

CHAPTER ONE

Dragon's breath billowed across the peaks of Feldall Forest, waves of green flame bursting into tongues of orange and red as it caught the trees in its path. The creature swooped, serrated wings chopping down the blazing tree-tops to spread the flames along the forest floor. Its scream shook the earth and set the horses to panic, but the three riders held their position along the edge of the tree line.

Lady Jasmine of Feldall cursed as her black Friesen, Nalen, reared, and she struggled to stay in her seat. Tendrils of dark brown hair fluttered in her face and she puffed out a breath to clear her vision. This dragon had plagued their lands for months, terrorizing the skies as well as their cattle—what little remained of the herds after a three month drought. Whatever fate had brought the beast out to play while she, Jayden, and Corey were cleaning up the damage he'd done, this was the closest they'd come to ridding themselves of at least one plight. If only Corey would take the shot.

“Are you waiting until he gets bored and decides to take a nap?” she asked.

Built like a solid building, with thick arms and a mean swing, her former lover was made for action, not for waiting. His stoic observation aggravated her.

“Arrows won't help unless we can figure out where to aim them,” he replied. His own mount, a gorgeous white stallion named Corsa, shimmied slightly to the left and Corey tightened his grip on the reins.

Jasmine released another puff of air and let her arguments drop. In the half-dozen times they'd faced the dragon, after all the men who'd tried to drop him and failed—died—they had never found one chink in his armor. But reality fought with Jasmine's desperation as the dragon cracked open its scaled jaws and let out a bone-piercing shriek. It wouldn't be long before he entered her range. She reached over her shoulder and pulled an arrow free, setting it snugly in her bow. She wouldn't have much time, so she had to make her one shot count.

“He's coming in again,” Corey called out.

“Jayden, to your left!” cried Jasmine.

Her brother turned his sorrel towards the swooping creature and balanced a silver-tipped spear in his palm.

“Let him come.”

His eyes narrowed in focus. Between Jayden's legs, Cormac pawed at the ground, ready to flee if his rider released his hold.

Above their heads, a twenty-foot wingspan stretched out, and another wave of flame consumed the trees.

“What do you figure, Corey?” Jayden asked, throwing the question over his left shoulder.

“Forty paces.” Corey stretched his arm in front of his eyes to shield against the glare of

fire.

Jayden shifted in his saddle and readied his spear. To his right, Jasmine raised her bow and tracked her aim against the movements of the dragon. The three of them had faced worse foes and won. They were the heroes of Andvell, protectors of the city. Together, they could not fail. They *would* not fail. House Feldall would be safe.

Jasmine saw her brother's lips move as he cursed under his breath. As the flying colossus drew closer, he hurled the enchanted spear—the gift from Andvell's queen for services rendered—and watched with vengeful glee as the silver tip soared towards the scaled breast. Satisfaction wilted into horror as the spear glinted off the iridescent armour and snapped clean in two, the pieces disappearing, useless, into the devouring flames.

The dragon circled over their heads and Jasmine dropped to the right to stay clear of the razor-sharp wings, feet tight in the stirrups to keep her balance. Nalen bolted with the shift in her weight and Jasmine scrambled to regain control, righting herself and pulling sharply to the left. Trusting to the instinct of twenty years' training, she readied her bow once more and loosed the arrow. Smoke oozed from the dragon's nostrils as he snorted and in the gust of dragon's breath, her aim misaligned and missed its mark. Under the force of dry heat, her bow warped and snapped, splinters cutting into her hands.

“Bastard,” Jasmine hissed, throwing the pieces aside.

The fire from the woods crept outwards, sweeping over the drought-dead grass, closer to the fields where they made their stand. Jasmine edged Nalen back, closer to her brother.

“Jayden, we need to get out of here. We can't win this!”

“We're not going anywhere.” He released his sword from its scabbard. “Not this time.”

Horrified, Jasmine turned to Corey. She hoped to make him see reason, but he had already aimed his crossbow and focused down the sight.

He cast a quick determined glance her way. “I can do this.”

The beast let out another ear-splitting cry and dipped his left wing down, slicing off the tops of the trees, casting sparks, and they could see nothing but smoke spilling towards them.

“Looks like we've pissed him off,” Jayden grinned. “Don't like pointed sticks, beast?”

The dragon screamed as if in reply and Cormac snorted, shimmied, and Jasmine could see the horse's wildly rolling eyes. For all Jayden's boasts about being Feldall's best rider, he was about to lose his seat.

“Now, Corey!” she ordered.

But as the dragon reared back in the sky and stared down on them, she knew it was too late. Frozen with terror, she could only watch as he opened his jaws to release another fiery breath.

Jeff Powell sat back in his chair. He stretched his fingers over his head to a satisfying, knuckle-cracking length and then dropped his hands over his mop of brown hair and pressed them into his dark-circled eyes. Six hours. A marathon sprint into his new novel.

He glanced at his previous book covers, pinned up next to his desk as motivation. The

Feldall Saga had ranked him high on the Sci-Fi & Fantasy best-sellers lists since book one, *Andalla's Chant. Evensong*, book four, would be his best yet. He could feel it, that writer's innate sense of everything falling into place.

He stood up and headed for what barely amounted to a kitchen in his overcrowded bachelor apartment. The clock over the stove flashed seven fifty-three. Morning, he guessed from the heaviness in his eyes and the hint of cold winter sunlight coursing in through the curtains.

He grabbed a beer from the fridge and, bottle in hand, returned to his desk to re-read the night's work, too excited to let it sit until tomorrow. For six months his fans had been after him to start the next Feldall novel and he'd kept putting it off, stuck on a stupid plot point and chomping at the bit to start a new project with new characters.

Because of the shiny new story awaiting him at the end of *Evensong*, Jeff couldn't get connected to the Feldall crew this time around. The story felt flat, the characters flatter, and only by throwing in lots of high-tension action scenes and over-arching issues, like the drought, could he move the story forward. He knew the plot would be fantastic when fixed, but for now if he could only get it done.

A muffled telephone ring broke his concentration and he reached for the cordless hidden under the bed pillows. A quick look at the caller ID, another swig of beer, and he answered.

"Ten minutes earlier, you could've ruined something incredible."

"I know you too well to think you have company," the voice on the line replied.

Jeff grinned and leaned back in his chair. Deceptively quiet, Lisa Tellier was a pitbull in the publishing arena and had been his agent since the first book, five years ago.

"Calling to check on my progress, or do you have news?" he asked.

"A bit of both, but mostly the first. I have a meeting with your publisher this afternoon and I want to be able to tell them *Evensong* is coming along in record-breaking time."

"Assure away," he said. "I've had a breakthrough. Just finished an all-nighter and facing another one if I catch a snooze soon. There's so much genius in this apartment right now, people walking by are inspired."

Lisa chuckled. "I'll settle for decent as long as it's moving. I deal with enough 'genius' in my life, thanks."

"You'll be happy. The Brady-Corey-Jasmine triangle? Let's just say wedding bells will be ringing."

He imagined Lisa's eyebrows shooting up. "You finally made a decision?"

Jeff made a noncommittal noise. "What do I know about love? Closest relationship I have with a woman is with you, and it's about as romantic as taking my car in for a tune-up."

"You don't have a car."

"You see my point. That's why I let the readers decide this one, and the resounding majority preferred Brady's sensitivity over Corey's brazenness."

"At least you can move on with it. About damned time."

"I said you'd be happy."

"I'll check in after the meeting. You're on lockdown until this draft is done."

"Yes, ma'am." Jeff saluted the air. "But I'm sending you the take-out receipts."

"Whatever it takes. But easy on the sodium, all right? You have that photo-shoot next week."

Lisa clicked off and Jeff returned his attention to the laptop screen. The next chapter would be a difficult one to write—and probably even harder for Jayden fans to read. Unfortunate that his male lead wouldn't survive the run-in with the dragon, but this book called for major sacrifices. Lisa had demanded greater emotion and he intended to deliver.

But he wasn't ready to write that scene, yet. It took planning to kill off a main character. It had to live up to Jayden's heroism—and his ego. It also had to satisfy the readers. Very tricky.

Jeff opened another blank document in his word processor and started to note down ideas.

Succumbs to burns—slow, but gives time for goodbye with Jasmine.

Promise to watch the House.

Dragon not dead, would die unsatisfied. Even in agony with burns, goes out to try his luck one more time and dies in second fight?

Injuries how serious?

He switched from his notes to the Internet browser, entered 'burn injuries' in the search engine and forty-five minutes later, had seen enough images to give him a very detailed idea of Jayden's wounds. And earn himself a queasy stomach.

Hushed voices migrated through the walls into the room, and flitted around his head like flies. Jeff cast an infuriated stare to the far wall.

Already?

His neighbour, Mr MacGregor, had a bad habit of cranking up what sounded like twenty theatre-quality speakers to watch the nightly news, but apparently today he felt like some day-time television as well.

The volume rose. Two women talking, a man arguing—the words indistinct, but the tone urgent. The voices sounded as if they hung on the air and came from an unseen source within his own apartment and not from next door. If Jeff owned a television, he would consider getting good speakers like that. Teach MacGregor something about aggravating one's neighbours.

It was difficult to work when other people's characters barged their way into his head. He kept saying he would go to the property manager and complain, but the fear of making things worse kept him quiet.

He plugged his fingers into his ears and squeezed his eyes shut for a momentary reprieve, but the voices followed him.

Between the distraction and his exhaustion, Jeff knew he would achieve nothing if he kept going. He either had to either get caffeinated or fall into a heap on the floor under his desk. With a yawn, he threw on his favourite black and red-checked shirt, stuffed his wallet in his pocket, and grabbed his coat before heading out the door.

From the hallway, the television didn't sound nearly as obnoxious, an evil twist of fate

that MacGregor had chosen the adjoining wall to set up his sound system, leaving the rest of the floor in relative peace.

For a moment Jeff was tempted to knock on the door and ask him to turn it down, but MacGregor wasn't known for his kind, understanding temper. He let the issue drop for now and headed towards the elevator, hoping the man's show would be finished by the time Jeff returned with his breakfast so he could get back to work. Although coffee was a good excuse for a break.

Feeling great about his morning's work—and more than a little sleep-deprived—Jeff whistled a few tuneless notes as he jaywalked across the street. He pushed through the doors and felt himself grinning like a mad fool.

When *Le Coin du Café* coffee shop opened across from his apartment building three years ago, Jeff hailed it as a godsend, believing his creativity increased in proportion to how much caffeine he consumed. Since then, he'd become a daily patron, and over time the coffee had become a secondary lure.

The beautiful ponytailed barista behind the counter—all blue eyes and dimpled cheeks—smiled back at him.

"My favourite author," Cassie Murphy said, the same way she greeted him every day.

"Hi ... you," he managed, aiming for suave and suffering the crash and burn into awkward. He cleared his throat and scrambled to ask her something personal. Reaching for what he knew about her other than coffee, he remembered something about McGill and Social Work. "How are classes?"

Cassie stuck out her tongue in distaste. "Term just started and I'm already looking forward to the break. I knew post-grad would be tricky but, well, let's just say it's a good thing I get unlimited free coffee. How about you? What's the story de jour?"

"Dragon fight," he replied, and then got stuck. On paper, he was a regular Don Juan; in person, this woman made his words twist around and trip on each other.

Cassie stared at him expectantly, but Jeff's thoughts had shrivelled up and he could find nothing else to say. Giving himself a mental kick, he slid a ten-dollar bill across the counter.

Amusement danced behind her smile as she poured his coffee and added his usual two milk, two sugars.

"Sounds like a tough one. You'll have to tell me all about it some time."

The opportunity right in front of him, Jeff struggled to open his mouth and say *Why not tonight? Let's do dinner*. Simple, easy, a natural next step. But once again his courage failed, and all he could do was shift his feet and hastily search for his words.

"Not sure which is worse," he said. "The dragon, or my fire-breathing neighbour."

He thought he saw a flash of disappointment, but a moment later Cassie was focused on wrapping up his sandwich.

"Still causing grief, is he?" she asked with a sympathetic grimace.

"I swear he lives to make my life hell. Do you know, last night he kept his TV on until one in the morning? And then again today. It's amazing I get any work done with all these muffled voices floating around."

"Bang on the wall until he shuts up?"

Jeff sniffed. "More than likely he'd march right over, break down the door and bite off my head. He's the nastiest man I know."

Wanting to quit before he said anything really stupid, he flashed his brightest smile, picked up his breakfast sandwich in one hand, and his coffee in the other. "Keep the change."

He walked out of the shop with his regular feelings of elation and regret. Her smile always set his day on the right path, but shame of his own fear countered the feel-good effects. One of these days he'd ask her out, but right now he had an excuse to put it off.

The novel was all that mattered.

Jeff returned to his desk, having cast a warning glare at MacGregor's door as he passed, and stared at his notes on the screen, scarfing down his breakfast. The sandwich was hot, the coffee hotter, and thirty seconds later he was wide awake and eager to get started again.

He leaned back in his chair and patted his stomach. Lisa was right. These writing lock-downs were great for the work, but crummy for the waist. When he finished this book, he'd head back to the gym. Personal trainer and everything.

When he was done.

Until then, he had an enchantress with a bug up her dress about the drought, and a villain who needed some fleshing out.

Fingers on keyboard, Jeff lost himself once more in the rhythm of the story, laughing at his own jokes, full of admiration for a set of strong and witty characters. He ran through three full scenes, all skirting the inevitable torched-by-dragon-fire bit, before the coffee ran out.

The clock beside his laptop chirped, and he looked up to see eleven o'clock a.m. staring back at him. Nine hours he'd been working. He rubbed his eyes and rolled through the pros and cons of continuing. Another coffee or beer could probably keep him going for a few more hours, but then he'd be next to useless for the afternoon. Maybe better to call it quits for now and rejuvenate his mind with a nap.

A jaw-cracking yawn made up his mind. He flicked the switch on the alarm, and flicked another switch to turn off the desk lamp. Sunlight and the sounds of rush-hour traffic pushed through his open window, but in downtown Montreal, day or night, there was traffic, and the streetlights kept the whole apartment lit. Impossible to ever have silence or darkness, he had learned not to notice.

Tripping on the edge of his bed, Jeff faceplanted on the stretch of bright blue comforter. With a bleary mind, he debated getting back up to brush his teeth and get changed, but it sounded like a lot of effort for just a couple of hours. Rolling himself the rest of the way onto the bed, he pulled up the comforter and stared at the ceiling, watching the moving patterns of headlights as they went down the street.

Feldall floated through his thoughts. He had finished with the story for now, but clearly the story had not yet finished with him. Jasmine kept coming to mind. She would be heartbroken at her brother's death, and also seriously pissed off. Twins, they'd been inseparable since birth, choosing for the last five years to work together to protect and govern their House instead of

settling down to have families of their own.

Scenarios ran through his head at how Jasmine would react. Would she run weeping from the room, or swear vengeance against the dragon and go after it herself? A nagging voice in Jeff's head told him she shouldn't react at all, because Jayden shouldn't die, but he pushed the thought away. He had his story outlined from start to finish—every scene, every twist. Nothing would be left to chance on this one, and he refused to have doubts. He didn't have time to make changes.

A sharp itch on his arm roused him from drowsiness and his hand automatically jerked up to scratch it.

He knew this installment of the Feldall Saga would be the grand finale. Without Jayden there wouldn't be much point. How long could he write an entertaining series about a warrior maiden and her scholar husband? No, Jasmine and Corey would work together to finish off Raul—the evil sorcerer, still vague in his mind, trying to take over their country—and that would be the end. His characters would live as happily ever after as the ending allowed, and he would be free to move onto something new.

The decision came as a relief. After five years devoting himself to one group of people, he had to admit he was bored.

Another itch shot up his leg and his knee twitched in response.

Grunting, he rolled over onto his side and pulled his pillow over his head. He just had to focus on getting to sleep.

But there came MacGregor's blasted television again. The muffled rumble of a woman's voice filtered through his pillow and worked into his head until he couldn't drown it out. Tomorrow he would complain to the property manager. This time he swore he would.

His fingers tingled, the sensation spreading down his arms and from his feet up his legs. From tingly to light, almost floaty, he held onto his pillow and allowed sleepiness to wash him away.

He dreamed of flying.

No, not flying—falling. Free-falling until his stomach climbed up in his throat. He squinted his eyes open and the view sped past him in a blur of blue, white and black, with no orientation and no ability to stop. He couldn't tell if he moved, or if he was still and only the light spun. He tried to slow down, change direction, but some unseen force propelled him through the twisting spirals of light.

His heart raced, fear clutching his chest as the tunnel grew longer. Trapped and out of control, he had nothing to do but brace himself for the inevitable landing.

Jeff opened his eyes and blinked a few times to clear the crustiness before closing them once more against the light. He expected to find the room still spinning, an after-effect of his dream, and was grateful to find everything settled in its place.

The strange dream and restless sleep had not refreshed him, and for a minute he debated taking another hour before getting back to work. But his characters called and he had to get this

draft done.

Grunting, he swung his arm out to switch off the alarm, wanting to avoid the infuriating buzzer. His hand hit nothing but air. Sliding a few inches over in his bed, he tried again. Still no desk within reach.

Very weird. The first lesson any person with an alarm clock learned was where to find the snooze button. In the absence of the trilling alarm, his ears pricked to the silence of the room, and his hearted jostled uncomfortably in his chest. Instead of laundry detergent, he caught a whiff of dampness, like the air before it rained. Beneath him, his pillowtop mattress felt firm and lumpy, the sheets coarse on his skin. The remnants of some vivid dream he could hardly remember. Had to be. The alarm clock was just a bit farther away. He reached out again, shivered as a cool draft tickled his bare arms, but still no success. Squinting one eye open, he found no desk in sight. Only an empty stone wall.

Warning bells went off in his sleep-addled brain. He rolled over onto his back and took in his surroundings. It took three passes over the walls and furniture before he accepted that he had no idea where he was.