



BELLADONNA

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF ALL THE STARS AND TEETH

ADALYN GRACE



BELLA DONNA

ADALYN GRACE



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
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*There's a house in the woods
with an Arthurian table and a
never-ending charcuterie board.*

*This story is for those
I've sat with at that table,
who make writing feel
like magic.*

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
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PROLOGUE



IT STARTED WITH THE CRY OF A BABY.

Swaddled in a crimson gown bold as blood, Signa Farrow was the most striking two-month-old at the party, and her mother intended to prove it.

“Look at her,” her mother crooned, lifting the fussy infant for all to admire. “Is she not the most perfect creature you’ve ever seen?” Rima Farrow sparkled as she twirled her baby around the crowd. Every part of her was draped with elegant jewels, each of them a gift from her architect husband. Her silk gown was the deepest shade of cobalt, bustling over crinoline wider than anyone else dared to sport in her presence.

The Farrowes were one of the richest families alive; all who attended this party sought to dip their toes into even a fraction of their wealth. And so they plastered their faces with the grins they knew Rima hungered for and cooed at the child she held with such affection.

“She’s beautiful,” said a woman who watched Rima rather than the baby as she fanned her sticky skin in protest of the summer’s heat.

“Perfect,” said another, purposely overlooking Signa’s crooked little nose and wrinkled neck.

“She’ll be like her mother, I’m sure. Feasting on the hearts of unsuspecting suitors in no time.” This was spoken by a man who ignored how deeply Signa’s eyes unsettled him—one a winter blue, the other melted gold. Both too mindful for a newborn.

Signa never stopped crying—she was flushed with fuss and her skin was clammy. All who saw her thought this typical—summers in Fiore were a hot, wet blanket. Whether indoors or out, bodies glistened from sweat that coated skin like a veil. Because of this, no one expected what the baby already knew: Death had found his way into Foxglove manor. Signa could sense him around her like one might sense a fly that brushes too close. Death was a buzz upon her skin, alerting the fine hairs on her neck. With his presence Signa settled, lulled by the chill that blossomed with his nearness.

But no one else experienced the same comfort, for Death came only where he was called. And that night he’d been called to Foxglove, where poison laced every drop of wine.

First came the coughing. Fits of it overtook the party, but guests would cough into their pretty white gloves and pardon themselves, thinking the cause was something they ate. Rima was one of the first to show signs. Cold sweat prickled her temples, and she passed her baby to a nearby servant girl as her breaths thinned. “Excuse me,” she said, a hand to her throat, fingers pressing into the sweat that pooled into the crevices of her collarbones. She coughed again, and when she drew her hands away from her lips, blood the color of her baby’s dress stained her satin gloves.

Death stood before her then, and the infant watched as he laid his hand upon Rima’s shoulder.

With a final inhale, her corpse fell to the floor.

Death didn't stop with Rima. He swept through the grand estate, collecting the poor souls whose faces purpled as their chests seized with uncooperative breaths. He tore through dancers and musicians, stealing their breath with a single icy touch.

Some tried to make it to the door, thinking there must be something in the air. That if they could get into the gardens, they'd be spared. One by one they fell like stars, only the lucky few who'd not yet tasted the wine able to make their escape.

The servant girl barely managed to get Signa into the nursery before she, too, fell, lips bleeding rubies as Death slowed her heart and cast her body to the floor.

Even as an infant, Signa was unfazed by the stench of death. Rather than stir from the panic around her, the baby focused instead on what no one else could see—the bluish glow of translucent spirits who filled the estate as Death plucked them from their bodies. Some went peacefully, taking the hands of their partner as they awaited an escort into the afterlife. Others tried to claw their way back into their bodies, or to flee from a reaper who did not give chase.

In the midst of it all, a dead and glowing Rima stood silently in Signa's room, watching with a deep frown and vacant eyes as Death crossed the threshold. His footsteps made no sound as he approached the baby, his shape nothing more than ever-moving shadows. But Death did not need to be seen; he was to be *felt*. He was a weight upon the chest, or a collar buttoned too tight. A fall into frigid, lethal waters.

Death was suffocating, and he was ice.

And yet when he reached to collect Signa, who was full and settled with her mother's poisoned milk, the baby yawned and curled herself against the touch of Death's shadows.

He fell back, shadows retracting. Once more he tried to claim her, yet his touch did not show him flashes of the life this young child had led. It showed him instead something he'd never before seen—glimpses of her future.

A brilliant, impossible future.

His touch could not kill the baby he circled around, as confused by her as he was fascinated by what he'd seen.

Though Rima wished to stay—wished to wait for her child to join her—Death stepped back and offered his hand. To Rima's surprise, she drew close and took it. "It's not her time," he said, "but it is yours. Come with me." There were too many souls in need of ferrying to remain any longer. He'd be back, though. He would find this child again.

Hand in hand with Death, Rima's spirit cast one last look at the baby they left behind, alone in a house with nothing more than corpses for company. She prayed that someone would find Signa soon, and that they would protect her.

Just as the night had begun with the cry of a baby, it ended with one. Only this time, no one was around to hear it.

ONE



IT'S SAID THAT FIVE BELLADONNA BERRIES ARE ALL IT TAKES TO KILL someone.

Just five sweet berries, eaten straight from the foliage. Or, as Signa Farrow preferred, mashed and steeped into a mug of tea.

Her dark brows were slick with sweat as she leaned over the steaming copper mug, inhaling the fumes. Certainly eating the berries straight would have been easier, but she was still learning the effect belladonna had on her body, and the last thing she wanted was Aunt Magda finding her passed out in the garden with a bright purple tongue.

Not again, anyway.

It had been weeks since Signa last saw the reaper. Only a final breath would draw him out from hiding, and he never left empty-handed. At least, that was the way it was supposed to be. But Signa Farrow was a girl who could not die.

The first time Signa remembered seeing the reaper, she was five and had fallen down the stairs of her grandmother's house. Her neck had snapped and was crooked as she'd watched him sideways from the cold floor. She understood, vaguely, that her young body was not meant to endure such things and wondered if he'd arrived to take her. Yet he said nothing, watching as her bones snapped back into place, and disappearing when she recovered from a fall that should have killed her.

It was another five years before she saw Death again. Signa had watched from her grandmother's bedside as Death took the woman's hand and eased her spirit from the body. She'd been ill for months, and she smiled and kissed Signa's forehead before letting Death guide her into a peaceful afterlife.

Signa begged for Death to return. To bring her grandmother back as Signa held the corpse's hand and cried until there was nothing left in her. No one else was able to see him or the spirits he led, and she wondered if it was her fault this had happened. If she was to blame because she was the girl who could see Death.

She didn't remember how long she remained in that house before someone had smelled the body and came to find Signa, hair matted and clothes unwashed, curled at her grandmother's bedside. They'd whisked her away from the house, shepherding her off to the first of many new guardians to come.

She spent the next several years testing her odd abilities. It'd started with pricking her finger on a thorn and watching the blood bubble and then disappear, as though the skin had never been blemished. From there the experimentation shifted into jumping off stones high enough to break bones upon falling. Signa came to realize she would feel only a sharp snap, then be fine for a

cliffside stroll minutes later.

But the belladonna berries were never meant to be an experiment, just something she plucked from her aunt's unkempt garden after arriving several months prior, thinking they were wild blueberries. She'd had no idea they were poisonous until she fell upon the weeds, vision swimming. Death made an appearance then, watching from behind the bend of an oak tree. Even if Signa hadn't recovered too quickly to speak with him, she'd been too distracted by Aunt Magda, who found her in the garden clutching deadly nightshade, her mouth stained purple. The woman nearly had a heart attack when Signa bolted upright from the ground, the poison out of her system within minutes.

Signa had learned something that day—how to draw Death out of the shadows. And with that knowledge, she refused to let him hide from her a moment longer.

Signa lifted the tea to her lips, though her tongue only grazed the warm steam before the copper mug was knocked from her hands. She stumbled from the rickety wooden bench she was perched upon as the mug clattered to the floor and the violet tea spilled onto the worn gray stone of the kitchen.

Signa whirled to find Aunt Magda scowling. That was an expression she wore often, though if one was to look deeper, they'd see that her thin bottom lip and leathery hands trembled in Signa's presence. They'd see dilated pupils and a thin sheen of sweat upon her wrinkled forehead.

"You think I don't know what you're up to, demon-child?" Aunt Magda scooped the mug into her hands. She sniffed and peeked inside, scowling at the mush of berries. "Filthy girl, doing the devil's work!"

Aunt Magda threw the mug at Signa, who reeled back but couldn't avoid being struck on the shoulder. There was enough liquid left in the mug to burn her, and for the purple juice of the berries to stain her favorite gray coat. "I warned you what would happen if you brought that witchcraft into my home."

Signa ignored her searing skin and looked her aunt hard in the eye. "It was tea." Her voice was so firm that anyone who didn't know better might believe Signa was telling the truth. But unfortunately, Aunt Magda did know better. She thought herself too smart and too godly of a woman to be tricked by a "witch."

Not that Signa truly believed she was a witch, of course. Though she did have a love for botany, and often found herself wishing that she knew a few spells. How wonderful it'd be to have a spell to tidy the dust from this hovel, or to feed herself something other than stale bread and whatever concoction she could think to cook up with the sparse ingredients Magda left for her.

"Pack your things," Aunt Magda snapped as a draft of autumn air hissed through a slit in the kitchen window. She pulled a coat tight around her frail body. Her skin was graying, and every so often her chest rattled with a wet, hacking cough. There was a moment when Signa looked past her aunt and into the shadows, waiting to see if Death was coming to claim Aunt Magda as she'd feared ever since that cough started a week prior. "You'll sleep in the shed tonight." Magda's words were spoken so coolly that Signa's insides withered, and she found herself wishing she'd never had the misfortune of being taken in by the awful woman. It was a shame she had so few alternatives.

Because of the inheritance she was to claim on her twentieth birthday, and the allowance that her caretakers received from it, Signa had once been warred over by potential guardians. Her

grandmother had won the first war, not out of greed but of love. When she'd passed away, Signa was sent to live with her mother's brother—a young and healthy banker with a fine estate and fruitful love life. Though he often left her alone to care for herself, Signa didn't despise her years with him. She'd even had a friend to keep her company on romps in the woods and on espionage missions through the neighborhood—Charlotte Killinger.

Her uncle's love life proved to be *too* fruitful in the end, however—at the age of thirty, he died from a disease he'd contracted from one of his many partners. Signa had hoped to be taken in by Charlotte's family after that, only to discover that her friend's mother had passed from the very same disease. That scandal was effectively the end of the girls' friendship, and Signa hadn't received so much as a letter from Charlotte since.

Signa was twelve when the whispers began, made worse when her third guardian died in a tragic carriage accident on his way to pick her up, then when her fourth guardian drowned in her own bathtub after a sedative and too much liquor. *The child is cursed by Death, some said. The wickedest of witches, spawned by the devil himself. Wherever she goes, the reaper will follow.* Signa never said a word to dissuade them because she wasn't certain they were wrong.

She pretended she couldn't see the spirits she passed on the streets or even shared homes with, hoping that if she didn't interact, perhaps they'd one day disappear altogether. Unfortunately, ignoring spirits wasn't so easy. Sometimes she thought they knew she was hiding from them and were the worse for it, howling through the house or haunting mirrors, always trying to catch Signa surprised and frightened by their antics.

Fortunately, there were no spirits living in Magda's house, though that didn't much improve Signa's situation. Aunt Magda was the sort who would lose herself in gambling halls for days at a time, always to return with empty pockets. She didn't worry herself with silly things like keeping the kitchen stocked or ensuring that Signa could breathe properly in the dusty hovel she claimed was a home, and she cared only about the allowance that housing Signa provided.

Signa understood her aunt's fear of her—expected it, even—but it made for a miserable life. Only months from turning twenty, she would soon be able to claim her inheritance and finally build a home of her own. One filled with light and warmth and, most importantly, *people*. She would parade through that house in a beautiful gown, catching the eyes of a dozen handsome suitors who would proclaim their love to her. And Signa would never again be alone.

But to claim that future, she needed to confront Death. That very night, preferably, before he claimed yet another guardian and damned her further.

“Pack, girl,” Aunt Magda demanded again, her bony hands trembling. “I'll not have you in my house tonight.”

Pausing only to pick up her mug from the floor and examine the newest dent in the copper, Signa hurried out of the kitchen. The rickety wooden staircase groaned as she climbed, trying to think only of how the floor creaked as if offended by the weight of her steps and the grime that covered the house from the floorboards to its craggy roof. She tried to think of the orb spider that lived upon a perfectly preserved web in a corner of the ceiling, out of reach but always in view. Anything to get the dark thoughts out of her head—that there was something terribly wrong with her. That she was a monster. That everyone and everything would be better if only she were normal.

Magda believed Signa carried the devil within her very soul, and perhaps that was true. Perhaps the devil *was* nestled comfortably within her, and that's why it was impossible for Signa to die. Regardless, that notion didn't change what Signa knew she had to do.

Aunt Magda's cough rattled the house, and Signa moved faster. In her tiny bedroom in the attic, she slid her trunk toward the bedroom door to block anyone from an easy entry and tiptoed back to the center of the room. Gathering up her skirts, she took a seat on the floor and removed her coat, taking the belladonna berries from a pocket. She set them before her, then retrieved a rusty kitchen knife from a second pocket and wrapped the tarnished handle in the folds of her skirts for easy access. Signa picked up five berries, and though she couldn't say why, she smoothed down her dark tresses and adjusted her collar to ensure she was presentable before letting their sweetness explode on her tongue.

The poison began in her chest, as though someone had torn her open with a hot iron and seized hold of her lungs. Her skin was a leaking faucet, fat beads of sweat rolling from her pores. Signa heaved as bile burned her throat, shutting her eyes against the shadows that swarmed in and cast strange hallucinations.

Only moments later, the effects of the belladonna were slipping away—it was a dose that should have killed a person, though one Signa could recover from in minutes. But she needed to stay in this moment for as long as possible because this was what she was after; this was her chance to chase the reaper, and to stop him once and for all.

Finally, ice spread its way into her veins. It was a familiar presence that seared her from within and demanded to be acknowledged. Signa opened her eyes, and Death was there before her.

Watching.

Waiting.

His presence was intoxicating and familiar, and it took Signa by surprise as it always did—writhing shadows cast into the vague shape of a human. So dark and void of light that it was painful to look at him. And yet looking at him was all Signa could do. All she could ever do. She was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. And so, it seemed, was he to her.

Death no longer waited at a distance but bent over her like a vulture before its prey, shadows dancing around him. Signa looked up into the endless abyss of darkness, and though her eyes stung, she refused to look away.

"I'd prefer you not summon me whenever the urge strikes." The voice was not what she expected. It wasn't ice, nor gravel, but the sound of water in a meadow, slipping over her skin and inviting her in for a midnight swim. "I'm a busy man, you know."

Signa stilled, breathless. More than nineteen years she'd waited to hear Death's voice—and those were his first words? She folded her fingers around the knife's hilt and scowled. "If your intent is to ruin my life, it's time you tell me why."

Death retracted, and as he did, warmth swept in, biting into her numbed fingers. She hadn't even realized she was cold. "You think that's what I'm doing, Signa?" The disbelief in his voice mirrored her own. "Ruining your life?"

There was something concerning about those words. Something overly familiar that sent chills shuddering across her skin. "Don't say my name," Signa told him. "Upon Death's tongue, it sounds like a curse."

He laughed. The sound was low and melodic, and it had his shadows writhing. "Your name is no curse, Little Bird. I just like the taste of it."

It was strange, the things his laughter did to her. Though Signa had spent years building her words for this moment, she found that now she had none. And even if she did, what was the point? She couldn't let herself be swayed by curious words—not when his actions had all but

ruined her life, stripping her of every friend, guardian, and home she'd ever had. And so she didn't let herself think any longer; it was time to seize her opportunity and see if Death had a weakness.

With trembling hands she clutched her knife tight, fighting the heaviness in her limbs to gather all the strength she could muster. And then she struck him square in the chest.

TWO



THE BLADE SLIPPED THROUGH THE SHADOWS, AND SIGNA CURSED.

Death peered down at his chest, and the shadows tilted as though he was cocking his head. “Now, now, aren’t you a curious thing. Surely, you didn’t believe something so trivial would work on me?”

Her lips soured at his amusement, and she withdrew the knife. She’d hoped the blade would do *something*. That it would deter him or let him know that she was serious about him staying away from her. She wanted Death to see her as dangerous. As someone not to be toyed with. Instead, he was *laughing*.

And because of that laughter, Signa barely registered the persistent banging at her bedroom door. She stilled only at the screeching of her trunk sliding against the wooden floor and Aunt Magda’s yelling as she stormed into the room, sheet white and with the fear of the devil in her eyes. The woman wasted no time, trembling as she grabbed a fistful of Signa’s hair and hoisted her from the floor. Her eyes darted toward the window, as though she intended to throw Signa out.

Beside Aunt Magda, Death bristled, choking the air from the room. Ice bit into Signa’s skin as she tried to pry herself away from her aunt’s grasp. And though Signa knew she should tell him to stop, she didn’t. Her aunt’s eyes burned with hatred, and as the woman lunged for her neck, Signa gritted her teeth, took her aunt by the shoulders, and threw her off-balance.

The moment Signa’s skin touched Aunt Magda’s, it was as though a fire burned through her veins. Her aunt fell back as if stunned, breaths thin and reedy. The color drained from her skin, as though Signa’s touch had leached it all away. Aunt Magda tripped over a corner of the trunk, tumbling backward with a silent scream, lungs emptying themselves.

She fell upon the floor with a smack, silent for perhaps the first time in her life.

By the time Signa understood what had happened, it was too late to help Aunt Magda, whose glossy eyes stared hollowly at the ceiling. Death hovered above her, bent to inspect the body.

“Well, that’s one way to shut her up.” His tone was light with mirth, as though this were all a joke.

Signa’s breaths then came not in sips but in panicked gasps. “What have you done?”

Only then did Death straighten, recognizing her panic. “What have *I* done? I’m afraid you’re mistaken, Little Bird.” He spoke with the same slow inflection one might use when instructing a child. “Take a breath and listen to me. We haven’t much time—”

Signa heard none of it. When she looked at her hands, they were the palest blue, as translucent as a spirit’s. She tucked them behind her with a low moan. “Stay away from me!” she

pleaded. "Please, just stay away!"

There was an edge in Death's voice when he replied. A hint of darkness looming in the meadow. "As if I don't already try." He turned from her, and Signa could only watch as Death reached through her aunt's corpse and tore the spirit from her body.

That spirit took one look at Signa, then at Death, and her eyes widened with understanding. "*You rotten witch.*"

It felt as though the ground were falling out from beneath Signa's feet. Already her mind was crawling in on itself, her vision tunneling as she stared down at her trembling hands. Hands that had betrayed her. Hands that had stolen a life.

"What have I done?" she whispered, her body curling into itself. *What have I done, what have I done, what have I done?* And then, with dawning horror, "What do I do?"

"First, you take that breath." For some reason it eased her nerves to hear Death speaking and not Magda, who sat staring at her translucent body in shock. "I assure you, I did not expect this —"

"What do I care for your assurances? You're the reason this happened!" Signa didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so the sound that escaped her was a mix of both.

Death's shadows tripled in size as darkness enveloped the room. "*You summoned me. I've done nothing but come where I was called. I'm not your enemy—*"

At least at this, she knew to laugh. "Not my enemy? You are a perpetual cloud upon my existence. You're the reason I've spent my life in places like this, with people like *her*, surrounded by spirits! You're the reason I'm miserable. And look at what you've done now." Her eyes fell to the corpse in front of her, and Signa buried her face in her translucent hands as tears burned hot. "You've damned me. Now no one will ever want to marry me!"

"Marrying?" Death stared at her incredulously. "That's what you're crying about?"

She sobbed harder, the words doing nothing to ease her spiraling mind.

Had Signa been looking, she would have seen that Death's shadows wilted. She would have seen that he reached out for her, only to draw back before she could reject him. She would have seen his shadows wrap themselves around Magda's mouth, silencing the woman before she could say another cruel word.

"I never meant for this to happen." His voice rang genuine. "Our time is limited, and I know that whatever I say right now, you won't hear it. But I'm not your enemy. In two days' time, I'll prove it to you. Promise me you'll wait here until then."

Signa made no such promise, though it wasn't as if she had anywhere else to go. Still, she didn't look up until Death was gone and warmth crept back into the room, bringing feeling back into her fingers and toes as life once again colored her skin. The effects of the belladonna had worn away, leaving a pulsing headache and the seething spirit of her aunt as the only reminders that Death had visited.

Signa took one look at her through watery eyes, and Aunt Magda scowled. "*I always knew you had the devil inside of you.*"

Without argument, Signa fell back upon the floor to stew in her misery.



Signa stood before the crooked door of her dead aunt Magda's house later that evening, hugging

herself as she waited for the coroner to finish his work.

He made haste—not because he was unnerved by the body but because he was fearful of Signa with her raven hair and oddly colored eyes, and of the crowd of neighbors who watched from a distance with knowing looks.

“You never asked for this to happen,” Signa whispered to herself as she braced against anxious onlookers. “You may have *thought* it, but thinking is not the same as doing. You are good. People could learn to like you. This is his fault.”

His fault, his fault, his fault. It was her new mantra.

Signa hated Death even more now than she did before. Hated what he’d somehow caused her to become. Though... she couldn’t say she was sad that Aunt Magda was gone.

Or at least mostly gone.

“*Are you going to let them take me?*” Aunt Magda’s spirit croaked, angry even in death. “*You owe me, girl! Are you going to let them stuff me into a bag like that? Do something, you little witch, I know you can see me!*”

“Unfortunately, I can hear you, too,” Signa grumbled, realizing she’d spoken aloud when she earned a surprised blink from the man lifting her aunt’s bagged body into the back of a black carriage. Unsure what to do, Signa stared between him and her aunt’s floating spirit until the man grew uncomfortable and excused himself, sputtering on about how sorry he was for her loss and how he’d be in touch.

All the while, neighbors held their crosses tight around their necks, whispering that they always knew there was something off about the girl. Telling anyone who would listen that Signa was a bad seed, and that Magda should have known better than to invite the devil into her home. There was even a spirit among them in a loose white tunic, who crossed themselves over and over again as they stared at Signa with empty, hollow eyes.

She tried not to scowl. It didn’t matter that their gossip bothered her. It didn’t matter that she would have given anything to have just one person to confide in—because they weren’t wrong to fear her. Signa had used the powers of the reaper.

She just needed to figure out how it had happened.

Signa’s skin prickled as she backed away toward Magda’s house, hoping neither the neighbors nor her distracted aunt—who was busy making a fuss about her body as the coroner’s carriage disappeared down the street—would follow as she sneaked away and into the garden.

The term *garden*, in this case, was used loosely. Over the years the land had decorated itself with weeds and wildflowers Magda had often complained about, and that Signa spent hours tending to as well as she could without so much as a shovel or shears. If there was anything she’d miss about Magda’s home, it was the garden.

She made her way beneath a willow, knocking the overgrown foliage to one side so she could lean against the tree’s trunk. But she wasn’t alone.

Beneath the leaves, covered with dirt and clover, was a hatchling. It was so new to the world that its eyes were shut tight, its skin pink and fleshy, without a single feather.

Signa stooped to inspect the poor creature, which was covered in soil and hungry ants that had every intention of devouring it alive. The insects overtook it, ruthless in their pursuit. Signa couldn’t help but sympathize with the creature; it was like her—cast out of its nest and expected to fend for itself. Only it was not as capable as Signa; for it could not cheat death. It would be a mercy for the creature to die swiftly and be put out of its misery.

But Magda’s death had been an accident. If Signa took another life, on purpose this time,

what did that make her?

She didn't want to give any consideration to the thought, yet she knew that she needed an answer before she was face-to-face with anyone else she risked hurting.

Tentatively, she peeled her gloves off and brushed the tip of one finger along the hatchling's spine, sweeping away some of the ants and debris that had collected. She held her breath, waiting to see if its death would come. Curiously, the hatchling continued to writhe on the ground, its heart pulsing.

Again she pressed a bare finger upon the bird, longer this time. When she pulled her hand away, the creature was still breathing.

She leaned back against the trunk of the willow with tears of relief prickling her eyes. Her touch hadn't killed the poor bird. Her touch wasn't *lethal*. Unless... unless there was more to it.

She remembered the belladonna in her pocket, and with a shaking hand Signa drew five berries from it. Ensuring that the foliage would conceal her from anyone who might wander by, she popped the berries into her mouth and let them burst upon her tongue. The symptoms came fast—the nausea, the swimming vision, and there across from her, Death himself stood once more. Though she knew he'd come, she refused to acknowledge him, glad that he waited at a distance. She reached out once more to stroke her finger along the bird's spine, and this time its heartbeat ceased and it stilled with a final relieved breath.

Signa drew her hand back and clutched it to her chest. There was no denying it—with just a touch, she could bring death. But that death would come, it seemed, only when the reaper was in her presence. Only when Signa was in this strange space, teetering between life and death.

She had so many questions, yet not once did Signa spare Death a glance as she forced herself from the ground, leaving the dead hatchling upon the soil for the ants to claim as she stumbled toward the house.

She was glad, at least, that the hatchling would no longer feel pain. Glad that if she was to be a monster, at least she could deliver mercy.

THREE



A POLISHED IVORY CARRIAGE ARRIVED TWO DAYS LATER.

The barking of a neighbor's hounds signaled its arrival, and Signa's chest tightened as she glanced out the kitchen window to see the commotion. She'd practically been living in the garden since her aunt's death, saying her goodbyes to the plants and waiting for the days to pass while she ignored the spirit who rampaged through the house. Aunt Magda was atrocious even in death, rustling the curtains and howling her frustrations whenever she wasn't telling Signa how much of a pest she was or snooping on the neighbors.

Signa had received a letter the day prior—one with a red wax seal and signed by a Mr. Elijah Hawthorne, extending her an invitation to his home, Thorn Grove. It was with surprise that Signa recognized the name as the husband of Magda's granddaughter, Lillian. She'd heard Magda complain about the young woman before, telling stories of the wealthy socialite who'd cut off Magda's allowance with no warning.

Signa had spent all day and well into sunrise the next morning staring at the letter, unconvinced it wasn't a figment of her imagination. She didn't want to consider how Death must have managed it, and though she had half a mind not to take this offering, Signa was no fool. Setting off for Thorn Grove was the best option she had. There was little choice but to put aside her tea, clutch Elijah's letter tight, and hurry outside.

The carriage didn't buckle as it clattered over the thick vines and damp moss that erupted between the splitting cobblestones. The two horses that pulled it had dark black coats slick with sweat; their nostrils dripped from the exertion, but their bodies were healthy and coiled with muscle. Signa couldn't help but think of her own bony wrists and scrawny legs, and be a little jealous of these horses whose diet was surely superior to her own. The massive stallions huffed as they halted before her, and an elderly coachman shimmied down. He was a rail-thin man, tall and fair-skinned.

"Morning, miss." Tipping his top hat, he propped the carriage door open. "I presume you're the lass I've been sent to pick up?"

"I believe I am." Signa trembled like a hummingbird. Someone had truly arrived to retrieve her. To whisk her away to a family high within the social hierarchy, with whom she might wear beautiful gowns and sip tea with other women and have the life she yearned for. It seemed too good to be true; she kept glancing toward the shadows, waiting for Death to appear, laughing as he told her it was all a ruse.

"My orders are to bring you back without delay," said the coachman. "We've got a bit of a journey ahead of us. Have you got any belongings?"