



PROLOGUE

The walls of the Burning Court were high and white-tiled, its ceiling one giant chimney. If the young witch at the stake had been able to look up the funnel, she might have glimpsed a distant pane of sky.

Instead, she stared ahead. There was a glass panel in front of her, and the shadowy shapes of the inquisitors behind. One of them would have his hand on the switch, ready to light the fuse.

She couldn't speak or move. Her body had been frozen rigid by the drug they'd given her so that she would be numb and immobile throughout her execution. Her reflection in the glass was calm. Everything was quiet and orderly, exactly as it should be.

In which case . . . should she be aware of the coarse material of her prison shift, or sense the chill coming off the shining tiles? Propped up in the centre of the pyre, she was newly conscious of the weight of its wood.

The witch's heart began to stammer. This wasn't right. Something must have gone wrong. The drug wasn't working properly. She had to let them know before it started. She had to tell them, she had to explain –

But her tongue didn't move. Her eyes were locked open, her mouth was locked shut. The fear was suffocating, but she couldn't gasp for breath. Her face in the glass gazed peacefully back, while every nerve, every muscle, every pulse of her heart and brain screamed STOP.

The wood sparked.

No, wait, please wait –

A thin yellow flame wriggled into life, then danced upwards. Smoke rose with it. Heat blossomed, intensified.

Behind the blurred glass, the unseen audience was waiting.

Somebodyhelpmeohgodpleasestopstopstop

Tendrils and coils of fire. Her eyes stung from its smoke. Her pale hair was already rippling into flames. At any second they would be eating into her flesh. She was screaming and screaming now, soundlessly –



CHAPTER 1

In bed, Glory was screaming too, her body thrashing into wakefulness in the moonlit room.

A tall shape blundered through the door. Light flooded in after him.

‘It’s over,’ her father said, coming to the bed, wrapping her in his arms. ‘Hush now. You’re safe; it was just a dream.’ He pushed a sweaty strand of hair off her face as she shuddered and gasped.

‘Was it the Burning Court again?’

Glory nodded. She was eight years old and had been having the same nightmare for as long as she could remember. ‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered. Thumps and grumbles could be heard through the walls as the building’s other residents resettled themselves.

‘There’s nothing to be sorry for, baby-girl. Nothing to be frightened of either. I’ll chase the bad dream away.’

But in the end it always came back. As Glory got older, she learned to control her waking outbursts and no longer disturbed the house with her cries. The terror didn’t diminish though. The dream was so vivid; immediately

afterwards, she could swear the scent of smoke clung to her hair.

Her father believed she'd grown out of it. In the early years, he tried to get her to describe it properly, and talk about what might bring it on. But even as a little girl, she was embarrassed by her weakness, refusing to revisit the panic of the night. And the Burning Court dream was bound up with two secrets that her father mustn't know.

The first was the image in the glass panel. In the dream, Glory was the witch at the stake, yet the face she saw reflected was her mother's. She recognised her from photographs, not memory, for Glory's mother, Edie, had disappeared when she was three.

Edie Starling's farewell to her husband and child had been a single line on a postcard, dropped on the doormat the morning she walked out of their lives – and perhaps her own – for ever. *I love you, but it's better if I go. Forgive me.* That was the last they or anyone else heard of her. 'She'll have run off with some fancy-man,' the neighbours speculated. 'Done herself an injury,' said others. 'Too flaky for family life,' declared the rest. Any of this could be true, but whatever else Glory's mother was, she was also a witch. The illegal kind: unregistered, unlicensed and hunted by the Inquisition.

For this was Glory's second secret fear: that the dream of her mother's burning felt so real because her mother had been caught by the Inquisition, because it was true.

Yet despite this, once the nightmare was over, after she'd been soothed and petted and her tears had dried, she'd wait until the house was quiet again. Then she would climb out of bed and go to her attic window. She would look over

London's jumbled rooftops, the ghostly glow of the street lights, the darkness above. And Gloriana Starling Wilde would lift her chin, take a deep, defiant breath, and say the same prayer she had said ever since she could remember.

Please, God . . . when I'm grown-up, make me a witch.