

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.