seen anyone with a better head for cards than you. With your looks, you'll draw every man in London to our tables."

Callista straightened martially, then picked up the tray and held it before her like a shield. "I shall not be associated with a gaming hell, even if you can raise the capital. I certainly shall not sell Paris to aid you in such a scandalous cause. My mother would turn over in her grave to see me in such a place."

"Survival is hardly a 'scandalous cause,'" he retorted.

"How do you think your mother would feel to see us living in a hovel?" His large dark eyes glowed like charcoal from ashen folds of flesh.

Callista surveyed him sadly. Illness and worry had stolen the good looks he'd passed to Simon. His bold nose resembled a beak now rather than a Roman coin. His high cheekbones and full lower lip were all that remained of the Greek god who had turned her mother's head away from her fiance, Bryant Kimball, a widower with a son.

Unable to stomach the endless argument, Callista had carried the tray back to the kitchen, searching again her scanty knowledge of the past for a clue to the quandary of her present. The Kimball match was encouraged by the Raleighs, for the motherless boy and the fatherless Callista would gain the parent each lacked. Callista's mother Mary was not opposed to the match as she never expected to love anyone as much as Callista's father, her first reckless young husband who had died as he drove the mail coach along the Dover road in an attempt to win a bet.

A gambling predilection, Callista realized grimly, that she shared....

However, when Kimball introduced her to Henry, his best friend from their joint service in the East India Company, life--and love--stirred again in the English spring. Clandestinely, Mary and Henry wed. Kimball vowed to ruin Henry. Taking his eight year-old son with him, he rejoined the British East India Company only to die in a pirate attack. Rumors abounded that the attack was planned by a company rival, but no proof was ever found.

A cousin had related the old scandal. Callista had never believed her stepfather, who had been a loving husband and father, was capable of planning the attack, as some whispered.

Yet now, alone in the dark, The Question returned: If Kimball were dead, who was their implacable enemy?

Creeeak...Callista bolted upright.

That noise came from the inside!

She tossed back her covers. Her stepfather had been awakened by the storm and was probably struggling downstairs for more firewood. That was all. Naught to be concerned about.

Callista lit the candle beside her bed. Maybe now, in the dark of night, he'd supply the answers he'd denied by daylight. If Henry's misbegotten youth had ruined their future, she had a right to know why. The dread in his eyes proved he at least suspected their tormentor's identity.

She stuck her feet into her slippers, throwing her robe on carelessly. The circle of light was feeble, and as she opened her door, the flame guttered. She paused, cupping it with her hand, until it brightened again. Of necessity the long trek down the hall was slow. Shadows lurked on every side, alien now the corridor was bare of its exquisite oriental runner and family portraiture. She started with every creak of the aged plank floors installed in Queen Bess's time.

She'd only heard the old house settling, she tried to tell herself.

"No--" The one muffled word stopped Callista in her tracks. That was Henry's voice. Weak and choked off. Dear God, was she too late?

She leapt the last few steps to the door, unaware that her heavy robe came open. The knob felt icy under her shaking fingers, and she struggled to twist it. Flinging the door wide, she hurried inside and held the candle high, but the gale from the open window snuffed it instantly. However, the lantern beside the bed cast a luminous glow.

The magical golden circle was too weak to charm the darkness. Her nightmares dwelt incarnate before her. The candle fell from her limp hand.

Someone--something--hovered over her stepfather, a misshapen hand covering Henry's mouth. She saw a hunched back clothed in black velvet, heard a deep voice threaten, "Oh no, my dear Henry, I shall not kill you. That is too quick, too merciful. Your suffering has only begun. You will live as I lived, thankful for your squalor, dine as I dined, fighting rats for scraps..."

The vitriol was made all the more caustic by that deep, calm tone. Too late, Callista covered her horrified gasp. Instinctively she backed away, thinking to fetch Cerberus, but the wind caught the door and banged it shut.

That humped back straightened. The heavy velvet cape settled about strong, boot-clad legs, revealing a sword-straight spine that slowly turned. Callista scabbled behind her with one hand for the knob, fearing that if that Medusan gaze touched her she'd turn to stone on the spot.

She might have escaped had her stepfather not sat up as soon as the hand released his mouth and cried, "Run, Callista!"

The knob turned. She began to pull the door open, but her eyes, mesmerized, leapt upward. She choked back another scream, faltering.

His sibilant whisper took her name and made it his own. "Ah, Callissta..."

In one bound, the beast, for she could name what faced her naught else, was on her. His huge right paw slammed the portal closed and rested there beside her head.

She tried to grow into the chilly wood at her back, but for every centimeter she retreated, he moved closer. Soon his immense chest pressed against her. His warmth might have been soothing in other circumstances, but as it was, she realized only that her robe had come open and that this....entity was more monster than man. She felt the silk shirt rubbing against the vee in her neckline; beneath the silk, she felt muscles as steely and resilient as well-oiled springs.

The one glance at his masked face had terrified her, so she concentrated on the patch of black hair bristling between the lapels of his shirt. The hood of his cloak covered his head, so she couldn't see his hair, but her imagination ran rampant. Had the very night come alive and sent a werewolf to kill them?

"Let me look at you." A specially-made leather glove covered the three middle fingers of his left hand. He had no thumb or little finger, and Callista's skin crawled at the contact as he forced her chin up.

He moved slightly aside. Callista blinked as blessed light fought his spell, but the apparition did not disintegrate, as she vaguely hoped. She swallowed, forcing down her panic.

Once, alone in the woods behind the estate, she'd faced a hungry wolf. She still remembered its bared fangs, the deep-chested growl. Some instinct had warned her not to run. Instead, she'd stared into the wolf's glowing eyes, then rushed forward, making her cape flap in the breeze, waved her arms and screamed as loud as she could. The wolf had bolted.

Only similar tactics could save her now.

The mask was not as terrifying on second glance. No mere wolf looked back at her. This predator was solitary, mystical, legendary in strength and fierceness. The leather had been sewn into the eternal grimace of a dragon, giving no hint of the true form beneath. The snout was pulled back into a roar and a hole gaped where the mouth was, revealing perfectly shaped masculine lips. Stylistic horns grew out of the wrinkled forehead. The eye slits were slanted, allowing only a glimpse of a pale glitter as those eyes, in turn, examined her.

Her fingers curled against the door. Any moment she expected fire to singe her end to end, but her initial shock had faded as her iron will recovered. She stood tall, her mouth firm, her chin high. He'd taken enough from her. Be damned if he'd purloin her self-respect as well.

Mettle was taken and measured; a battle plan was calculated in two opposing minds and two proud hearts.

Appropriate, Callista thought, that the dying English winter writhed outside. Death and decay surrounded them.

Winter presages spring, came the rogue thought. She quelled it and calculated her best move. The acuteness of his attention was all too familiar to her, and dread settled in her stomach. For the thousandth time she wished God had not blessed her so richly.

At last, however, her appearance served her well. He would not expect her to be smart enough, or brave enough, to defeat him. She looked like a nymph who should be cavorting on a Grecian urn, as so many men had told her. She sent her stepfather one glance, flicking her eyes toward the poker at the fireplace. She only hoped he was strong enough. He nodded imperceptibly and began to inch out of bed.

Callista looked straight into those shadowy eye pits. "Who are you and who gives you the right to disturb our rest?"

That powerful frame vibrated with mocking laughter that made their torsos rub intimately together. This time, she didn't bother to shrink away, but she wished she'd taken time to tie her robe tightly.

"Your first lesson you shall learn this very eve: I do not ask for rights. I grant them." The three-fingered hand drifted down her throat, dangerously close to the vee of her bodice. His gaze tracked his hand.

She sighed her relief when he moved further away, the better to see her. She suffered his appraisal to give her stepfather time. Almost there. She bit her lip as metal scraped against stone when Henry lifted the poker, but the dragon was too intent on his visual ravishment to notice.

She was tall and willowy, her tiny waist and delicate bone structure giving the impression of fragility. But her dainty hands had a bruising rider's strength; her exquisite face was modeled with the purity only character grants. Her thick hair, spilling to her waist like angel light, cast an aura of gold and red, every strand reflecting myriad hues. Her fearless eyes belied the quivering in her knees. The almond shaped windows to her soul were an unusual shade of green, the color of a sunlit pond or tender seedlings. They irresistibly reminded men of spring and its eternal rites. Curling dark lashes framed them, and her dark brows made perfect arcs above them. Her skin was cream rather than ivory. Exactly five freckles dotted her perfect nose.

Broad shoulders lifted in a contented sigh. "Callista. Greek for Most Beautiful. Your mother named you well, but then, you have much the look of her." Almost tenderly, he brushed back a thick lock of hair from her cheek, turning it this way and that to admire the play of red and gold.

Her bravado weakened as he confirmed her greatest fears. She snatched her hair away. "Who are you? How do you know my mother?"

"You may call me Drake."

Of course. What other name would a dragon take? Keep him talking. Her stepfather was only five steps away now, his bare feet soundless on the boards. "I'd lay odds that is not your real name."

"Ah yes, I have heard that about you. For a woman, you are supposed to be quite good at cards. I shall test you. Soon."

That shadowy gaze enveloped the rich bosom her thin night rail hinted at. Callista bit her lip on the urge to tie her robe. Two steps away. She blurted, "I never lose."

"Never is a futile concept only westerners hold dear. It is the fires of suffering and loss that forge character." He reached out casually, without turning his head, and backhanded her stepfather. "I shall be the making of you, my dear Henry."

Henry fell, the poker clattering to the wood floor.

"You fiend!" Callista shoved the powerful frame away, dimly aware that she could do so only because Drake allowed it, and helped Henry up. Arm in arm with her stepfather, she spat, "Get out. You've had your pound of flesh. I pray you choke on it."

"Quite to the contrary. It tastes wonderful." Strong white teeth snapped together several times.

Her eyes widened, and she couldn't control the shiver that ran through her. Her hand drifted to her throat. She could almost feel those teeth squeezing, eliciting her death's rattle.

Henry stood as tall as his stooped spine would allow. "I am not without friends, you bastard. You shan't persecute us without retaliation."

"Good. You'll make better prey, my dear Henry."

Sheer fury drove Callista's fear away. She took an angry step forward. "If a fight you want, a battle royal you shall have! My name is Raleigh, after all."

Henry tried to pull her back, whispering desperately in her ear, "No. This is exactly what I wanted to avoid."

She didn't even hear him.

That wide chest shook again. "Listen to the little pigeon." His teeth snapped together. "Hmm, I can't wait to see how tender and tasty you are."

His mockery literally made Callista see red. She was tempted to reach for the poker, but his casual stance, arms crossed over that immense torso, didn't fool her. The unexpected. That was the trick, with such as he. Sticking two fingers in her mouth, she gave a long, shrill whistle.

A deep, baying bark answered. A heavy weight pounded up the stairs.

Drake's arms fell, but he didn't bother to lock the door, as she expected. His deep bow had surprising grace for one so large. "I can be polite when it suits me. This is your home, milady. For one more night."

Callista flinched when he strolled toward them, but he only passed on his way to the window. Callista stared. There was no balcony, and they were three floors up. Cerberus was tromping up the corridor now. She whistled again, to guide him.

Drake sat on the broad sill and paused for a last glittering inspection. "For your own sakes, learn, the both of you, that my life has depended upon my intelligence. You shall soon discover that danger has a certain liberating quality. Nothing is more conducive to risk than realizing one has naught to lose."

Cerberus burst through the door, eleven stone of protective fury. He paused, sniffing the air, then growled, baring his formidable fangs. His black ruff stood on end and his ugly mastiff face fixed into an even uglier snarl.

"Get him, boy!" Callista cried.

Cerberus bounded forward, his muscles rippling in the lantern light.

Drake swiveled lithely and dissolved into the night.