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Opening extract from

Poison Diaries 2: Nightshade

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NIGHTSHADE

1

I WAKE, AS I usually do, to the sound of Weed's voice. It rustles in my ear as I sleep. It skitters through my dreams like autumn leaves along the ground. My skin warms, my breath quickens. The memories come unbidden.

It is early spring, before I became ill. Weed and I are on one of our long rambles through the rolling green fields of Northumberland. He tells me strange fables, one after another, of a world where plants can speak, and all forms of life are of equal worth: humans, animals, and plants, too.

I laugh, because the tales are so marvellous. He turns to me, solemn-faced, and I explain my reaction.

"Marvellous? You may find them so. The trees are quite serious when they tell them."

"But it is only a tale, a story – even to the trees, is it not? Look, here is a lovely place for our picnic. Shall we stop?"

How foolish I was then. How wrong I was, about so many things.

I thought love was a rare orchid that bloomed only once – but once it bloomed, it bloomed forever.

I thought that with the death of my mother, so many years ago, the worst of my life had already come and gone.

I thought my father would protect me from harm.

Was I wrong about Weed as well? Every time I draw breath I catch the earth scent of him. I lie motionless in my bed, alone in my tower bedchamber. A summer breeze floats through the open shutters, and I feel the tenderness of his kiss.

The last time I saw him I was dying. My mind

flew with dark wings, and I looked down on my own pain-wracked body as if it belonged to another. I had nightmare visions of a strange prince who fed me poison, who wooed and tormented me, who showed me bloody scenes and unspeakable evils – evils wrought by my father.

My heart still pounds when I recall those hellish dreams. I thought I would not survive them. There were times I did not wish to.

More memories play on my half-closed eyelids as the morning sun tries to pry them open: Weed sitting at my bedside, spooning medicine to my lips. Wiping my brow. Gazing at me in love and grief, his moss-green eyes bright with tears.

Then he was gone. He lost hope and left. Too faithless to stay by my side until the end, he abandoned me at the worst point of my illness. That is what Father said, after my fever finally broke and I gasped and cried my way back to life, like a second birth.

"He is gone, and good riddance. He is a coward and a trickster. You are not the first maiden to be

fooled by such a scoundrel. Bear your shame alone now; marry your work, and forget him, for you will not see him again." Father said it coldly, and not without satisfaction.

Of course, what Father says cannot always be believed. But Weed is gone; that much is true. There has been no word, and now the summer draws to a close.

I stretch and turn beneath the cool linen sheet. I flex each limb and yawn, like a waking cat. Am I well? It is hard to say. In some ways I am stronger than I was. I am less trusting, less innocent. I have thoughts, sometimes, that I barely recognise as my own. I feel capable of things that I never would have dreamed of before.

I have even taken over my father's healing practice. I had to; Father is too busy now, or too indifferent, to tend to people's ills as he used to. With my knowledge of plants, it was not difficult to learn the basic cures, and they are most of what any healer needs. One fever, croup, or childbirth pang is much like another.

Once I walked through Northumberland hooded and silent, too shy to speak, too unimportant to approach. Now I am known and respected, and even a little bit feared. I do not mind that.

But there is an ache within, an empty place. My heart, once lush with joy, now lies fallow. Everything tastes like dust.

Weed, I have whispered a thousand times as I wandered alone through the meadows of Hulne Park. *Where are you? Why did you leave? When will you come back to me?* But the dull, ocean roar of the grass is the only answer I receive.

Tell him I love him still, I weep into the bark of an ancient pine. *Tell him for me, please.*

Still, I get no reply.

I long to drift back to sleep and bury myself in the bittersweet dream of all that I have lost. But I must rise and dress. It is Sunday.

Yes, I go to church on Sundays, now. I go alone, for my father worships no god but knowledge. The tested,

proven theories of long-dead men, as recorded in the musty books in the Duke's library – those are his only sacred texts.

I myself have sometimes wondered what force could have put so many kinds of life on the earth, and made us need each other so, and hurt each other so, but I have not yet conceived of an answer. Still, to church I go, three miles on foot in the hot August haze. It is for my own protection. A woman who knows how to heal will always be suspected of witchcraft in these parts. The witch laws were struck down before I was born, but the people fear what they fear.

This is the north of England, after all; it is beautiful and raw here, and the land, the wind, and the sea have minds of their own. The people do, too. The north is not London, where the latest fashion is always best. In the north, the new is suspect, and the old ways die hard.

Like an apparition I glide silently into the chapel, so that everyone may see I am a virtuous and God-fearing young woman, and that my powers, such as

they are, are drawn from nothing more sinister than a sprig of feverfew, a tisane of camomile, or a paste of crushed garlic and cloves.

"Good morning, Miss Luxton," the people murmur as I pass. "Good day and good health to you." When they ask about my father, and wonder why he no longer goes out, I say he is busy with his apothecary garden, or studying ancient cures at the Duke's library at Alnwick Castle. The truth is that since my recovery, his frequent dark moods have knitted themselves into a ceaseless gloom. He works day and night, in his study or in the garden. At mealtimes he is silent; when we pass each other in the hall, he barely looks at me.

I thought I was alone before, before Weed came and I had only Father's stern presence for company. Now Father is as lost to me as Weed is.

I sit stiff-backed in a pew, not far from the church doors. I stand when the preacher asks us to stand. I kneel when he tells us to kneel. When it is time to sing hymns, I raise my voice with the congregation, not so

loudly that I draw attention to myself, but with enough force to be heard.

When the service is over I linger, my head bowed. Those who would beg my help approach me in turn: "Miss Luxton, the baby won't stop coughing." "Miss Luxton, a week's come and gone and the wound won't heal." "Miss Luxton, it's near my time, I need something to ease the birth pangs, will you come right away if I send my girl for you?"

One after another they tell me their aches, their pains, their worries. I nod in sympathy and promise to come when needed. Then I follow my fellow worshippers through the door, stepping from the cool, damp air of the church into the merciless noonday sun.

The preacher speaks to each one of us as we exit, gazing into our eyes, clasping our hands. He tells us to believe, so that we may be saved. "Hellfire is a *thousand* times hotter than this," he warns, shaking a finger to the sky. "A *thousand* times a thousand! But you must believe!"

Outside the church the people gather in small,

frightened groups and whisper, "The end of the world is nigh."

They are righter than they know.

There – it has happened again. The words appear in my mind as if someone spoke them aloud. But there is no one here. It is as if my thoughts are not entirely my own.

And the voice – it chills my blood to admit it – but I have come realise that I know that voice. It is the voice from my nightmares. The voice of the evil prince.

He calls himself Oleander. The Prince of Poisons.

Shaken, I walk home from church, lay down my light summer shawl, eat a simple lunch of bread and cheese, alone. The cottage is quiet. Father must be out wandering the fields, or brooding behind the tall gate of his locked garden.

Once I thought of it as his apothecary garden, but now I know better. Those plants are poison, and the garden is something unnatural – a living weapon. Weed told me as much.

Your father has done me a great service, planting that garden. I hope he is not fool enough to think he is its master.

The words snake through my head, slow and inexorable, like oil spreading over water.

If so, he will pay the price someday, for that garden already has a master. One who will allow no pretenders to the throne.

There is a rap at the door.

I startle. Am I losing my mind? Is the dark prince of my nightmares standing outside my cottage this instant?

A charming thought, lovely. But I have no need of doors. All the locked gates in the world could not contain me. I enter when and where I wish. I hold the key to every poisoned heart.

The rap comes again, insistent. I remember the woman at church, the one who was heavy with child. Perhaps her pains have started. Trying to shake off this strange bout of madness, I grab my shawl and my medical bag and hurry to the door.

"I am ready," I begin to say, but two men stand

before me. Local men, both farmers. I have seen them before, at market day. Their awkward bulk fills the doorframe and blocks the slanted afternoon light.

"Miss Luxton?"

"Yes."

The taller man glances at the bag in my hands. "Might we come in for a moment and speak with you? It won't take long."

I bid them enter and show them to the parlour, but I remain standing. "I would ask you to sit, but as you see I was just on my way out," I say, gesturing with my bag. "I trust you are not ill? That is the usual reason for strangers to appear at my door."

The men shake their heads and glance uncomfortably around the room, with its vaulted ceiling and tall, arched windows. Long ago this cottage was a chapel. Now it is our home. *Is that why I am being curse with this strange madness?* I think. *Can the echo of a thousand unanswered prayers ever truly fade? Can a chapel be haunted?*

My uneasy visitors wring their hats in their hands.