

— *Bloodline Trilogy 2* —

POISON

A Novel

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Poison: A Novel

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Chapter 1

Monday

A COOL AUTUMN BREATH whispered at the base of Keelyn's neck and drew her attention to the front door of the busy diner. The man who entered wove through the chairs, unapologetic as he bumped customers along his path. His pale hand laid claim to the red vinyl stool beside her.

"Is this taken?"

Her words caught in her throat as she tried to reply. In the void of her silence, the stranger leaned toward the counter and pushed his scratched, dented silverware into her space.

A clear move to establish territorial dominance.

Heat flushed her cheeks. Heaviness settled in her gut and needled at the peace she generally felt being in the place where she'd shared sweet memories with her mother and sister.

A mother now dead.

A sister estranged.

Keelyn pressed her lips together as she gathered her thoughts. "I'm expecting my fiancé." His eyes pinned her, and she felt entranced by the unusual color of his irises. Like malachite with variegated ribbons of green.

Dark and edgy.

"How about I keep the seat warm for him?" He offered his hand. "Until another one becomes available?"

Keelyn glanced around the diner and saw no other empty seat. She accepted the gesture. His grip tightened around hers, emanating an icy chill that seeped through her skin and thickened her blood. Each heartbeat pulsed at the tips of her fingers. She pulled her hand from his with a tug that unbalanced her on the stool, and he grabbed her elbow to keep her from falling. Once he released her, she swept her hands over her arms to squelch the sensation of burrowing insects.

He seated himself beside her.

Keelyn's eyes landed on the TV behind the counter. She motioned to tease up the volume. A mother and her two small children missing—the story consumed Denver local news for days. Rebecca, Bryce, and Sadie, seemingly all kidnapped when she had gone to pick them up from school. No leads yet. Keelyn's heart ached as she watched Rebecca's husband break down in front of the news cameras and shove them away.

It echoed her own grief for those she'd lost.

She pivoted toward the counter and pushed the plate of cookies she'd made for Lee off to the other side, her attention back to the crossword puzzle.

"Hazel," the stranger said.

Keelyn's heart leapt. "What?"

"As in witch or the color of your eyes."

She scanned the clues to the right side of her mostly empty boxes.

"Despair. Four across."

Glancing back at the puzzle, she put the letters in place.

The pen she held tapped against the newspaper. The black print sharpened as her vision crystallized from the adrenaline. What was it about this stranger that caused her nerves to fire? She closed her eyes and sent a silent wish for Lee to arrive soon.

"Unholy. Twenty down."

Keelyn's eyes shot open. He reached around her to point. Did he understand personal space? This time, she didn't engage him and slid an inch to the right, hoping he would pick up on her obvious disinterest in continuing a conversation.

"You're a very confident woman." He leaned forward and peered around her arm. She rotated her chin in her hand, looking at him directly. His deficiency in reading her body language annoyed her. Keelyn worked as a paid consultant interpreting nonverbal communication, and most people intuitively understood cultural boundaries.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you mark your answers in indelible ink." He traced a finger over her filled-in squares. "You don't think you'll need to change any?"

"Why is that a concern of yours?" Keelyn put the pen down and creased the paper over it. At the footrest of her bar stool lay the loop for her Vera Bradley tote, and she reached to open the bag and slide in the puzzle.

A prickle itched at her ear as she waited for the jingle that would signal someone's entrance from the front door. Hope edged at her elevated

heartbeat that Lee would pop through and she would have a reason to ask this interloper to leave.

The stranger seemed unfazed by her question. “Captain Watson has been delayed,” he said. He pulled the tumbler of water the waitress left for him closer and twirled his index finger through the ice. Within the frigid vortex, his finger grew blue.

The tinkle of frozen cubes against the glass sent shivers up her spine. “And you know this how?”

“I know many things about Lee. About you, Miss Blake.”

Pressure swelled in her forehead as blood rushed to her head. Her thoughts raced back through their short conversation. Had she told him her name?

She massaged two fingers into her temple to counter the pain. “You’re a friend of his?”

“An old acquaintance.”

“How old?”

He sipped his water then pulled a purplish finger across his full lips to wipe the droplets away. “I’m surprised Lee lets you keep this little routine.” The glass clinked against the counter like a crack in a window. “Being a SWAT guy and all. The two of you meeting at this diner every week is predictable. It allows people to find you. Maybe someone you wouldn’t want to meet.”

“Is there a message I can give Lee for you?”

He twisted a ring on his right pinky. An eight-pointed star behind an hourglass. “Who said I wanted to talk to Lee? He’s detained because of me, so I could speak to you.”

Keelyn’s mouth dried. “He’s injured?”

“Physically, he’s fine. Homicides can have a nasty way of interrupting his day.”

“You’re responsible for a murder he’s investigating?”

“Never directly, of course. Did Lee ever tell you how he felt that day?”

There are instances in a person’s life where the words “that day” hold such significance that not another word need be uttered to clarify their meaning. Some of them are collective, like the day two planes took down the twin towers, and others are intensely personal moments.

Keelyn’s throat thickened at the mention of her life’s moment, but her concern for Lee’s welfare and the implications of this stranger’s knowledge

edged over her sense of foreboding. “That day is something he doesn’t talk about.”

“You’re not curious about it? Such an odd beginning for a relationship. You held hostage by your stepfather. The slaying of nearly half your family. Lee playing a part in saving your life.”

Her heart pounded against her ribs.

“You never did tell me your name.” Keelyn’s voice shook despite her effort to stay calm.

He leaned toward her, a smirk playing across his face.

Cold fear shot through her. Each muscle tensed as his breath warmed her cheek, his lips inches from her ear.

His word whispered malice. “Lucent.”

Her heart collapsed as he pulled away. She closed her eyes, the memory always at the forefront even though the incident was seven years past. Her stepfather before her, the black hilt of a knife in his hand as he held the sharp metal blade against her mother’s throat. The panic in her mother’s eyes as her father spewed hate. Her younger siblings cowered in the corner behind her. The sentence her father repeated like a stuttering vinyl record.

I’m doing what Lucent wants.

Keelyn’s body shook as she remembered those few tentative steps she’d tried to take to stay his hand. The phone had stopped him.

A call from the police.

Keelyn swallowed hard. She gripped the counter as she turned toward her nemesis.

“Lucent isn’t a person. He’s my stepfather’s hallucination. I want to know your *real* name. I want to know how you’re privy to my stepfather’s psychiatric record. Were you in prison with him?”

“So unlike a deer to attack.”

“Tell me!” Her words arced above the quiet murmur of the other diner guests.

Several patrons within earshot looked their way. The man, Lucent, smiled and waved them off. He placed a hand on her shoulder, trapping strands of her brown hair and pulling her head into an awkward tilt. When she tried to shake him free, his fingers dug into her skin.

“I’ve left something here for you.”

“Lee is coming. I think you need to leave.”

“Raven’s daughter.”

She shoved his hand away. "That's a sick lie."

He clicked his tongue. "You've never met her. Your niece."

His statement lent credence to who he might be, and Keelyn scoped the diner for a young child. What he'd divulged prior could be obtained from public sources. But the details about Raven's daughter were slim. How did he know this information? How did a hallucination materialize into a person?

Unless he'd been real all along.

After her searching gaze only turned up twin boys tossing ketchup at one another, she turned back to Lucent. "How do you know my sister?"

He skimmed crumbs from the countertop. "Raven and I have been spending time together. That little girl of hers, cute as she is, has been getting in the way. I suggested we find her a new home."

"Raven would never do that. She'd never surrender the child to anyone."

"How would you know how she feels about her little girl?"

A slow ache crawled up Keelyn's back to the base of her skull. The walls of the diner closed in. Lucent's brazen forthrightness stilled her as she considered her options. Turn and run. Punch him in the face. The latter was her preference, but there was a voice within her, a presence that strengthened her.

"Isn't it your duty to take the child in? You found God, as they say," Lucent challenged.

An overwhelming peace consumed her sense of flight. Keelyn felt a calm ease through her like ripples on a lake; each wave steadied her frayed nerves. Her own will battled against the tranquility. Trust was a hard-earned commodity, and the wealth of her faith was poor.

"What is it you want?" She clipped her words sternly.

"Raven is no longer able to care for her daughter. I've left her here for you. Thought I'd be generous and spare her life. I think you owe Raven this much . . . for what you did."

Keelyn wanted to break free from this man, but his words sank like hooks into her flesh and her resolve wilted under his glare, his accusations a confirmation of her own internal condemnation.

"Why aren't you up out of your seat looking for her?" Lucent asked.

She held his gaze.

"Is it because you wouldn't recognize your niece? Last time you saw Raven, she was pregnant. Two years is a long time."

“What kind of trouble is my sister in?”

Lucent slid the edge of his jacket open. The grip of a gun glinted from the waistband of his black denims.

He pulled her chin up and locked his eyes on hers.

“You need to take what I say very seriously.” She tried to pull away, but his fingers squeezed at her jaw like a vise. He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “If you look for Raven, I’ll come back and kill you and the child.”

Keelyn eased his hand from her face with shaky fingers. The violent churning in her stomach released a flood of saliva into her mouth, and she swallowed several times to clear it. Was it the greasy smell or his threat that caused her stomach to flip?

“How do I know you’re telling me the truth?”

“In the end, it’s all about truth, isn’t it? And ultimately, the choice you make about your belief in truth. But no matter how heartfelt your belief is, the truth doesn’t change. That’s what is so fun about humans. They believe they can change truth.”

Keelyn scanned the diner. “Where exactly is the child?”

Lucent leaned back and secured his toes under the metal bar upon which he had been resting his feet. “I’m just curious how much you buy into your faith.”

“We’re done.”

“I’m sad we didn’t get along.” Lucent stood and patted her on the shoulder as though she were a child. “I guess it’s to be expected.”

Keelyn watched as Lucent left. Her mind begged her body to detain him until Lee came. How could he leave and not tell her exactly where the child was?

As Keelyn sat motionless with indecision, Lee entered the diner. She caught his attention with a quick wave and turned back toward the counter as he approached. His uniform drew every eye like a magnet, and a quiet pause settled over the diner. Lee placed one arm around her, giving her a gentle hug, his service weapon a wedge between them. He pulled back her hair and kissed her cheek. Keelyn raked her fingers through his short blond hair and focused in on the comfort of his sapphire eyes. Could he feel the tremble in her fingers?

“Sorry I’m late. Got a call about someone barricaded in their home, threatening suicide. I hate it when we don’t get there in time. Such a

horrible day for that family.” He scooted onto the barstool Lucent had vacated and looked at her expectantly. “What’s wrong? Did I say too much?”

Keelyn placed her hands in her lap.

“Not feeling well?” Lee pursued.

“Can you be sure it wasn’t a homicide?”

“Are you questioning my astute deductive reasoning?” Lee waved the waitress off and grabbed the water in front of him.

“Don’t drink that.” Keelyn shoved the glass away. Water splashed over and onto her hand, stinging like acid.

“What is up with you?”

“I had a visitor while I was waiting.”

“Sounds cryptic.”

“He called himself Lucent.”

The dread in Lee’s eyes caused Keelyn’s pulse to double. “Lucent? You actually saw him as a person?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“He was sitting right where you are.”

“You’re sure he was *real*.” The last word was seeded with doubt.

A slow heat built in her cheeks. “Lee, I wasn’t hallucinating.”

“He hurt you?”

“No.”

“Where is he?”

“He just left.”

“Is this some kind of joke? If so, it’s not funny.”

Keelyn inhaled deeply, shaking her head. “It’s not a joke.”

“What did *Lucent* want?”

“He said he’s left Raven’s daughter here for me.”

Lee settled his hand on his thigh near his weapon. With his other hand, he eased his fingers around her neck and slid his hand under tendrils of her long brown hair and pulled her close into his shoulder. Her skin tingled under his touch. Patrons would observe an embrace between lovers. A seasoned officer could scan a room for threats subversively, and Keelyn knew this was the reason for his public affection.

Cover.

After several seconds, he pulled back and placed his lips against hers in a soft kiss, the warmth dispelling the chill in her bones left from Lucent’s

visit. His palm cupped her cheek as he broke away to look into her eyes. One of her tears slid down his thumb and over the inked cross tattoo on his inner wrist. She wiped the tear away from the symbol of their shared faith, and she prayed for this gripping horror to pass.

“Keelyn, it’s going to be all right. I think this is some freak playing you.”

She leaned her cheek into his hand, wanting to melt into his strength. With his free hand, he tugged her open cardigan closed. His insistence didn’t ease her nausea. “He knew you were going to be late.”

“Sweetheart, he could get that from a police scanner.”

Keelyn reached up, placed her hand over his, and held his softened eyes with hers. “He knew about us meeting here.”

The dimples disappeared from his easy smile as his jaw muscles tensed. Lee dropped his hand from her face and grabbed a small notebook and pen from his breast pocket.

“I’ll need to know everything. What he looked like. We’ll need to get Nathan in on this, just to be safe.”

“He had blond hair. He was pale, sickly looking . . .”

A woman approached and tapped Lee on the shoulder. “Officer?”

Lee turned, a hint of annoyance in his voice. “What can I do for you?”

“Someone’s passed out in their car. There’s a child in the backseat. She appears to be sleeping, but I’m worried about her getting too hot.”

Keelyn leapt off her stool and took two steps before Lee reached out to stop her.

“I’ll go first.” He stood and positioned Keelyn behind him. To the woman, he said, “Can you show me which vehicle?”

They walked single file to the parking lot. Gray clouds hovered low in the sky, and the air was thick and musty with the smell of threatened rain. Keelyn huddled herself into her arms, the cool ground further numbing her feet.

The woman pointed to a pearlescent white Highlander parked in a distant corner of the lot.

“Ma’am, can you wait by the building, please.” Lee edged the concerned citizen back onto the stoop.

Keelyn wanted to reach out and hold his hand as they approached the car but knew he’d switched into active police persona and stayed three steps behind. The SUV’s windows were tinted.

They approached the driver’s side. He glanced at her. “Stay back.”