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# FOXGLOVE

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# PART ONE



# 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.