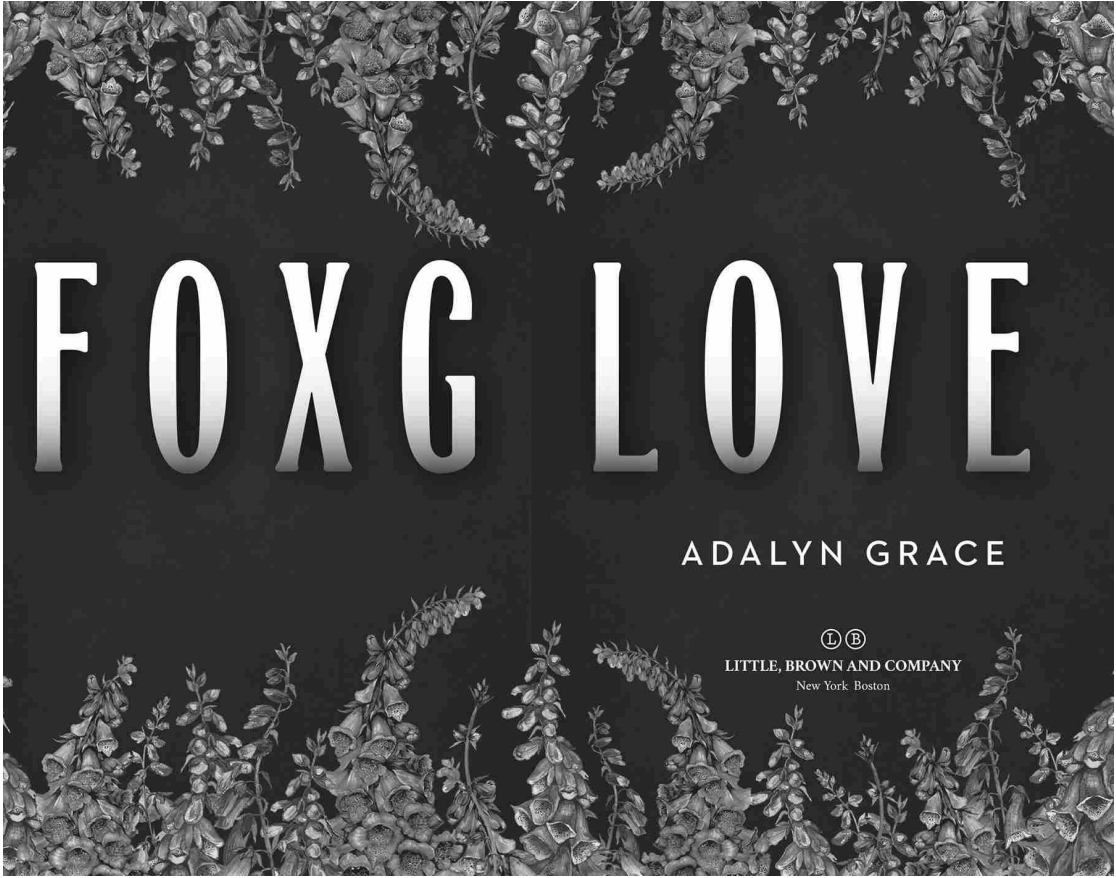




FOXGLOVE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BELLADONNA*

ADALYN GRACE



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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Part One](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

[Twenty-Two](#)

[Twenty-Three](#)

[Twenty-Four](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Twenty-Five](#)

[Twenty-Six](#)

[Twenty-Seven](#)

[Twenty-Eight](#)

[Twenty-Nine](#)

[Thirty](#)

[Thirty-One](#)

[Thirty-Two](#)

[Thirty-Three](#)

[Thirty-Four](#)

[Thirty-Five](#)

[Part Three](#)

[Thirty-Six](#)

[Thirty-Seven](#)

[Thirty-Eight](#)

[Thirty-Nine](#)

[Forty](#)

[Forty-One](#)

[Forty-Two](#)

[Forty-Three](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)



*I have a friend who was asked, “What gets you out of bed in the morning?” during a job interview.
She answered: “My alarm clock.”*

This book is for her—for always being my first reader, the best travel partner, an A+ stalker, and for making me laugh even when she doesn’t mean to.

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PROLOGUE



IT HAD TAKEN FATE A MILLENNIUM TO LEARN THE SONGS OF THE threads, and even longer to discover how to weave them.

He sat on the floor of a cellar lit by a waning candle, hunched over a bare tapestry draped across his lap. Above it, a needle glinted between nimble fingers, the color threaded through it ever changing as Fate crafted yet another lifetime.

The first color was always the same—a hymn of white that signified new life. He promptly followed it with a calming hum of blue threaded across the canvas, fueled by the music that thrummed in his veins. Passionate riffs of red and a wailing of yellow came next, the colors exploding over the tapestry like a sunburst as Fate allowed himself to be consumed by the life of a wealthy aristocrat who would one day become so devastatingly beautiful that she'd inspire the most wondrous art. Paintings and sculptures, music and poetry—none of which would ever fully capture her beauty. Her life was a series of torrid affairs, each of them spun from gossamer threads as fragile as they were exquisite. With each new lover she took and every twist he foretold, Fate grew more frantic, tearing through her life as he followed a crescendo only he could hear.

Anyone who saw him work would assume Fate was more a musician than an artist—the needle his bow and the tapestry his violin as he strummed life across a canvas. With every slice of his needle, he hurried to capture an entire lifetime that came to him in seconds, spinning songs into colors. He wove with such haste that he did not think. Did not breathe. So lost was he to the story that when the strike of a minor chord sounded and the thread of his needle turned black to mark the end of the tapestry, there came a second where Fate did not remember who he was, let alone what he was crafting.

Fate remembered himself eventually, though, when he looked about the empty room with its bare gray walls and recalled that such vibrant colors no longer belonged to him but to those whose stories he foretold. For while Fate's tapestry had once shone a brilliant and pure gold, the final thread had been marred by a new color for centuries—a quiet, perfect silver that he couldn't bring himself to look upon, for it signified all that had been taken from him. All that *Death* had taken from him.

As he blew out the candle, the walls surrounding him morphed into rows of tapestries that hung from moving lines stretched endlessly ahead. The moment a clear space revealed itself, Fate stilled the line long enough to hang the newest addition. He brushed his finger across its whorls of rich crimson—his favorite of all the colors, for love and passion that strong always made the most gripping stories. The tapestry continued onward as he drew back his hand, and

onward it would continue until all the threads had unwoven and it returned on the next line, blank and ready to craft a new tale.

Golden eyes had slid to his next canvas when a sound from behind drew his attention. It was unlike any he'd heard before, one as soft as harp song and yet as arresting as Death's minor chord. It drowned out all other noise, and while Fate made it a rule to never revisit the tapestries he'd already hung—for why alter a masterpiece?—he could not resist its call.

Fate moved between the rows, ducking and sidestepping as he made his way toward it. The line stilled as he approached, and Fate saw that the song did not come from one tapestry but two.

The first was perhaps the ugliest that Fate had ever woven, for too much of it was gray, and purpled like a bruise. And yet it was one that Fate had taken his time with, every thread sewed with precision as he crafted this cruel gift for his brother: a woman Death would love but could never have. Only now, Fate frowned as he looked upon the tapestry, for somehow his creation had been altered. The gray shifted into lines of black that merged into red and gold. Yellow. Blue. And then more black—not just a single line of it but thousands of threads that continued to stitch themselves even as Fate took the marred creation in his fists.

The second tapestry was no better than the first. Swirls of faded rose and icy blues were struck out by thick lines of black and white, over and over like the keys of a piano. He bent to listen to its song—the darkest, quietest hymn in which each note struck like a punch—and drew away with a sharp breath. Its beauty was undeniable, and yet it was *wrong*.

Fetching a needle he'd tucked behind his ear, Fate stuck it through the second tapestry to see what might happen when he tried to weave in the final black thread of death. To his surprise, the tapestry spit the needle back into his palm. He clenched his fist around it.

Whatever these monstrosities were, he had not created them. The sight of them soured his stomach, and he yanked both tapestries from their lines. Even as Fate hauled them over his shoulder, they continued to grow, black and white stitches waterfaling down his back, brushing over each lip of the stairs he stomped up while trying not to trip. He hurried to a crackling stone hearth that cast an amber glow across yet another bare room, this one dressed with nothing more than a single leather armchair that faced the roaring flames.

Fate tossed the striped tapestry into the flames and took a seat in his chair, eager to watch it burn. Yet the flames sizzled out the moment the fire was fed, bringing an all too familiar chill into the room. It felt like ice sinking through his bones, seizing hold of his body and sending tremors down his spine.

Fate lurched to a stand and yanked the tapestry out, scowling as the hearth reignited. Anger stirring, he took the hideously bruised tapestry this time and thrust it into flames that coughed embers up at his face. Fate stumbled back, shielding himself. When he'd glared down at the fire, it was neither red nor orange but a color he thought he'd never see again.

Color leached from his face as he latched trembling fingers around the tapestry, not caring that the heat scorched his palms as he freed it from the flames. He pushed the chair to the edge of the room so that he could spread the tapestry before him on the floor. He fell to his knees, staring, searching—and there they were, glinting like stars: silver threads. Perfect, impossible silver threads. Until he blinked, and they were no more.

His breath grew strained. Likely, what he saw was little more than a product of his loneliness. A delirium brought on by too much work. Because after all this time searching... could he have found her at last?

As delicate as a lover, Fate brushed his hand across the threads to behold exactly who this

tapestry belonged to—a girl he'd crafted out of spite, made to tempt Death just enough to ruin the man when it turned out they could no longer be together. And yet her fate had somehow continued to spiral onward, no longer in his control.

The second tapestry was similar, belonging to a girl who had defied Fate not once, not twice, but three times over. Death had often warned him that he was too cavalier with the fates he wove—that there was no such thing as a perfect creation and that, someday, someone would overcome the future he had bestowed upon them and beat Fate at his own game. Until now, he had never believed that could be true.

He needed to know. Needed to see this girl with threads of silver, this Signa Farrow, for himself. And so Fate grabbed his hat and gloves, and he went to crash a party.

ONE



IT'S SAID THAT FOXGLOVE IS MOST LETHAL JUST BEFORE THE SEEDS RIPEN.

Signa Farrow could not help but think of that alluringly toxic flower, and her family's manor that shared its namesake, as she stared down at the corpse of the once Duke of Berness. Lord Julius Wakefield.

All her life she'd heard the stories of how her parents had died in that manor, their breath stolen by poison. Signa had found wrinkled newspaper clippings detailing the incident buried in her grandmother's attic when she was a child, and she remembered thinking what a beautifully tragic evening it must have been. She'd envisioned bodies dancing beneath a buttery haze of lights while satin gowns twirled about the ballroom floor, and Signa thought of how lovely it must have been in those final moments before Death arrived. She'd taken comfort knowing that her mother had died in a ball gown, doing what she'd loved most.

Never had Signa allowed herself to imagine the tragedy of such a death or stopped to consider the shattering glasses and earsplitting screams like those that reverberated through Thorn Grove's ballroom. Until her cousin Blythe stumbled forward as someone shoved past her, Signa hadn't given any thought to how a person would have to mind their hands and toes to avoid being trampled by those who hurried past the body lying dead at their feet and rushed toward an exit.

This death was not the beautiful, peaceful one that she had dreamed for her parents.

This death was merciless.

Everett Wakefield sank to his knees beside his father. He wilted over the corpse, showing no awareness of the mounting chaos even as his cousin Eliza Wakefield gripped him by one shoulder. Her face was green as lichen. Gathering one long look at her dead uncle, she clutched her stomach and heaved her dinner onto the marble floor. Everett didn't so much as flinch as her sickness spilled onto his boots.

Moments before, the Duke of Berness had been all smiles as he'd prepared to partner with the Hawthornes on their esteemed business, Grey's Gentleman's Club. The arrangement had been the town's most notable gossip for weeks and a venture that Elijah Hawthorne, Signa's former guardian, had been preening about for even longer. Yet as he stood behind the corpse of that almost-partner with a flute of water trembling in his hands, Elijah Hawthorne no longer preened. He'd gone so white that his skin was like marble, veins of blue corded beneath his eyes.

"*Who did this to me?*" Lord Wakefield's spirit hovered over his body, his translucent feet not quite touching the ground as he twisted to face Death and Signa—the only ones who could see him.

Signa was asking herself the very same question, though with the restless crowd surrounding them, she couldn't very well answer Lord Wakefield aloud. She waited to see if more bodies would fall, wondering all the while if this was how it had been at Foxglove the night of her parents' deaths. If it had felt too bright and too glittery for the sickness that marred the air—and if her mother's sweat-soiled gown and coiled hair had felt as heavy then as Signa's did now.

So lost in her thoughts and her panic was Signa that she flinched when Death whispered beside her, "Easy, Little Bird. No one else will die tonight."

If that was meant to reassure her, he'd need to try harder.

Everett held his father's limp hand, his tears falling in a bone-chilling silence as his father's spirit sank to his knees before him.

"*Is there a way to reverse this?*" Lord Wakefield surveyed Signa with such severity—such hope—that her shoulders caved inward. God, what she wouldn't give to be able to tell him yes.

As it was, she had to pretend not to hear him, for her focus had been stolen by a man who stood opposite the corpse, watching Signa's every move. His presence alone had her drawing back, every hair on her body standing on end.

Never had she seen this man, yet she knew who he was the moment his molten stare pressed into her. With his gaze, the haze of lights dimmed, and the panicked screams of partygoers dulled, ebbing away until they were little more than a distant hum. While Death's grip on her tightened, Signa found that she could not turn to look at him. The man who called himself Fate consumed her, and by the slice of a smile on his lips, he knew it.

"It's a pleasure, Miss Farrow." His voice was as rich as honey, though it held none of its sweetness. "I've been searching for you for a very long time."

He was taller than Death in his human form but slender and corded with delicate muscle. Where Death was fair skinned and sharpened by a cut jawline and hollow cheekbones, Fate sported deceptively charming dimples upon bronze skin. Where Death was dark intrigue, Fate shimmered as if a beacon for all the world's light.

"Why are you here?" It was Death who spoke in a tone of bitter ice, for Signa's lips were numb, useless things.

Fate tipped his head to look at Death's hand on Signa's shoulder, only a slip of fabric between their touch. "I wanted to meet the young woman who had stolen my brother's heart."

Signa's attention halted. *Brother*. Death hadn't mentioned having one, and from the tension in the air, she wasn't certain whether she should believe it. Never had she felt such lethality from Death, whose shadows pooled beneath him. She yearned to draw back and find solace in their protection, but no matter how much she begged her body to move, it was as though her feet were nailed to the floor. Signa felt like little more than a bug beneath Fate's glare, half expecting him to lift his boot to squash her. Instead, he drew two steps forward and took Signa's face in a hand so startlingly soft that she flinched—*a noble's hand*, she thought. He bent to her level, his touch scorching her skin.

"Let her go." Death's shadows spiraled forward, halting at the back of Fate's neck when the man brushed his thumb across Signa's throat.

"We'll have none of that." Fate didn't so much as look up to acknowledge Death's threat. "You may have reign over the dead and dying, but let's not forget that it's my hand that controls the fates of the living. For as long as she breathes, this one is mine."

The cold snapped from the room as Death stilled. Signa struggled against Fate's grasp, but the man held tight. He bent, nearly nose to nose as he inspected her. And while no words were

spoken, a searching look lurked within his ancient eyes. Something so dark and fevered that she bit her tongue, not daring to make a move against this man who had stilled even Death.

In a whisper, Fate asked, “Miss Farrow, have you any idea who I am?”

Looking at him was like gazing into the sun. The longer Signa stared, the hazier the world became, streaks of sunlight bursting across her vision. His voice was going misty, too, the words soft as cream as they clotted together.

Signa’s temples pulsed with a blossoming headache. “Only by name,” she managed, nearly gasping the words. From his touch to his voice, everything about this man was scalding.

Fate’s grip on her face tightened, holding her focus. “Think harder.”

“There’s nothing to think of, sir.” If she didn’t get away from him quickly, her head was going to split open. “I’ve never seen you a day in my life.”

“Is that so?” Fate released his grip. Though his severity was plain, there was something familiar about his rage. Something that reminded Signa of the helpless fledgling she’d held in her hands months ago, or of the wounded animals she’d come across in the woods. As Fate rolled his shoulders back and dusted off his cravat, Death swept in, shadows swathing Signa. He eased her against his chest, curling a hand around her waist.

“What did he say to you?” Death’s shadows were colder than usual, flickering and irate. Signa tried to tell him, to soothe him, but every time she opened her mouth to speak Fate’s question aloud, it bolted shut. She tried three times before she understood it was not shock or the pulsating headache that prevented her from speaking, and she turned to glare at Fate.

Death said nothing as he slipped past her. Darkness seeped from him with every step, leaching color from the gilded walls and splintering across the marble pillars. Signa breathed easier, no longer having to squint as Death stood toe to toe with Fate in his human form, his voice that of a reaper found only in the most terrifying nightmares. “Lay another finger on her, and it will be the last thing you ever do.”

Fate wielded his amusement like a weapon, expertly crafted and honed to perfection. “Look at you, all grown up. What a fierce protector you’ve become.” He snapped his fingers, and the world surged into motion. Muted screams became shrill in Signa’s ears. The press of rushing bodies more intense. The scent of bitter almond wafting from the dead body beneath them more obvious by the second. “You are not the only one who can make threats, brother. Shall I make one of my own?”

It was impossible to say how much time had passed or whether any had at all, but soon Elijah was rushing a constable into the ballroom to inspect the body. Fate no longer stood before them, now amid the small crowd that had remained. Though Signa could not hear the words he whispered into a woman’s ear, she didn’t care one bit for the horror that crept over the woman’s face. Fevered, she whispered to the man beside her, who in turn spread whatever was said to his husband. Soon the entire ballroom was ablaze in gossip and heated glances cast toward Elijah and his brother, Byron, who stood beside him, his rosewood walking stick trembling in his hand. The guests kept a wide berth from Blythe as well, as though the Hawthornes were a blight that would infect all those who dared get too close.

Though Elijah faced the crowd’s sudden wariness with his head held high, the roaring whispers had Blythe sinking in on herself. Her narrowed eyes sharpened as they swept the room—which suddenly felt much too large and far too bright—toward faces that didn’t dare hold her stare.

Familiar with this feeling and how deeply it could tear at a person, Signa whirled to those

who were watching. “Have you no shame? A man has just died, and yet you behave like this is a theater. Leave, and let the constable do his work.” Though several of the guests turned up their noses, they made little haste to leave, especially as Fate stepped through the crowd and approached the constable. Signa started toward him to stop whatever Fate might have been up to, but Death caught her elbow and drew her back.

Not yet, Death warned with words that rang through her head. *Until we know what he wants, we shouldn't make a move*. Signa balled her fists at her sides and had to do everything in her power not to give in to the temptation.

In an act so effortlessly performed that he ought to have sold tickets, Fate made a show of pointing one slender finger toward the Hawthorne brothers.

“It was him,” Fate announced, standing taller among the gasps. Signa hadn't even a moment to react to the fact that, unlike Death, Fate was now fully visible to those in the room. “It was Elijah Hawthorne who handed Lord Wakefield a drink. I saw it with my own eyes!” There were murmurs of agreement. Low, quiet rumblings of people convincing themselves that they, too, had seen exactly what this man spoke of.

The constable's face hardened as he stooped beside the body and picked up a shard of the shattered champagne flute. When he lifted it to smell the residue, his nose wrinkled. “Cyanide,” he said flatly, and Signa had to remind herself to look surprised. The constable shared none of the crowd's astonishment, and Signa wondered whether his equanimity had to do with what she'd been reading in the papers for the past several months.

Poison—cyanide in particular—was growing unnervingly popular. Nearly undetectable, it was a clever way to commit a murder. Some had gone as far as to call it a woman's weapon, for it required little effort and no brute force—though Signa could have done without that label.

Her eyes fell to Everett and Eliza Wakefield. Eliza was still turned away from the body, clutching her stomach while silent tremors rattled Everett.

Fate drew a small step forward to rest a hand on Everett's shoulder. Crouching to Everett's level, Fate asked him, “You saw Elijah Hawthorne hand that glass to your father, did you not?”

Everett's head wrenched up. His eyes had hollowed out, their light sucked away. “Both of them,” he said, rising to his feet, a fire raging in his voice. “Byron was near them, too. I want both the Hawthorne men taken into custody!”

Signa's chest burned when she saw a faint shimmer of gold at Fate's fingertips. He moved them ever so slowly, and when she squinted, Signa could have sworn that there were threads as thin as spiderwebs glistening between them.

“Listen here, boy,” Byron began. He stopped only when Elijah grabbed hold of his brother's arm and said, “We'd be happy to tell you anything we know. I assure you that we want to find the truth as much as you do.”

Signa was more grateful than ever for Elijah's newfound sobriety. She didn't dare imagine how he might have responded months ago, back when he was delirious from heartbreak over the death of his wife and the illness of his daughter, Blythe. He likely would have found humor in the irony of the situation. Now, though, she was relieved to see that his mouth was set in a grim line.

There was no knowing what game Fate was playing, but surely Elijah and Byron would have no trouble with the constable. He escorted the Hawthorne brothers through the ballroom, allowing them only a moment to stop beside Blythe and Signa.

Elijah took Blythe's face in both hands and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “This is nothing to

fret over, all right? We'll have everything sorted out by morning."

Elijah embraced Signa then, and her body warmed from head to foot as he kissed her forehead, just as he had kissed his own daughter. Perhaps it was because both she and Blythe were on the verge of tears—each of the girls holding the other's hand—that Elijah looked so calm. Like a man on his way to tea, rather than one publicly accused of murder.

"Do not trouble your mind, my girls." He set a hand upon their shoulders. "I'll see you soon."

And then both Elijah and Byron were gone, escorted out of Thorn Grove like the gentlemen they were. Signa stared down the hall even after they'd disappeared, blinking back her tears so that Fate wouldn't be allowed the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

Elijah would be fine. There would be a few questions, and then the alleged involvement of the Hawthorne brothers in this death would be put to rest before a coroner even arrived to retrieve the body.

Signa squeezed Blythe's hand to signal as much, though her cousin wasn't looking at her, or even at her departing father. Instead, Fate was the sole focus of Blythe's rage. Before either she or Death could stop her, Blythe slipped her hand from Signa's and marched across the ballroom, clutching her skirts so tightly that it seemed she might tear the fabric.

"You saw no such thing tonight, neither from my father nor my uncle!" Even in heels, Blythe was a good deal shorter than Fate, though that didn't stop Blythe from getting as close as physically possible and stabbing her finger into his stomach like it was a weapon. "I don't know what you want from my family, but I'll be damned before I ever allow you to have it." Blythe shoved past him without concern for who might have been watching and started toward Thorn Grove's butler, Charles Warwick. Fate scoffed but did not spare her another glance before he turned back toward Death and Signa.

"It's your move, brother," he said. "Make it a good one."

As quickly as he had appeared, Fate was gone again, leaving only chaos in his wake.

TWO



AN HOUR LATER, THE HALLS OF THORN GROVE WERE EERIE IN THEIR STILLNESS.

Signa kept close to the shadows, her fingers curling into the banister's gnarled wood as she took her time descending the stairs with cautious steps. When the iron bolts locked behind the last of the gossipmongers and Warwick had retired to his quarters, Signa became overly aware of every groan and creak of the wood that echoed through the foyer.

Her nose tickled from the smoke of too many hastily blown-out candles, which cast the manor into such darkness that Signa shouldn't have been able to see her own two hands before her. Yet she may as well have been in a summer glade, for the glow of a spirit seeped beneath the ballroom's threshold and illuminated an effortless path toward the double doors. She expected that Death must still be in there preparing the late duke, and she was trying to peer discreetly inside when the hairs along the back of her neck rose and a voice sounded behind her.

"He's asked for a few minutes alone with his son."

Signa stumbled back, having been ready to abandon her own skin before she realized that the low, resonant voice belonged to Death. She checked behind her, ensuring that no one was lurking on the stairwell before she waved him down the hall. The last thing the Hawthornes needed was to find her alone in the darkness, talking to herself moments after a murder.

Death had returned to the form of his shadow self, gliding across the walls behind Signa, who tried not to shiver from his nearness. A million questions plagued her mind, but the first that slipped out as she sealed the parlor doors shut was: "When were you going to tell me that you have a *brother*?"

Death's sigh came as a soft brush of wind that blew wisps of hair from Signa's face as he took her hands into his own. Had she not been gloved, his touch would have been enough to still her heart and bring out the powers of the reaper that lay dormant within her. But because of those gloves, Signa remained entirely human as she curled her fingers around his.

"I've not spoken to him in several hundred years," Death answered at last, his shadows gentle as they tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with great care not to touch her skin. "Were it not impossible for us to die, I wouldn't even be certain I still had a brother."

Signa recalled the way he'd shrunk in Fate's presence and the tension in his grip as he'd held her. Even now, alone and pressed against the bookcases in a corner of the room, Death kept his voice low. She tried not to grind her teeth, hating to see him so anxious. Death was not meant to cower. He was not meant to *fear*. Who was Fate, exactly, to sweep in and make his brother respond in such a way?

"He's toying with us," Signa said. Her skin itched, and she was more unnerved than she cared

to admit. She eased only when Death pulled her close, her heart fluttering as his thumb stroked a soothing line down the length of one glove.

“Of course he is. Fate controls the lives of his creations—what they see, what they say, how they move... Their paths and actions are all foretold by his hand. My brother is dangerous, and whatever his reason for being here, we can be sure that he has no good intentions.”

Signa didn't care much for being referred to as one of Fate's "creations." After all she'd overcome, boiling her choices down to Fate made her success feel unearned. Like he somehow had a hand in all her hardest decisions and her biggest triumphs.

“He certainly didn't treat you like a brother.” Signa pressed her thumb softly into Death's palms, wanting only to pry her gloves off so that she might feel more of him.

“For the longest time, the two of us had only each other,” Death said. “We came to view ourselves as brothers, though that title means little these days. Fate hates me more than any person in this world ever has.” Signa didn't have the opportunity to press for more before Death stole his hand away to take hold of her chin, tipping it toward him. As dark as it was in the parlor, Signa could still see the cut of his jaw among the ever-shifting shadows. The tension in her shoulders eased as he touched her bare skin for the first time that night. Coolness flooded through her body, and Signa tipped her head against him, savoring the touch.

“Tell me the truth.” Death's lips brushed her ear, and her knees buckled. “Did he hurt you, Little Bird?”

Signa cursed her traitorous heart. She wanted more information, for only in that moment was she beginning to realize there was so much left to learn about this man she'd believed she understood. But the longer Death held her, the more Signa felt herself melting beneath his touch as, beat by beat, her heart stilled.

How long had it been since he'd held her like this? Days? Weeks? For them to see each other, someone nearby had to be dead or dying, and ever since Blythe had recovered from belladonna poisoning, such circumstances were rare. Signa was glad for that, of course, for she could use some stability and a bit less death in her life. Still, she'd spent too many nights remembering the burn of Death's lips against hers and how it felt when his shadows glided across her skin. For too long she'd been able to communicate with him only through her thoughts, but with him physically present, her control wavered. Her mind may have wanted answers, but her body wanted *him*.

“Are you trying to distract me?” she asked as she peeled off her gloves and discarded them onto the floor.

The deep rumble of Death's laughter had heat stirring in her lower belly. Signa's blood burned with desire as he asked, “Is it working?”

“Too well.” Signa trailed a hand down his arm, watching as the shadows melted beneath her fingertips and gave way to skin. To hair that was white as bone, and a frame as tall as a willow and broad as an oak. To eyes as dark as galaxies, which shone as they looked upon her with the very same hunger that pulsed deep within her core. “But not enough to keep me from asking what your life was like before I met you. I want to know everything, Death. The good and the bad.”

Endless was the silence that stretched between them, the only response that of a branch scraping against the window, the sound sharp and staggered in the spring breeze. Then Death whispered, “What might you think when you discover that the bad outweighs the good?”

Signa tried to commit this feeling of his skin beneath hers to memory, savoring it while she

still could. “I will think that everything you’ve gone through has made you the man who stands before me today. And I quite like that man.”

Death’s arm snaked around her waist, his fingers curling into the folds of her dress. “How is it that you always know the right thing to say?”

Melting into the contours of his body, she laughed. “I seem to recall you accusing me of the opposite a few months back. Or have you already forgotten?”

“I couldn’t forget that clever tongue of yours even if I wanted to, Little Bird. And I will tell you whatever you want to know about me. But first, I believe we have some catching up to do.”

Death settled a hand on each of Signa’s hips as his shadows swept behind her, scattering checker pieces to the floor as he laid her upon the table where she and Elijah had played several months prior. Signa had a fleeting, humorous thought of how she’d hated Death so passionately then. Yet here she was months later with her legs locked around him and her skirts lifted as she kissed him fully. She tasted his lips and thought of nothing but how much she wanted them to consume her. Signa kept herself gripped around him, and when they’d had enough of the table, they moved to the chaise, where he came down over her, one knee settled between her legs.

Death’s lips savored her neck, her collarbones, the tender flesh just above her corset. “I have thought of you every day.” His voice was a rushing stream, pulling her into the depths of its current and devouring her whole. “I have thought of *this*, and all the ways I would make my absence up to you.”

There were not enough words in this world to describe the ways Death’s touch made her feel. One day, when she was old and her human life had run its course, there would come a time when the cold would call to her and not let go. Signa wasn’t eager for that day, but she wasn’t afraid of it, either. She had learned to appreciate the cold that seized her veins; to revel in its power, for it was part of who she was meant to be. And so she guided Death closer, placing his hands on the laces of her corset.

Except, rather than release his hands, Signa stilled as she recognized the chaise they were settled upon as the one that Blythe and Percy had used to watch Signa’s early etiquette lessons. Her eyes darted to the thick Persian rug that she’d tripped on when Percy had been helping teach her to dance. Signa pushed away from Death, clutching her chest as she thought of the last time she’d seen her cousin—in a burning garden, made the meal of a hungry hellhound.

“Signa?” Lost in her haze of memories, Signa barely heard the reaper’s call. She didn’t regret her decision; if she’d made any other, Blythe would be dead. Still, she couldn’t stop hearing Percy’s laughter. Couldn’t stop seeing his smile in her mind’s eye and remembering how red his nose had turned whenever they’d ventured into the snow.

“This is where I learned to dance.” She curled her fingers into the cushions, nails dragging across the fabric. “Percy helped teach me.”

That was all Death needed to understand, adjusting his position so that he could scoop her into his arms. Signa sat between his thighs, cradled against the pleasant coolness of his chest. “You are not responsible for what happened to your cousin.”

She appreciated him saying so, but that didn’t make it true.

“I was given a choice,” she whispered, “and I made it.”

With his chin resting on her head, Signa felt Death’s gentle hum before she heard it. “Are you saying that if you were in that position again, you’d choose a different path?”

She wouldn’t, and that’s what terrified her more than anything. What kept her up at night wasn’t that she’d given the command to trade Percy’s life for Blythe’s, but that she’d do it again.