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opening extract from

The Poison Diaries

written by

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published by

HarperCollins Children's Books

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Chapter One

15th March

REY SKIES; THE RAIN CAME AND WENT ALL MORNING. *A cold wind blew in gusts, worsening as the day went on, until the lowest branch of the great chestnut tree in the courtyard splintered down the middle and crashed to the ground. If I had been standing underneath, I would have been crushed.*

Spun wool after breakfast. Read for a short while, but my eyes ached too much from sewing to continue long. Changed the soaking water for the belladonna seeds.

Father is still not home; it has been two days.



The berries of the belladonna plant are beautiful. I have always thought so. I would string the plump

black pearls on silk thread and wear them around my neck if they were not so deadly.

The seeds are nearly as poisonous as the berries; Father has warned me a thousand times. But I am careful. First I tie the seeds in clean muslin bags and drop them in a pail of cold water. Before they can be planted they must soak for at least two weeks, and I must change the water every day. That is how Mother Nature would do it: the snow would fall and melt and then fall again. And it would be too risky to leave the seeds in the ground during the cold months; they might get eaten by birds and carried away to grow in some distant field, where they could wreak their mischief without warning. Instead I make-believe a winter for them, to trick them into growing only when and where I wish.

Even after all that care, only a few seeds will sprout, and of those half will soon shrivel back into the dirt. Are you so in love with death, lovely lady? I call you lovely lady, for that is what 'belladonna' means. You are curiously reluctant to be born. Is our world not beautiful enough for you? Or perhaps there is another, more perfect realm in which you prefer to dwell?

I laugh at myself now; what foolish imaginings! But when Father is away I must make do with

whatever companions I can find: a sparrow on the windowsill, a shadow on the wall, or even a tiny, dangerous seed. We have lived alone here among the ruins for so long, Father and I, and he is away so much, and is so silent and lost in his own thoughts even when he is here, I sometimes worry I might lose my speaking voice completely from lack of use.

Let me test it.

"Hello."

"Hello?"

Feh! I sound like a frog. A tincture of lemon balm and anise would cure this broken voice of mine.

Or someone to talk to. That would do it too.



I wonder where Father has gone this time. Someone must be very ill to keep him away from home so long. Father is not a doctor, nor is he a "butcher" (that is what he calls the surgeons). But high born or low, when the people of Northumberland are sick, they send for Thomas Luxton. On the rare times when Father has let me go to market day and walk through the crowds, with my cloak pulled close around my face (he does not wish me to speak to anyone, for he says they will try to trick me into revealing secrets about his work), I hear the things they say:

"You're better off with Luxton than those university-

trained doctors, with their ointments that blister the flesh, and their buckets to fill with your blood."

"Doctors! Tell 'em you've got a sore toe and they'll take a hacksaw to your leg!"

"Luxton may be an odd duck, but at least he doesn't burn you and bleed you and stick you all over with leeches. Luxton follows the old ways, the lost ways…"

"…the witches' ways," some of them might add in a fearful whisper.

But Father would scorn the very notion of witchcraft. People call him an apothecary, but he considers himself a man of science, and a "humble gardener," as he likes to say. By that he means that he grows all the plants he needs to make his medicines right here, in the garden beds that surround our stone cottage. He grows other plants too, in a separate walled garden behind a tall, black iron gate. The gate is held shut by a heavy chain, fastened with a lock that is bigger than my fist.

When I was small, Father warned me morning and evening never to approach the locked garden, until I was so afraid I couldn't sleep without dreaming of snakes chasing me. The snakes' bodies were links of thick metal chain, and their gaping jaws clicked open and shut like a lock, catching at my heels no matter how fast I ran. Finally I asked Father:

"Why would anyone grow bad plants that have to be locked up behind walls? Why not only grow the good ones, and let the bad ones wither and die?"

"Plants are part of nature; they are neither good nor bad," he replied, drawing me to his knee. "It is the purpose we put them to that matters. The same plant that can sicken and kill an innocent girl like you can, if mixed in the right proportions, make a medicine that saves a young man from typhoid or cures a baby of the measles."

"But why do you keep some plants apart then?" I demanded to know.

"Because of you, Jessamine. Because you are only a child. Until you are older, and have the wisdom to know what you may touch and taste and what you may not, I keep the most powerful plants behind the locked gate, where they cannot harm you."

"You don't have to lock the 'pothecary garden, Father." I pouted like the baby I was at the time. "If you tell me not to go in I surely will not."

"If you surely will not," he said with a smile, "then the existence of the lock should not trouble you in the slightest."

I have never won an argument with Father, but it is not for lack of trying.

I add more coal to the fire, and light a fresh candle

to sew by. It is mid-afternoon, but the sky is thickly blanketed with clouds. The day feels dim as dusk.

Father must be working hard, wherever he is. I hope it is not a child who is ill. Not that I am squeamish about sick people: in fact, I prefer to go with Father when he pays his visits. I like to watch how men thrash about as they battle against terrible fevers, or how women moan and grunt as they labour to bring their babes forth, while Father mixes just the right medicines to help ease their pains.

But there is so much work to do at the cottage, especially with spring coming. Now that I am old enough to mind the house and care for the gardens myself, Father usually insists that I stay at home.

So here I remain, with only my sewing basket and the wet seed babies of my lovely lady for company. A damp, shaded spot near the stone wall suits the belladonna plant best. Or so Father tells me. I have never seen it growing there myself, for I am still not permitted to enter the apothecary garden. It is too dangerous; I am too young, I do not know enough – Father is stubborn as stone and will not change his mind. Yet I want to learn. For now I content myself with leafing through Father's books and examining the specimens he brings home.

That is how I came to know the belladonna

berries. Every autumn Father collects the lush, ink-black fruits and preserves them in a glass jar, that he keeps on a high shelf in his study. In late winter he removes a few and delicately slits them open to harvest the seed.

This is the first year he has entrusted the seeds to me to prepare for planting. "Remember, Jessamine," Father warned, "you will be raising a litter of assassins."

That was Father's idea of a joke, but I knew to heed the warning. When I change the soaking water, I wear gloves and remember not to touch my fingers to my lips or eyes. After I finish, I wash my hands twice with lye soap and throw the gloves in a bucket of bleach. I place a lid over the pail that holds the seeds and the fresh water, tie it fast with strong twine, and mark it **POISON.**

I do this even when I am alone, as I am now – one never knows when a vagrant might wander by in search of a cool drink. Even those who cannot read will know the sign **POISON**. If they ignore it, they do so at their peril.

Then I carry the discarded soaking water far from the cottage and drain it into a swampy, overgrown ditch. I choose one so thickly surrounded by bramble and gorse bushes that the duke's sheep and cattle

would never try to drink from it, nor any human either.

Last week I found a dead cat by the ditch. But I think it had died of something else. Even so, when I told Father, he dug a hole and buried the body right away, and Father is no particular friend to cats.

It was a deep hole, deep enough for a man's grave. The cat was small, with soft orange fur. I know it was soft because I petted it to say good-bye, but the body was cold and stiff and Father told me not to touch.

I said a silent prayer too, as Father shovelled the dirt back into the hole. Soon the last glimpse of orange had disappeared; a slight depression in the muddy earth was all that marked the place. Within a fortnight that would grow over with brambles too.

"It is a rare beast that gets such a funeral," Father remarked, sweating and leaning on his spade. "Lucky cat."

Personally I think the cat would have been luckier had it lived. Then again, life for a stray, unwanted thing is not always pleasant, so perhaps Father was right after all.

And of course, we have other ways of keeping the mice away from our cottage.

Father laughs when I call Hulne Abbey "our cottage".

"It is a ruin, a wreck, a pile of weathered, moss-covered rocks," he always corrects me. But this is the only home I have ever known, and who can feel at home in a ruin? Anyway, Father exaggerates; where we live is no mere pile of rocks, though it is centuries old. It is not large, but it has a feeling of spaciousness; even, if you ask me, of grace.

That is no surprise. Father says our house used to be the chapel, in the long-ago days when the old monastery still stood on these lands. For miles around, the buildings and farms of the abbey stretched up through the hills until the distant spot where the planting fields end and the line of the forest begins. For five hundred years these fertile acres teemed with people and animals and life. No more though. Now Father and I live in the chapel; the rest of the monastery is rubble, and all the Catholics are in Ireland and France.

Sometimes, when the weather is fair, I lie on my back in the grass of a nearby field. I close my eyes and try to imagine that last, terrible day, in the hours before it was all laid waste. But even the grandfather of the oldest person in the town of Alnwick was not alive to see it. There is no one who can tell me what it was like to hide at the edge of the forest, as I imagine I would have done, watching in terror and

fascination as the king's soldiers smashed the ancient buildings to bits and then hunted down the fleeing monks like so many helpless rabbits.

Father often says he wishes they had torn down the chapel and left the monks' library standing instead, but I like our home just as it is, a long, rectangular structure made of rough-hewn blocks of stone. Long ago Father divided the interior into rooms. My bedchamber is small and up a long flight of stairs, in the old bell tower. On the main floor is a bedchamber for Father, a study in which he does his work, and a front parlour where we take our meals. It is where I write my garden diary too, at the end of each day's labours.

Of all these rooms, the parlour is the largest, and the one that still looks most like a church. There is a high, vaulted ceiling, and tall, arched windows that Father says once had stained-glass pictures in them. Now they are filled with thick, plain glass that is divided into many small panes. On sunny days the light slants through the panes and makes narrow, glowing pathways across the dark wood planks of the floor.

I used to play hopscotch with those paths of light when I was small – *if I leap over the light without touching it, Mama will live,* I would say to myself. *But*

if my foot touches the light she will die.

My foot never, ever touched the light – to this day I will swear it – but Mama died anyway.

Oh, how I wept! I was only four, so perhaps the outburst can be forgiven. But I remember how Father's voice stayed calm.

"That is the way of things," he explained to me at the time. "All creatures die when their time comes. No matter what we do, or how we may feel about it, nature always gets her prize in the end."

Father is always so strong and wise. Sometimes I wish I were more like him. I wish I could accept that the way fate has arranged things is both right and good, and that living here alone with him, sewing and cooking and tending the garden, and perhaps, when I am old enough – *perhaps*, in my mind I can hear him say it! – learning to help him with his work, as I am beginning to do now with the belladonna seeds, is exactly the way my life was intended to be.

But, other times, the scent of bread baking, a remembered, loving smile, or an especially lonely winter night, with no one to sing me to sleep, leaves me weeping in secret for Mama, and filled with a kind of fury I cannot name.

It happens less often as the years go by though.