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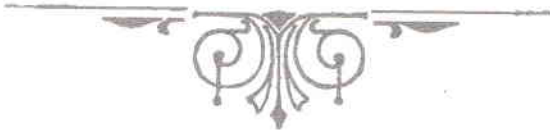
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# BELLADONNA

ADALYN GRACE

**H**  
HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

# 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

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

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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.