

CHAPTER ONE

The dream ... It's always the same.

I see Bryan, my husband, dressed like a medieval knight. He's in a fierce battle, fighting for his life. Monsters, goblins I think, are swarming on him like angry bees. He fights them off with a fury I've never seen in him before. He's swinging two swords—one blade is black as night, the other shines like the sun.

The numbers are too great for him and one of the goblins gets through to him. The creature jumps on his back and stabs him through the heart with a dagger. He screams in agony ... I can feel his pain. He falls to the ground as they continue to beat him down until he disappears in a sea of monsters.

I wake up screaming. It's always the same.

* * *

She coughs—the taste of salt water and sand in her mouth—the waves lapping at her feet. Slowly, she opens her eyes and they begin to adjust to the bright morning light. Her fingers press into the wet sand as she pushes herself upright.

Stephanie Drake finds herself on an empty beach, her clothes soaking wet, her burgundy red hair wet and matted with sand. She stands up, brushing the sand off her clothes, then bends over and runs her fingers through her hair to clean herself off as much as possible.

She looks around the shoreline. Tall trees stretch from end-to-end along a seemingly never-ending beach, leaving only about 50 feet of beach between the forest and the sea. Sheer cliffs rise up behind the thick trees.

“*What beach is this? Where am I?*” she thinks to herself. She was on a boat with her children off the coast of Florida. They were laying a wreath on the spot where her husband, Bryan, was lost at sea.

He was a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy. It was during a Spring Nor’easter, when he saved that young sailor from falling overboard off the flight deck of the aircraft carrier *Enterprise*. Bryan was on the flight deck—helping tie down an aircraft that came loose during the storm—when the ship hit a 60-foot swell. A wave crashed against the carrier and water rushed across the flight deck, knocking the sailors down. As one sailor neared the edge of the deck, Bryan pushed him into the catwalk, saving his life. He was thrown over the side and fell into the roaring ocean.

The swells were too severe to launch a rescue. His body was never recovered.

She wanted to honor the one-year anniversary of his disappearance by chartering a boat from Bermuda to take her family to the spot where—according to the Navy—he went overboard.

It was the dreams, the dreams of him fighting and writhing—in agonizing pain—that drove her to come out to sea.

“*Wait ... the children. Where are my children?*” Stephanie suddenly realizes that her children are missing.

“Ashley? Rose? Hunter? Where are you?” she shouts, her voice hoarse and dry from sand and seawater. She starts looking up and down the beach, her heart beating harder and faster as she frantically searches for her missing children.

In the distance, she spies the boat, wrecked and lying on the beach. She races towards it, her feet sinking in the sand with every step. “... Ashley, Rose, Hunter! Answer me!” she screams louder as her pace quickens with every step.

The boat sits high on the beach with large holes in the hull—holes from the imposing rocks she sees jutting out of the water in the surf. A few of the windows are smashed too. Stephanie hopes and prays that her children are safely inside the wrecked yacht.

Just then, a head pops up from inside the boat. “Mom?” cries her

son Hunter. The 12-year-old boy, scared into thinking he was alone, was hiding inside the boat. His mother's voice is a comforting sound. "Mom!" he screams as he spies her running down the beach. He quickly jumps over the rail and onto the sand. He lands hard—grabbing his glasses so they don't fall off his face—and starts running towards his mother.

Stephanie falls to her knees and wraps her arms around her little boy. She hugs him tightly in her arms—trying to feel every beat of his heart—and grabs him by his face. "Are you alright?" she asks him.

"I'm okay, Mom. I woke up in the boat and everyone was gone." She runs her hands over his body and through his dirty, brown hair, checking for injuries.

"It's okay, Hunter, everything is going to be okay," she tells him, trying to comfort the frightened child. "Have you seen your sisters or Mr. Owens?"

Hunter shakes his head. "No, no one."

"Mom!" a voice comes behind them. Stephanie turns around to see her daughters, Ashley and Rose, walking out of the water and up the beach. The girls are holding onto each other, moving gingerly towards them.

Stephanie takes her son's hand and they run towards the girls. The family falls into each other's arms, hugging tightly. Stephanie cries tears of joy. She hasn't lost any of her children. "Are you girls all right?" she asks, looking over each of them for any injuries.

"We're okay, Mom," Ashley says, her voice wrought with exhaustion. "Rose and I woke up on those rocks," she says pointing to rocks offshore. Twenty-one-year-old Ashley, the oldest of her children, is soaked with salt water, her long strawberry blond hair clinging to her lithe frame.

"We're a little banged up from being thrown around by the waves," Rose tells her mother. "We'll be black and blue all over, I'm sure," she says rubbing her arms. Sixteen-year-old Rose is a younger version of her mother, except for the braces on her teeth and shorter red hair.

"Rose, where are your glasses?" Stephanie asks. She knows Rose

can't see without them.

"I put them in your purse when the storm hit, so they wouldn't get broken," Rose explains to her mother.

"Have either of you seen Mr. Owens?" she asks the girls. "Uh-uh, no," they answer her together.

"Where are we, Mom?" Hunter asks.

"I don't know, sweetheart, maybe Bermuda or the Bahamas," she tells Hunter. "Let's get back to the boat and see if the radio is still working."

Stephanie takes her children by the hand and walks back to the remains of the chartered boat, looking around with every step, hoping to see some signs of the captain or anyone who can help them.

Stephanie climbs up into the boat, and then helps her kids up, one-by-one. The boat is sitting on an angle, so it's hard to keep from slipping on deck. She climbs up the ladder to the helm and reaches for the radio.

Though she doesn't know what to do, Stephanie grabs the microphone and starts turning knobs and pressing buttons. "Hello, can anyone hear me ... mayday, mayday!" she shouts into the microphone, but to no avail. "It's dead. There's no power at all."

"Mom," Rose yells from the lower deck, "I found your purse." Stephanie drops the microphone and rushes over to the ladder and steps down to the lower deck. Rose pulls her glasses from Stephanie's purse and then hands it to her mother. Stephanie rummages through her purse until she finds her cell phone.

She flips it open and starts dialing, but it's dead too.

"That's impossible, I charged it just before we left home," she says. "What about yours, Ashley?"

Ashley takes her cell phone out of her own purse. "Sorry Mom, mine's dead, too."

"So's my iPod," Rose says, showing her MP3 player, "and Hunter's video game."

"What? Did you leave it turned on?"

"Uh-uh," Hunter tells his mother. "I put it away before the storm hit. It just won't work."

“Hello!” they hear from down the beach, a faint voice calling to them. They start looking around and see Captain Gerald Owens, limping down the beach, waving at them. Happy to see him alive, they all yell back and wave to him.

Captain Owens chartered his boat for what he thought was a one-day trip from Bermuda to where the U.S. Navy said Mrs. Drake’s husband went overboard. Though he doesn’t recognize the beach he’s on, Gerald is just happy to be alive after that storm.

What happens next, though, he never expected.

A hulking beast with greenish-gray skin bursts out from the woods and onto the beach. The monstrous hulk stands over ten-feet tall, wears rags around its waist and carries a wooden club the size of a small tree trunk. Its face is small on its head, except for its huge mouth and oversized, canine-like teeth. A little tuft of hair sticks out from the top of his head.

The creature swings at Gerald. The blow from the massive club rips him in half—his upper torso flies over a hundred yards into the ocean. His lower torso falls at the water’s edge.

Stephanie and the children scream in terror at the monstrous beast and how he killed Captain Owens. The creature sees them and growls, rushing towards the boat. Stephanie grabs her kids and pulls them inside the boat, hoping to hide from the monster.

They cower inside towards the bow of the boat, crouched low to the floor. Stephanie holds her children close to her.

“Sh-h-h, you need to be quiet,” she whispers. They’re crying and scared. So is she, but she can’t show them.

Without warning, the top of the boat is ripped off by the beast, which has now been joined by second one. They scream, but to no avail. The monsters reach in and grab them—one by one—pulling the kids from their mother’s grasp. She is the last to be pulled from the remains of the boat.

The creature holds Stephanie up by her arms while the other corrals the children next to the broken hull. The beast stares at her. Its breath is foul, like rotting garbage; its teeth sharp, yellow and stained; its lips are

covered in drool which drips from the corner of its mouth. The monster pulls her close and smells her all over. Stephanie closes her eyes and turns away, repulsed by the ravenous beast.

“Take it easy with her, you dim-witted troll,” a voice yells from afar.

Stephanie opens her eyes to see a man on a black horse ride up, accompanied by another one of those monsters. The man is short, only five-feet tall, dressed in black leather—almost like armor—wrapped in a cloak made of green silk and lined with peacock feathers. His black hair is dirty and spiked. His face is pot-marked and covered by various metal piercings on his nose and ears. What looks like a sword and dagger hang from the belt at his waist.

“You twits are going to lose me a lot of money,” he yells at them. “She ain’t worth anything dead.”

The trolls drop their heads, as if ashamed of themselves. “Sorry, Master Biscane,” the troll holding Stephanie says. “She smells like an Outlander.” The troll drops Stephanie next to her children. The kids grab her and hold tightly and Stephanie holds them back, scared and confused.

“Of course she’s an Outlander, you idiot,” he yells at the troll. “But we’re looking for a particular one. You better hope that she’s it, or you’ll be back in Blackbriar Forest waiting for your next meal to wander by.”

“Bring her here,” Biscane tells the troll. The hulking beast grabs Stephanie, twisting her arm as it drags her over to Biscane. The children reach out to help her, but are pushed back by the other troll, snarling at them.

“Shut up, meat!” the beast yells. The children quickly quiet down, holding onto each other tightly.

Biscane grabs Stephanie by the face, moving it from side to side to get a good look at her. She spits at him, her eyes angry as well as confused. Biscane wipes off the spittle and slaps her hard across the face.

“Bitch,” he screams, wiping the spit from his face on the troll’s chest. “You better watch your manners or you’re gonna find yourself in a world of hurt. You may be wanted alive, but that doesn’t mean I can’t feed your legs to Og here,” Biscane says, motioning to the troll next to

him. The troll smiles, thinking of the tasty meal that awaits it.

Biscane pulls a rolled up piece of parchment paper from his belt, opens it and compares the image on the paper to Stephanie. “Yep, payday boys, it’s her all right,” Biscane says happily as he rolls the paper up and tucks it back in his belt. The trolls laugh with glee, deep and heartily.

Biscane grabs Stephanie by the hair and pulls her away from the troll, dragging her towards his horse.

“What about them?” one of the trolls asks Biscane, pointing towards the three children. Biscane looks over at the children.

“They’re not on the bounty. Kill them—eat them if you want—just don’t leave anything behind.”

“No!” Stephanie screams, struggling against Biscane’s hold on her, reaching out to save her children. They scream in terror, backing up against the boat as the troll reaches towards them, chuckling and licking his lips with the thought of a juicy meal of fresh meat.

But then, he stops dead in his tracks and looks down at his chest. A black blade slices through him from behind. Dark black-red blood trickles down from the wound. The troll drops his club as his body begins shaking uncontrollably. The monster begins to shrink and shrivel to dust and bones—as if consumed by an unnatural force—until what remains of the troll falls into the sand and sea.

The dust settles and now, standing where the troll once stood, a mysterious stranger has appeared. A metal sheath hides his face, his head hooded and hidden by a flowing grey cloak. Only his blue eyes pierce through the shadows under the hood. His body is armored in chain mail. He wields two swords—one black and one gold—each hilt adorned with dragons clutching the blades in their claws. At the bottom of each hilt, the dragon’s tail curls around crystals resembling the moon. On his chest, a coat of arms—a dragon holding the moon coiled in its tail—is proudly worn. The same image rests on a silver pendant, hanging from a heavy silver chain around his neck.

He turns to face Biscane and the other trolls. Biscane looks in horror and speaks just one name, “Gil-Gamesh.”

He looks over at the two remaining trolls, gawking at the stranger in awe and fear. “Well, what are you slobs waiting for, kill him!” Biscane shouts. The trolls, though afraid and unsure, raise their weapons and rush to attack.

The stranger takes a fighting stance, stepping between the hulking beasts and the children. “Take cover behind the boat,” he tells them, his voice commanding, ringing with a metallic sound from the mask.

Ashley grabs her brother and sister and quickly pulls them to the back of the boat. They peek over the top rail and watch the ensuing battle before them.

The troll swings wildly at the Gil-Gamesh who reacts quickly, rolling under the swinging club and slashing the troll in his Achilles tendon, across the back of his leg. The troll falls in pain, dropping his club and grabbing his wounded leg.

The Gil-Gamesh moves to one knee and thrusts his sword in the troll’s forehead, quickly silencing the beast. He then takes his free hand and places it on the sand and looks at the last troll, charging towards him.

“*Terrenus!*” he shouts. The sand swirls beneath his fingers—as if alive—and a dragon-like serpent made of sand rises from the ground and wraps itself around the charging troll, stopping it in his tracks. Without warning, the sand serpent pulls the troll underground—deep within the sandy beach—swallowing the creature whole.

The Gil-Gamesh reaches back and pulls his blade from the dead troll’s skull and faces Biscane, raising his sword towards him. Biscane struggles to keep Stephanie in his grasp as she wrestles to get away from him. Finally, he draws his dagger and places it across her throat. Stephanie stops resisting, sobbing as the steel blade drags across her skin.

“All right now, you keep back,” Biscane exclaims, “or I’m gonna cut her throat, right here and now.”

The Gil-Gamesh doesn’t move, keeping his sword raised and pointed at Biscane. “Biscuit,” he calls him mockingly, “if you hurt her in any way, you’ll be dead before a single drop of her blood hits the ground.”

His voice—grim and serious—makes Biscane’s wicked smile turn

to sheer terror. “Now, wait a minute, Gil-Gamesh, let’s make a deal here, all right?” he stutters, fear trembling his lips.

The Gil-Gamesh slowly lowers his sword. “Okay Biscuit, here’s the deal ... you let her go and I let you leave this beach alive. You have ten seconds to decide.”

Biscane has a look of utter disbelief. “Now hold on there, what kind of deal is that?”

“Ten ...” Gil-Gamesh starts to count. “... nine, eight, seven ...”

“Gimme a chance to think here,” Biscane pleads with him.

The Gil-Gamesh continues to count. “... six, five, four ...” He raises his swords again towards Biscane.

“Stop, wait, just one second,” Biscane sputters his plea for help, but Gil-Gamesh just counts and readies himself to strike.

“... Three, two, one ...”

“All right, all right, you got a deal!” he shouts, just in the nick of time. The Gil-Gamesh backs down, but keeps his sword raised, just in case.

“Release her, now!”

Biscane takes his hand off her hair and slowly takes the dagger off her neck. Stephanie moves away from him as fast as possible, rushing next to the stranger who saved her.

Gil-Gamesh doesn’t look at her, keeping both eyes on Biscane. “Go to the children, quickly,” he tells her, softly but assuring. She looks at him, staring into his eyes. She sees something familiar—his eyes, those swords, as if from a dream—but sets it aside when her children call for her.

“Mom, Mommy!” they all shout together, urging her to come to them. Stephanie runs as quickly as she can, grabbing her kids and holding them tightly in her arms, washing away the fear that she almost lost them. She turns back to see what fate awaits her captor.

Biscane stands by his horse, his hands still raised. “Now, we had a deal, Gil-Gamesh, you gave me your word,” he stutters, still terrified. The Gil-Gamesh stands his ground, continuing to stare down Biscane.

“I want the bounty sheet, Biscuit. Give it to me,” he demands.

“Do you have to call me Biscuit?” the frightened man whines.

“Now!” Gil-Gamesh shouts.

Biscane quickly reaches into his belt and pulls out the parchment, tossing it at Gil-Gamesh’s feet.

Gil-Gamesh still does not move. “Now, get out of here before I change my mind ... Biscuit.”

Not even waiting to sheath his dagger, Biscane jumps on his horse and rides off, looking back every now and then to ensure his safety. Thinking he is safe, he pushes his horse on and rides off the beach and into the trees.

Gil-Gamesh sheaths his swords and picks up the parchment, tucking it into his own belt. Quickly, he flips his cloak off his shoulder, revealing a bow and a quiver of arrows slung across his back. The bow is wood inlaid with metal. The bowstring shimmers in the sunlight.

He pulls off the bow and draws an arrow. Stephanie slowly walks towards him from behind, wondering what he is about to do. “What are you doing?” she asks. “I thought you gave your word to let him go?”

He ignores her, notching an arrow in the string and drawing it back, taking aim down the beach towards a cliff that rises up from the trees. “I said he would leave the beach alive,” he quietly answers her, never taking his eye off the target.

“I never said anything about after that.”

Above the distant tree line, Biscane appears, riding up a narrow path along the cliff. It is well over a half-a-mile away. “He’ll never hit him from this far,” Rose whispers. The Gil-Gamesh smiles slyly underneath the mask.

He fires the arrow, sending it singing through the air. Suddenly, Biscane falls off his horse—dead before he hits the ground—the arrow placed perfectly in his back, straight through the heart.

The Gil-Gamesh says nothing, slinging his bow back over his shoulder as he turns and walks towards the fallen troll. Stephanie and the children stand in awe of an unbelievable shot.

“Wow, that was so cool,” Hunter yells. “How did you do that?”

Gil-Gamesh ignores the boy’s question. He takes out a large over-

sized glove from inside his cloak. The grey glove looks like it is made of stone. He places it over the leather glove on his right hand, reaches down and touches the troll on the head with a single finger.

"Cinefactus!" he shouts. The dead troll's body turns stone grey then crumbles into dust, blowing away across the sand and into the sea.

He takes off the glove and tucks it back into his cloak. He turns towards the damaged boat, seemingly assessing how to get rid of it. He looks over the boat—fore and aft—and looks at Stephanie and the children.

"Step back from the boat," he tells them, motioning to move up the beach and away from the water.

The Gil-Gamesh reaches back into his cloak again and pulls out a small glass vial of a clear blue liquid. Pulling off the cork, he wades into the water until he's knee deep and pours the liquid into the churning water.

"Aquaticus!" he chants, his eyes closed as he concentrates on the magic spell he's casting. As the words echo into the wind, the water stirs and swirls around him. The sea erupts like a geyser, forming a column of rushing liquid around him and into the air. It takes shape in the form of a watery dragon. The beast roars, startling the family as they watch in utter disbelief.

The Gil-Gamesh raises his hand in the air, and the dragon follows his motions, turning towards the boat. The creature grabs remains of the boat with its watery jaws. The wrecked craft creaks and moans under the bite of the dragon as he lifts it up out of the sand and throws it hundreds of feet away, crashing into the sea.

In a single motion, the Gil-Gamesh points into the air and the watery dragon rushes up into the sky and then plunges into the boat, sinking it into the water and beneath the waves.

The Gil-Gamesh opens his eyes and takes a deep breath. The spell has taken a lot out of him, but he knows he cannot stop now. He tucks the vial back inside his cloak and walks towards Stephanie and the children.

"We need get moving and get you somewhere safe, before more

bounty hunters come looking for you,” he says walking past them and down the beach. “Everyone, follow me.”

“No!” Stephanie shouts. “We aren’t going anywhere with you until you tell me who you are, what’s going on here and where the Hell we are, because this certainly ain’t Bermuda!”

“I mean, I appreciate you saving my life and my children’s lives, but we’re not going anywhere with you until I get some answers.”

The Gil-Gamesh stops in his tracks. He shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head and sighs. “You’re still as stubborn as I remember.” He turns around and stares straight at her. “And still as beautiful too.”

Stephanie is stunned by what he says to her. Puzzled, she looks at him—his words are very confusing to her. She pulls her children in close, as if to protect them. “What? What do you mean? Who are you?”

The Gil-Gamesh reaches up and pulls his metal faceplate off his face and drops it to the ground. He pulls the hood of his cloak down, revealing long brown hair, peppered with streaks of gray at his temples.

His face is older since the last time they saw it. He has a beard now, streaks of gray running through it like his hair. It covers a face they remember as clean-shaven. In his eyes, they see something familiar. There is a look of pride ... one of caring and love.

Stephanie sees her husband, Bryan Drake. The children see their father, and he is alive. The shock is overwhelming, but the joy is even greater.

“Daddy!” the children shout in unison, running over to him. He kneels down and reaches out—hugging his children tightly—feeling a warmth and a love he thought he’d lost. He holds them in his arms, his grip tighter and stronger than they remember.

“I’d never thought I’d see these wonderful faces again for as long as I live,” he says as tears well up in his eyes.

Hunter holds his father’s face in his hands, pulling it so Bryan will look right at him. “What happened to you Daddy?” he asks.

“Yeah, when’d you get all medieval?” Rose chimes in.

“You’ve got that 80’s rocker look with your hair, Dad. It’s so retro,” Ashley adds, stroking her father’s hair.

Bryan just smiles and laughs. “Well, it’s a long story.”

He stops and looks past the children, over at Stephanie. She is staring at him and wondering whether what she sees is real or just an illusion. Bryan lets go of his children, stands and walks over to her. He takes off one of his gloves, reaches out and touches her face.

“Still as beautiful as in my dreams,” he tells her, sweetly and sincerely. She reaches up and touches his hand, and looks to see the wedding band on his finger—the one she put there over 21 years ago.

“Bryan, is it really you?”

He pulls her close and kisses her. She’s hesitant but melts in his arms when she realizes it’s really him. Stephanie wraps her arms around him and returns the kiss, reigniting the passion and love she thought was lost.

He releases her, still looking into her eyes. They’re both crying, tears running down their cheeks. “I can’t tell you how much I’ve missed waking up to this face.”

She smiles at hearing that. “No, I look terrible,” she says, wiping the tears from her eyes. Then, reality sinks back in and a thousand questions come to mind.

She pushes off of him and gets very serious, very fast. “Bryan, what’s going on? Where are we and why are you dressed like this?” she demands.

The kids then chime in with their questions. “What were those creatures? Were they really trolls?” Ashley asks.

“How did you make that dragon appear? Are you a wizard or something?” Rose asks.

“Those swords are so wicked . . . can I see them?” Hunter breaks in.

Bryan puts his hands up to quiet them down, “Sh-h-h . . . all right, listen to me,” he says to them. “I know you have a lot of questions, but right now, I need to get you somewhere safe.”

Stephanie tries to interject, but Bryan interrupts her. “Listen to me, Stef. There are more hunters like Biscuit out there looking for you,” he says, calling her by that familiar nickname he always called her. “And I can’t protect you out in the open like this.”

He walks down the beach in the direction he was heading before. "There's a lighthouse about five miles down the beach," he says pointing the way. "You'll be safe there, and I promise, once we get there I'll answer all your questions."

Stephanie looks at Bryan, not sure whether to believe him or not. "Please Stef, you have to trust me. This is not the time or the place to sit down and talk. We need to get moving ... now!"

She sees the honesty in his eyes and senses the danger he mentioned as being very real. She does not want to endanger her children, so she has no choice.

"Okay, tell us what to do."

"All right, kids ... stay together and walk single file along the shoreline, that way the waves will cover your tracks. Ashley, you take the lead, then Rose, Hunter and you, Stephanie."

The kids walk down towards the water and then turn and walk down the beach. Bryan picks up his faceplate and tucks it inside his cloak. When he gets down by the water, he stops, turns back to where the battle took place and places his bare hand on the ground.

"Exsculpo!" he chants. The sand shakes as if being sifted. The same sand serpent appears from beneath the ground and moves along the sandy beach, erasing their footprints and other imprints, leaving it pristine. He turns and catches up to his family, allowing the waves to wash away their tracks as they begin the long trek down the beach.