

CHAPTER ONE

Rayne woke screaming.

Gasping for breath, heart drumming.

She'd been burning. Fire had caught hold of her, seized her hands, danced with her. Her hair had flared like a tree hit by lightning. Pain had possessed her.

And standing in front of her, laughing, St John, the boy she'd thought was in love with her . . .

She let out a long *hooo* of breath, got out of bed, padded over in the dark silence to the tiny kitchen, and put the kettle on.

Don't you start all this, she told herself. Don't you start with the nightmares now. It's over. It was over a week ago, when you burned out the dungeon. St John's gone. He can't hurt you now.

She made a mug of tea, took it back to bed with her, and propped herself up on one elbow, sipping it. A fox's harsh cry broke the silence but it didn't add to her fear; she liked the sound.

Ten short weeks ago, she thought, I was living on Cramp-hurst Estate, going claustrophobic and mad hearing the fights and the TVs and the sirens, and now I'm here, in this wild wood. . . .

It was unbelievable to her. When she'd arrived at the ancient mansion house of Morton's Keep she'd had no idea what was waiting for her. There'd been warnings, of

course—Becky, who worked in the tearoom with her, going on about the Keep’s gory history and its ghosts. Mrs. Driver, the elderly housekeeper, warning her to always lock her door at night. Patience, the mad old woman at the Green Lady inn, with her singsong predictions of danger. And then . . . she’d been caught up with St John and his friends. From the moment she’d accessed their weird Hidden History website, they’d tracked her, trapped her, and she’d mistaken it for friendship. She’d mistaken it for love. They were glamorous, seductive, and St John was irresistible. *Beauty is Cruel, Cruelty is Beautiful*. . . .

She put down her mug, pulled the duvet over her head. She was remembering how it had all finished. In her head she was back in the dungeon again.

She saw the black candles cast their lurid light on the low brick ceiling; she felt the smothering miasma of fear and evil. She heard Flora taunting her, saw Abigail terrified and bleeding, and Marcus and Petra like automatons, obeying St John. People she’d thought were her friends, the boy she’d thought was in love with her . . . she’d just been their key to Morton’s Keep. St John’s face was gloating, triumphant, as he goaded her for falling for him, for liking his vampire kisses. She heard him claim ancestry with the sadistic Sir Simeon Lingwall, claiming the house and its ancient, dark power for himself. . . .

She rolled herself tighter in her duvet, willed herself to see Ethan appearing, hurling the flaming torch, launching himself at St John, and knocking him out cold as the ravenous fire took hold. . . .

Fire. She saw fire scorching through the dungeon, and felt calmer imagining its heat. Her nightmare was wrong. There was safety in fire. Ethan was with the fire festival men and he'd told her they were watchers over Morton's Keep, and somehow their fires kept it safe. Although no one was clear what was myth, what was real, it was all shrouded in a thousand years of uncertainty. . . .

It's over, she told herself. Whatever it all meant, what was real, what was unreal—it's finished. *I'm safe.*

But she couldn't get back to sleep.

Dawn was breaking as Rayne, her short coat over her pajamas and her wellies pulled on her bare feet, walked out into the medieval garden. She locked the Old Sty door behind her and pocketed the huge iron key.

The birds hadn't started singing yet. She wandered through the trees, toward Morton's Keep. The ancient mansion house seemed to crouch like a great beast behind the woods, its two towers looming.

She stopped in a clearing made by a tree felled in one of the recent storms, half sawed up for firewood, and with a catch to the throat recognized where she'd sat last night, with Ethan. She sank down onto a log, where last night she'd sat half-facing him. She felt like crying.

It had started out so right, with her sudden sense that Ethan liked her, wanted her, with him agreeing to come back to the Old Sty for coffee.

And then it had all gone so wrong.

She covered her eyes with her hands, remembering.