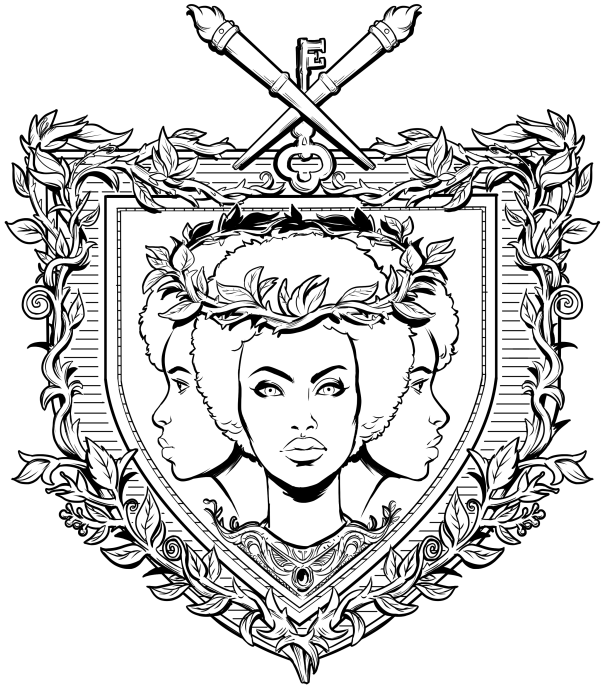

From the author of
CINDERELLA IS DEAD
To break an ancient curse she must let her power bloom
THIS POISON HEART
KALYNN BAYRON
BLOOMSBURY



THIS POISON HEART

Also by Kalynn Bayron

Cinderella Is Dead

THIS POISON HEART

KALYNN BAYRON

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY YA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in the United States of America in 2021 by Bloomsbury YA
This edition published in Great Britain in 2021 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-3279-1; Exclusive edition: 978-1-5266-4271-4;
eBook: 978-1-5266-3274-6; ePDF: 978-1-5266-3729-1

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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For the plant lovers

CHAPTER 1

White roses. Genus *Rosa*. Family *Rosaceae*. Common name "Evening Star."

Mr. Hughes took a dozen of them to his wife's grave every weekend, rain or shine. He had for the past year. He didn't care about the genus or the species, only that there were twelve of them waiting for him every Sunday, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. My mom was going to have to tell him that the delivery truck hadn't arrived last night like it was supposed to—it flipped over on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. The driver was okay, but our shipment of Evening Star was scattered across six lanes of traffic.

"I'm so sorry, Robert," Mom said as Mr. Hughes, dressed in his Sunday best, came into the shop. "There was an accident, and we didn't get our regular shipment. We should have a new delivery in the next few days."

He gripped the lapels of his freshly pressed navy blazer, his bottom lip quivering as he ran his hand over his mouth and sighed. He looked like he might fold in on himself. Grief was heavy. It could do that to a person.

"We've got some beautiful peonies," Mom said. "The Ann Cousins variety. They're gorgeous, Robert. I could put them together for you right now."

I pushed my glasses up and peered around the arrangement I was working on.

Mr. Hughes's brow furrowed. "I don't know, Thandie. The white roses, they were her favorite."

My mom closed her hand over Mr. Hughes's as he pulled out a tissue to dab at his eyes. We had a single white rose in a vase on the back counter, a remnant of a wedding bouquet I'd put together the day before. I looked down at my hands, opening and closing them. I wanted to help. But I couldn't. It was too dangerous.

"I miss her so much, Thandie," Mr. Hughes said, his voice choked with sadness.

"The people we love are never really gone from us," Mom said. "Try to remember that. I know it's hard. It feels like the whole world should just stop spinnin', but it doesn't. And we've gotta find a way to pick up the pieces."

Mom always knew exactly what to say. Mr. Hughes and his wife used to come into the shop together. Now, it was just him, and it made me so sad I could hardly stand it. The arrangement on the table in front of me began to wilt.

"Hang on, Mr. Hughes," I said.

He looked at me quizzically. I glanced at my mom for a second longer than I needed to. Her face grew tight with concern.

I plucked the single rose from the vase, rushed down the short hallway and out the back door. The eight-by-ten square of

dirt our landlord had the nerve to call a garden was where we kept the bigger plants that couldn't fit in the shop. Our recent shipment of chaste tree crowded the space, their spiky violet blooms just beginning to open in the damp heat of summer.

My hands trembled as I knelt and stripped the rose of its velvety petals, down to the pistil, the seedy heart of the flower. Any part of the plant would have been enough to make another like it, but having the pistil made it easier. A familiar tingling sensation crept down my arm. It started in my shoulder and trickled toward my elbow, then into my forearm. I glanced at the newly installed wooden pickets of the rear fence. They reminded me of what could happen if I lost control, even for a second.

I scooped a little hole in the ground and set the pistil inside. Covering it with loose earth, I placed my hands over it, sinking my fingers into the dirt, and closed my eyes.

Just breathe.

The tingling spread into my fingertips, warm and oddly comforting. A swell of anticipation crashed through me as a stout evergreen stalk broke through the dirt and immediately sprouted several small offshoots. They pushed their way up between my outstretched fingers. Sweat dampened my back and forehead. I clenched my teeth until the muscles in my temples ached. The new stalks reached toward the sun, their stems thickening, thorns sprouting, but never close enough to prick my fingers. Buds bloomed white as snow between new leaflets green as emeralds. Right before their petals unfurled, I pulled my hands back, clutching them against my chest. Dizziness washed over me. Orbs of light danced around the edges of my vision as I

sucked in a breath, filled my chest with the sticky summertime air, then pushed it out. My heartbeat slowed to a normal rhythm.

Six white roses dotted the newly formed branches. I took stock of the rest of the garden. The chaste tree had sprouted new roots like tentacles, cracking open its plastic planter. Its bright lavender blooms craned toward me. I couldn't chance growing another set of roses to give Mr. Hughes the dozen he wanted. These would have to work.

Taking a pair of pruning shears from my apron pocket, I clipped the roses and hurried back inside. As I handed them to my mom, Mr. Hughes's face lit up.

"First you tell me you don't have any, then Briseis goes and finds the best-looking flowers I've ever seen," he said happily.

"I was keeping them special, just for you," I said. "I only have six. I hope that's okay." The smile on his face made the little white lie worth it.

"They're perfect," he said.

Mom flashed me a tight smile. "I'll wrap them up."

She tucked the roses inside a layer of ivory tissue and brown paper, then pulled a length of white jute from the big spool on the counter and tied a knot in three turns.

"Angie and I are here if you need anything," she said, handing him the flowers. "Don't hesitate to call us."

"I don't want to bother you," he said.

"Don't," my mom said firmly. "Don't do that. It's not a bother and neither are you, understand?"

He nodded, dabbing at his eyes. "Tell Mo I said thanks for dinner the other night. I owe you."

"I'll tell her," my mom said. "And you don't owe us

anything—except maybe some of your world-famous peach cobbler."

Mr. Hughes laughed, his eyes still damp with tears. "I got you covered. I make it from scratch—my grandmama's recipe. Nothing like it in the whole world."

He beamed. My mom went around the counter and gave him a hug.

I ducked back behind my flower arrangement and took a deep breath. I'd been able to help this time, but it couldn't be a habit. The last time I'd pushed my abilities to their limit was after an argument I'd had with my mom. I didn't even remember what it was about, but my overdramatic ass was upset and decided to sit in the garden and grow some chamomile as a distraction. I took a handful of loose-leaf tea and scattered it in the dirt.

And then, I'd pushed too hard. I grew dozens of the daisy-like chamomile plants, but I also brought the roots of our neighbor's Norway maple tree up through the ground, tearing apart the landscaping and busting a hole in the fence. Mo told the guy next door that sometimes trees go through a growth spurt, like kids when they hit puberty, and for some reason that was beyond me, his dumb ass believed her.

I helped Mo patch the fence, but every time I looked at the new, pale pickets, a stab of shame coursed through me.

The flowers in my arrangement craned their soft petals toward me. Any time I was sad or scared or happy, they took notice, reacted in kind. Grief and sadness made them shrivel; happiness made them perk up; and fear and anger made them lash out.

I'd been growing plants in recycled plastic milk cartons and

empty glass jars since I was a kid. Mom said I had the greenest thumb she'd ever seen, even as a toddler. She found out exactly *how* green when she left me in the sunroom of my grandma's house when I was three. She went to grab her purse, and when she came back, I was tangled in the vibrant green vines of a velvet-leaved philodendron—a plant that had been dead and withered when she'd stepped out.

From that point on, Mom and Mo gave me little tests. They'd put me near a dead plant, and it would turn green and grow new sprouts if I paid attention to it. When I was older, they gave me seeds that I would plant and bring to bloom in minutes. They didn't know how or why I could do the things I did, but they accepted it, nurtured it, and let it grow, just like the plants—until I was about twelve.

Everything changed after that. I had a harder time keeping my power in check. Everywhere I went, if there was something green and growing, it was like an alarm went off, alerting it to my presence. The flora wanted my attention, and if I was being honest, I wanted to give it to them.

The bell on the door clanged as Mr. Hughes left the shop, and I went back to work on an arrangement that was scheduled for pickup in less than an hour. I clipped a few sprigs of baby's breath and stuck them alongside bundles of fuchsia crape myrtles, St. John's wort, and blush-colored roses in a tall vase. I ran my fingers over the roses and they plumped up.

Mom flipped on the Bluetooth speaker and Faith Evans's voice rang out as she bobbed her head to the beat.

"Lookin' good," she said, eyeing the arrangement in front of me. "I love the colors."

"Thanks. I've been working on it since yesterday. I should be done soon."

She came over and put her arm around my shoulder. "Thank you for doing that for Mr. Hughes. It means a lot to him to have those flowers, but . . ." She looked down the hall toward the back door. "You have to be really careful."

"I know," I said, reading the worry in her eyes. "I was. I got all six from a single pistil."

"Really?" Mom lowered her voice and leaned in close, even though we were the only two people in the shop. "That's some kind of record, right?"

I nodded. She had always been fascinated with what I could do, but her curiosity was tempered with concern. I couldn't blame her.

She looked me over. "How you feeling? Dizzy?"

I nodded. A shadow of unease crossed her face.

"Anything else you need me to do today?" I asked, avoiding her eyes.

"No, but there's something you can do after you finish this arrangement." She rested her hand on my cheek. "Try relaxing a little. School's out for the summer, baby. I know this year was tough."

I raised my eyebrows in mock surprise.

Mom narrowed her eyes at me. "Okay. 'Tough' is the understatement of the century."

This past school year had put my acting skills to the test. Not because I wanted to be on stage, but because the row of potted plants my English teacher kept on her windowsill grew roots as long as I was tall; the trees in the courtyard arched toward the

window next to my assigned seat in science—and everybody noticed. I had to pretend like I was shocked, like I thought it was weird. I had to speculate loudly about the cause. It could've been chemicals seeping into the ground from toxic runoff. Maybe all the hormones the government put in our food were leaking out of the lunchroom trash and into the ground, making the trees grow in strange and unusual ways. It made zero sense, but some people latched on to the idea, and now I had to show up at protests demanding the soil around our school be tested, like I didn't make up the whole thing to keep from being found out. If anybody had been paying close enough attention, they would have seen that every school I'd ever attended had a similar "contamination."

"I love having you in the shop," Mom said. "I really do. But don't feel like you have to be."

"I love working here," I said. "You know that."

"I want you to have some fun this summer. We can manage."

"But I can *help*. You know what I mean."

Mom shook her head. My parents liked to pretend they were fine with me slacking off for the summer, but the truth was, they needed the extra help. Orders were coming in and walk-ins happened all the time, but even though business was steady, gentrification rent was erasing our gains. They couldn't afford to hire any more people, so I took on the responsibility.

The bell clanged again, and Mo came in balancing a plastic container full of croissants on top of a flimsy cardboard tray with three cups of coffee. I ran over to grab the coffees before they toppled over.

"Good save," Mo said. She kissed me on the forehead and set the food on the counter.

"It's busy today," said Mom. "I got a call about the basic wedding package. They wanted to know if we can do it by Friday?"

"We can do it by Friday." Mo clapped her hands together and turned to me. "You workin' today, love?"

"Yup."

"Nope," Mo said. She took my hand and pulled me out from behind the counter, scooting me toward the door. She untied my apron and took it off, tossing it to Mom. "I love you, but you need to get out of here and go do some teenager stuff."

"Like what?" I asked.

"I don't know." She turned to Mom. "What do kids do these days?"

"Don't ask me that like I'm old," said Mom. "They like to Netflix and chill, right?"

"I'm leaving." I grabbed one of the coffees and two croissants. "Please never say 'Netflix and chill' ever again."

"Oh, they also like to make dance videos on TikTok," said Mo. "What's that one called? The Renegade?" She did some weird move with her arm, then grabbed her shoulder, wincing in pain. "I can do it, but the way my ligaments are set up—"

"I'll never be able to unsee that, Mo," I said. "Thanks."

"You welcome, love." She grinned.

While Mom and Mo laughed themselves to tears, I closed the door to the shop and took the stairs to the third floor of our building.

Mom bought almost every piece of furniture in our

apartment from IKEA. Mo hated it because even though the products were solid, putting them together sometimes required a level of patience neither of them actually possessed. Still, Mom was obsessed with making the space feel more open, which was hard to do in less than eight hundred square feet.

I straightened the mismatched pillows on the couch and organized the unopened mail into a pile on the table before heading to my room. As I opened the door, the warm, damp air hit me in the face, fogging my glasses. Air conditioning was on an as-needed basis, and Mom had a sticky note taped to the switch that said, "You got A/C money?" I didn't, so it stayed a balmy seventy-nine degrees. My posters and playbills that I'd tacked to the walls were curled at the edges. Everything was perpetually damp. The only plus was that my plants loved the tropical conditions.

The plants under my window turned toward me. The bluebells opened like tiny gramophones, and the bush of baby's breath that had taken over an entire corner of my room looked like it was breathing. The marigolds and snapdragons all shifted toward me. These plants were quiet. Quiet plants might perk up around me, but they didn't uproot themselves or destroy a fence to get close to me. They didn't turn obscene shades of their natural colors when I was around.

I plopped down on my bed. The ivy I'd grown by the window snaked toward me, slithering across the floor and up the bedpost, sprouting new leaves and curled tendrils as it reached for me. Ivy wasn't a quiet plant. It was reactive and loud. The only place I could keep it was in my room, where no one would see it but me and my parents.

Being wound up all the time, constantly watching my every move, and being careful not to provoke a response from a red oak or potted fern was exhausting. Ignoring them was the only thing that worked—and sometimes, that didn't even help as much as I wanted it to. The worst part was that it felt wrong to ignore them, like I was denying something that was as much a part of me as the color of my eyes or the coil of my hair. But in the confines of my cramped bedroom, I could let go, and the relief that came with that was something I looked forward to more than anything else.

The sun slanted through my window, shining a large, sallow rectangle onto the wooden floor. The gauzy light saturated my room. I let the creeping vines encircle my fingertips, then wind their way up my arm. I always wondered why the plants preferred me to the sunlight when it was in a plant's nature to reach for it. Mo told me once it was because I *was* the light. She was sentimental like that and I loved her for it, but I thought it might be something else, something I didn't have an explanation for yet, which was the reason I'd applied to take a college-level botany course at City College over the summer.

Mom gave me a book on botany when I got into middle school. She thought if I became a scientist, I could figure out where my power came from and what exactly it was for. It seemed like a good idea when she first brought it up, but as I got older, the "how" became less important than the "why." I wasn't sure the answers I needed could be found in a textbook but I didn't know where else to start.

I opened my laptop and logged into my school portal to check my email. A new message from my advisor sat in the inbox.

During the regular school year, her messages were always one of two things: a reminder that I needed to work on getting my grades up if I wanted to graduate on time, or telling me I was excelling in environmental science and suggesting I apply that same energy to my other classes. But since school was out for the summer, this had to be about the botany class. My heart ticked up.

Hi Briseis,

I hope you are having a wonderful summer. I received your request to enroll in City College's Introductory Botany class, but unfortunately, the class requires participants have a GPA of 3.0 or better. It's a college-level course for college credit. Your GPA was 2.70 at the end of the semester, so I'm afraid you don't qualify. However, you are a wonderful environmental science student, so let's make a plan to raise your GPA so that you can take this class at a later date. Please don't give up hope, Briseis. Keep pushing. You're going to do great your senior year.

Best,
Cassandra Rodriguez
Academic Counselor
Millennium Brooklyn High School

I closed my computer and shoved it across my bed, biting back tears. The baby's breath puffed up, the snapdragons twisted around, and the ivy gripped the metal frame of my bed so hard it groaned in protest. I took a deep breath and the plants settled.

Nothing went right this past school year. Being really good at environmental science and botany workshops didn't get me out of PE. I tried to convince Mom and Mo that running laps and playing badminton was a form of torture, but I still had to dress out and be within smelling distance of dudes who thought wearing deodorant was optional. But PE was the least of my issues with school. The fear that I carried around with me that someone would discover what I could do—or worse, that I'd lose control and get someone hurt—was heavy.

I glanced at my desk, which was little more than a wooden shelf propped on top of some plastic crates Mo had found at a thrift shop. My microscope sat there with my research journals and notepads, colorful Post-it notes sticking from between the pages. The botany book Mom had given me lay open, its pages worn and dog-eared, entire passages highlighted and underlined. I didn't want to make a career out of being a scientist. I just wanted to understand myself better, and something I'd come across in my research struck me in a way nothing else had—raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

Near the back of the botany book was a section labeled *Poisonist*—a subdiscipline of botany that involved the study of poison plants. It piqued my curiosity and stirred something deep in the pit of my stomach—a mixture of fear and excitement.

When I was eight, a girl named Tabitha Douglass dared me to eat five bright red berries off a low-hanging tree behind our elementary school. The fruit was sour and stained my lips and tongue, but I did it. I ate all five. Tabitha ate six just to one-up me. By the time our teacher came to bring us back to class, Tabitha was curled in a ball, screaming in agony, puking her

guts up. We were both rushed to the hospital. Mom burst into the emergency room like somebody told her I was at death's door, hollering and crying with Mo at her side, but I was fine. No stomach cramps, no headache, no irregular heartbeat. Tabitha had uncontrollable diarrhea for a week and couldn't eat anything other than soup and Jell-O.

The doctor concluded that I hadn't ingested as many berries as Tabitha. Technically, that was true. I'd eaten exactly one less than her. But I should have had the same symptoms. I should have felt something.

The incident stuck with me. I thought of it every time I handled anything even slightly toxic—ragweed, poison ivy, jimsonweed. They all made me feel like I'd stuck my hand under a cool tap, and a similar cold feeling had spread from my stomach the day I ate those yewberries in second grade. I hadn't explored every aspect of this strange gift yet, but that piece was always at the back of my mind—the poison plants.

A burst of excitement rippled through me as the memory swirled in my mind. That was the only other thing I had to look forward to this summer—tending to a very specific, very toxic plant. I grabbed my bag, went down to the shop, and stuck my head in the door.

"I'm going to the park for a while," I said.

Mom's face grew tight. "The park?"

The fear in her voice was too subtle for anyone but me to recognize. For her, being in a place as green as the park with all its open fields and trees and wildflowers was too much of a temptation, or maybe a threat. She worried that I'd push myself too far and make something happen that couldn't be ignored or

fixed. Mo wasn't sure I needed to be so careful all the time. She and Mom bumped heads over it. They both wanted me to be safe, but there was always fear—of what might happen, of what the limits of this power might be, of where it came from. They didn't have answers and neither did I. Not yet.

"Got your phone?" Mo asked as she wrapped a dozen parrot tulips in gold foil paper.

"Yup," I said.

"See you at dinner then."

CHAPTER 2

I stood in front of the Marquis de Lafayette memorial outside Prospect Park working up the courage to go in. A man in a safari hat positioned his kids in front of the statue and snapped pictures as they grinned. Tourists buzzed around the park entrance taking selfies, being generally annoying and completely unaware of how much danger they were in by being so close to me. I stared at my sneakers and the brickwork of the path beneath them.

Stay focused. Keep my head low. Go straight to the Ravine.

I marched around the Lafayette statue and into the park. The grass was laid out like a wide green carpet, dotted with softball fields and outcroppings of trees. I took a trail that cut through the Long Meadow, the expanse of green space where people were already doing the absolute most. I understood why people did yoga, went for a jog, or bird-watched in the park, but I had to shake my head over a group of Park Slope parents staked out with cardboard signs, ready to run off the ice cream and gelato vendors so their kids wouldn't be tempted by dairy-based treats.

I stopped at the tree line on the opposite side of the meadow

where the Ravine began. It was Brooklyn's only forest, and it was the one place secluded enough to test some of my more dangerous theories about what I was capable of.

I ducked onto the main trail and kept moving. The place I was going wasn't on the marked path, and my heartbeat kicked up as I got closer.

Keep it together.

The trees flanking the path shook themselves like they'd been roused from a sound sleep. Their thick, leafy canopies knitted together high above my head. I ignored the groan of their branches as they reached for me.

Keeping my eyes down, I took a sharp left off the marked trail through a thick patch of bracken that nobody other than me would have bothered to walk through.

When I reached my destination, the tree I stood in front of was just as ordinary looking as it had been the last time I was there. The towering elm looked identical to dozens of others standing nearby, but that was the point. I didn't want anyone to come across what I was hiding. Not gelato-less children in search of sweets, not dogs off their leashes. There wasn't anyone or anything that deserved the kind of painful death my secret would bring. I shouldn't have been growing it at all. Going into the park was a risk, but I couldn't keep the plant at home, where Mom and Mo would realize what it was and make me get rid of it. The shadowy, untraveled, unmarked trails of the Ravine were my only option.

At the base of the nondescript elm, far enough from the main path, through enough underbrush that even the most curious wanderer wouldn't have come close, I knelt and parted the

tall grass, revealing a small bush dotted with white umbrellalike flowers. The parasols reminded me of lace. They looked like the kind of flower I might add to a bride's bouquet back at the shop.

But only if I wanted to kill the bride.

The previous two days of rain had turned the dirt to a muddy soup, but the plant was hanging in there. I took pictures of it with my phone, adding them to a Google Doc I'd created called *Water Hemlock*. I kept track of its growth, what it looked like through the different stages of its development, what conditions made it grow better, and noting what didn't work.

I'd been growing the water hemlock for a month and trying different variables. Damp, sandy loam worked better than rocky dry soil, and when I dug my fingers into the earth near its roots, the bush would grow fuller, taller. If I concentrated hard enough, new blooms sprouted, though not as easily as they did in plants that weren't poisonous. It took a lot more effort to grow the water hemlock, and I had to concentrate harder to make sure nothing went wrong. The exhaustion and dizziness that came after was so much more intense. That should've been enough to make me abandon the treacherous work, but I couldn't. I was drawn to it.

My phone buzzed. A text from Mo hung at the top of the screen.

Mo: We're getting takeout later. You want pad Thai?

Bri: Sounds good. Veggies only please!

I slipped my phone into my pocket and took a plastic grocery bag from my backpack. This was what my month of work had come to. I was going to harvest one of the smaller stalks and take

it home to study. I'd only keep it long enough to take some notes, write down my observations, and then I'd get rid of it. A few hours. That was all I needed to do the research.

Running my hand down one of the stems, a cool, tingling sensation blossomed in my trembling fingertips. The petals and leaves stretched toward me with an urgency I didn't see in other plants. It was as if the water hemlock couldn't wait to make contact with my skin. I plucked the entire thing out of the ground, being careful not to touch the root, and placed it in the bag.

I left the Ravine with the bagged plant hidden in my backpack and walked home. I peeked in at Mom and Mo, who were busy loading premade arrangements into the floral cooler, before heading up to my room.

I'd debated cultivating the hemlock for months before I actually worked up the nerve to do it. I worried about being in the park and not being able to keep the other plants from noticing me. On top of that, I was scared my parents would find out. I was pretty sure that growing a poisonous bush in the park wasn't what they had in mind for how I should spend my summer. They wanted me to hang out with the few friends I had and do whatever it was they thought other kids my age were doing. Except I didn't think they understood how hard it was for me to balance friendships with the need to be near my plants, keeping what I could do a secret, and navigating the world in a way that didn't draw the attention of every single blade of grass, every tree, every shrub.

In my room, I closed the door and set my backpack on the bed. I thought about locking the door, but I pictured Mom

taking it off the hinges and decided not to. I flipped on my microscope and sat at my desk. I switched out my glasses for a pair with a built-in magnifier and pulled on a pair of plastic gloves. Removing the hemlock from the bag, I broke off a sprig and tossed it into a metal tray on my desk. I opened a notebook to write down my observations.

The taller plants could grow up to seven feet tall, but this sample was only about a foot, its leaves six inches long with alternately arranged oval leaflets. It was sharp-toothed and its leaf veins terminated at the bottom, not the tip.

The root was the deadliest part. Over time, as the blossoms grew taller, the poison pooled in the bottom third of the plant, leaving the leaves and flowers fairly harmless as long as they weren't ingested.

I pulled the roots apart. They looked like small, pale carrots and smelled like them, too. They oozed a thick straw-colored liquid as I sliced into them with a scalpel. This was the substance that would bring on nausea, vomiting, seizures, and ultimately, death.

A set of hands clamped on my shoulders.

The scalpel slipped and sliced through my glove. Into my thumb.

"Oh shit, Briseis! I'm so sorry!" Mo blurted out. "I was trying to scare you a little. I didn't know you were studying."

I ripped off my glove. The gash on my thumb bloomed like a rose. Blood trickled into the palm of my hand and down my arm in thin ribbons.

I looked up at Mo. I couldn't think straight. "I—I need—"

"I'll get the first aid kit." She hurried out of the room.

Fear gripped my chest. My breaths came in quick, shallow bursts. A cold ache pushed its way from my thumb to my wrist and up to my forearm. I looked at the time on my phone.

Seconds ticked by.

Mo came back with the first aid kit and reached for my hand. I jerked away from her. She couldn't get the poisonous liquid on her or she'd die, the same way I was about to.

"I need to see it, love," she said.

"No—no, it's— Can you hand me some gauze?"

She handed me a few pieces and I pressed them against the cut. I didn't care about the wound or the pain. The poison was already working. There was no stopping it, no way to reverse it. I couldn't form the words to make her understand. She didn't even know what I'd been doing. A rush of guilt swept over me. When I died, she'd blame herself.

The ivy suddenly burst from its clay pot, shattering it with a loud crack. Mo jumped back as the plants doubled their length to reach me, encircling my ankles.

"Hey, Mo," I managed to mutter. "I—I love you. A lot."

She sidestepped the tangle of vines at my feet. "You okay, love? It's only a little blood. I don't even think it'll need stitches. Wait." She touched my cheek. "Are you in shock?"

I shook my head. "Can you get Mom?"

"Uh, sure," she said, still looking confused. She left and I checked the clock again. Three minutes had gone by. The poison only needed fifteen minutes to kill me. This was my own stupid fault. I'd given into my curiosity instead of being careful the way Mom and Mo had taught me.

Four minutes.

All the plants in my room had turned toward me.

Mom came barreling into the room. "Let me see— Oh, God! Is the finger cut off? Where is it? If we put it in ice, they can reattach it!"

Mo came in behind her. "Thandie, it's a cut, not an amputation."

Five minutes.

I stared at my hand. The tingling had stopped and was now confined to the tip of my thumb. I tried to breathe slower so I could take stock of how I felt.

I couldn't tell if my pulse was faster because of the hemlock or because I was scared. Still no sweating, no seizures, or blurred vision. The scalpel lay on my desk. The blood smeared on it had begun to turn black. That was the poison acting on the cells, breaking them apart. If it was doing that inside my body, I should've felt something by now.

Six minutes.

Mom knelt next to me. "Bri, baby, are you okay?" She eyed the tangle of ivy around my ankles.

I held my hand away so that she couldn't touch it. "I—I think so." I actually wasn't sure at all.

"Let's take a deep breath and calm down," Mo said. She took Mom by the arm and guided her to my bed. She turned to me. "Briseis, love, I am so sorry."

"No, it's my fault," I said. "It's okay."

Nine minutes.

Something was wrong, but not in the way I expected. Nothing was happening.

"You scared the crap out of me," Mom said to Mo.

"You sit there and breathe," Mo said. "You look more shook up than Briseis."

Mom shot her a pointed glance, then turned to me. "You sure you're okay, baby?" I nodded. "Put a Band-Aid and some ointment on that."

Mo came over and cupped my face in her hands. "I'm gonna get you a sign to put on your door that says Future Botanist At Work so I know not to walk up on you like that."

I forced a quick smile.

"Love you," she said.

She and Mom left. I disentangled myself from the ivy and bandaged my finger. I swept the plant parts and the bloody scalpel into a plastic bag, shoved the whole thing into an empty shoebox, and dropped it down the trash chute in the hallway.

I sat on the edge of my bed in a haze of confusion. Thirty minutes had gone by and . . . nothing.

I grabbed a book from the stack next to my bed and flipped to a page with an illustration of the water hemlock. Contact with the liquid in the root was deadly and it went right into my bloodstream through the cut. According to everything I knew about the plant, I should've been dying an agonizing death. The walls of my cells should've been disintegrating. My blood should've been unable to clot, running like water and spilling from every orifice. But with each passing moment, I breathed easier. The tingling had stopped altogether. Only a dull ache remained.

Hours passed. Mom closed up the shop, brought me pad

Thai and a bottled water, then went to watch reruns of *Penny Dreadful* with Mo in the living room. I picked at my food but couldn't stomach eating. I scrolled through my phone and found Gabby's name in the contacts. I started to text her, changed my mind, and called instead.

"Hey, Bri. Long time no speak," Gabby said, a slight edge to her voice. "What's goin' on?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just wanted to call you."

It had been a month since we last spoke. There were some texts in between, but hearing her voice brought up a bunch of mixed feelings I'd been avoiding.

Gabby knew some of what I could do but liked to pretend she didn't. At junior prom, I'd been standing next to her when her boyfriend gave her a corsage that looked like he'd pulled it out of a dumpster. It had plumped right up and looked freshly cut after a few seconds in my presence. Gabby's boyfriend was too busy lookin' at her boobs to notice, but she'd seen it.

It became this unspoken thing between us. We didn't talk about the grass literally being greener wherever I stood, or why the maple tree growing in front of our building stayed green so much longer than any of the other trees on our street, or how the flowers I'd given her mom when she graduated nursing school had lived for almost a year. I'd been tryna tell her the whole truth of what I could do for years, but it never seemed like the right time to go into more detail.

"It's been a weird day," I said.

"Every day is a weird day for you, Bri."

That hurt. I wanted to tell her about the hemlock. I guess this wasn't the right time either. I decided to tell her the version

that left any mention of my strange ability out. "Mo scared me while I was dissecting a plant. I almost cut my finger off."

"Damn," she said, laughing. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I think so."

"Hold up. What are you doin' dissecting plants on summer vacation?"

"It's kind of my thing."

"It doesn't have to be, you know," she said. "You could do something that doesn't have to do with plants at all. Have you ever tried, you know . . . not being weird around plants?"

There was an awkward silence. I thought about cussin' her out. She would've gave it right back to me, then I'd be mad at her instead of just disappointed.

"My parents own a flower shop," I said. "I can't exactly get away from them—from the plants, I mean."

Gabby huffed. "So does that mean you're working there for the summer?"

"That was the plan, but Mom and Mo want me to take a break."

"I wish my mom would let me take a break," she said. "She said I gotta pay for my own phone this summer, so I'm babysitting for the people upstairs."

"Babysitting? I mean, I guess that's pretty low-key. Easy money, right?"

"Nope. That kid is a whole demon. He told his grandma to shut up the other day and nobody said anything. He's mad disrespectful. My grandma would've snatched my soul right out my body."

I wondered if I could survive telling my grandma to shut up.

Probably not, but I'd never chance it. "Oh hell no. You better watch out."

"*He* better watch out. I'll put his little ass in the cozy corner."

"What's a cozy corner?"

"Girl, it's a corner of his room with pillows and blankets where he gets sent to think about his behavior. It's like bougie time-out."

"Does it work?"

"No. He just thinks about how he's gonna be even more terrible when he gets up."

We both laughed. I looked at the cut on my thumb. It throbbed, but it wasn't too bad.

"Hey, Briseis?"

"Yeah?"

She sighed. "I don't know, Bri. Maybe listen to your moms. Try to have some fun this summer? You don't have to grow bean sprouts or potatoes or whatever. At least not all the time. That's not what most people are doing anyway. We can go to a show or a concert or something. I know you've seen everything already, but still."

I didn't grow potatoes or bean sprouts. I liked to grow flowers, vines, and the occasional deadly bush of hemlock. The words to tell her were on the tip of my tongue. I could lay it all out and maybe—just maybe—she would finally understand.

Gabby laughed. "If you can tear yourself away from your weeds—"

No. Nothing had changed. That's exactly why we didn't talk the way we used to.

"Have you talked to Marlon lately?" I asked.

"Yesterday," said Gabby. "You?"

"It's been a minute."

Marlon moved to Staten Island with their grandma over spring break and we talked less and less. But with Gabby, our friendship had hit a rough patch that didn't have anything to do with distance. It felt like the whole school year had been a countdown to the end of something. Like we were about to get off a roller coaster we'd been on since fifth grade when we'd met and become best friends. We damn sure weren't best friends anymore and we were slowly becoming something that looked less like friendship and more like people who didn't even halfway like each other.

I lay back on my pillow, watching the baby's breath in the corner of the room expand and contract. For a minute, I tried to forget about my thumb and the water hemlock. I tried to pretend that what I could do hadn't pushed its way into every corner of my life like an invasive weed. I wanted to get ahold of whatever this thing was, help my parents in the shop, and maybe have friends who understood me better. It didn't feel like too much to ask.

"We could find something to get into," I said, trying desperately to hold back a wave of sadness. "The library or the museum? Someplace quiet."

"And without any plants," Gabby added.

I sighed into the phone. That was a dig and she knew it.

"Yeah," I said, feeling defeated. I moved on to something else. "Did I tell you our building got sold? Rent is going up for the shop and the apartment, again."

"Damn. What are you gonna do?"

"I don't know." There were a lot of things up in the air and I was worried about what would happen if we couldn't bring in some more money. Everything was a mess.

A voice came screeching through the phone. "Gabby! You didn't take the chicken out the freezer?"

"Shit," Gabby said. I knew that ring of terror in her voice. Her mom, Miss Lindy, didn't play when it came to food. If she told Gabby to take out the chicken and she didn't, it was gonna be a problem.

"You better get the hair dryer or something."

"Mommy, I'm sorry! I'm taking it out right now!"

"I've been at work all day, and you couldn't take out the chicken?" Miss Lindy said in the background.

"Gotta go, Briseis," Gabby said, and hung up.

I lay across my bed, feeling the beat of my heart and listening to myself breathe. Maybe the poison hadn't gotten into my cut; maybe it was such a small amount that I wasn't affected. I looked at my thumb. The gash was oozing through the Band-Aid.

I thought back to when I met Gabby and Marlon. Our gym teacher, Mr. Cates, put us in the same group for relay races around the blacktop. We all pretended to be injured after the first lap and spent the rest of class sitting on a bench in the cool fall air, talking about our favorite movies and roasting Mr. Cates because he wore gym shorts that were way too small and his knees and elbows were forever ashy. The trees that crowded the gated outdoor area were leafless, preparing for the winter—all except the one we were closest to. It bloomed as we laughed

together. Gabby was the first one to notice. She clapped her hand down on Marlon's shoulder and pointed to the trees. Their eyes were wide and fearful. If they were scared of the trees, they'd be scared of me too. I knew right then I'd have to hide what I could do.

I hated it. I should have let it all go and made the trees green or made the grass grow and owned it. Maybe that would've been better than pretending. I wanted to know what it would be like to be myself, fully, right from the jump. No secrets, no hiding.

But it was too late for that. My friends were pulling away from me, my parents were worried about me, school was a mess, and this power squatting inside me was trying to break free. How much more of this could I take before I reached a tipping point? Before I did something I couldn't take back?