

— *Bloodline Trilogy 2* —

POISON

A Novel

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Poison: A Novel

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Chapter 3

LEE RUBBED HIS HAND over his jaw and felt the stubble scrape his palm. Through a door in the ER, he watched the medical team give up their resuscitative efforts, and then place a dingy, blood-soaked sheet over the woman's face. A nurse moved away from the bedside, the cap of a needle remaining between her lips as she began to clean the room.

The little girl, in a room to his right, had already been declared in good health by Dr. Lilly Reeves and sat in the arms of a volunteer, her thumb in her mouth as she shuddered at the exhalation of each breath. Her eyes were heavy as the last jags of a crying spell drained her energy.

He looked for Keelyn. She stood in the hall a few paces away, her clothes splattered with blood. He remembered her in the same condition, not so long ago, sitting on the bench in the back of an ambulance, knife wounds inflicted by her stepfather a road map of psychosis on her skin. Eventually, justice had been done, and her stepfather was currently on death row, convicted of the brutal slaying of her mother and two half-siblings. Her eyes met his gaze, and she gave him an unconvincing wave of reassurance.

Violence had brought them together.

But now it seemed to be pursuing them. Would they ever be rid of it?

He tapped his hand over his heart, and she placed two fingers over her lips. A smile played on his face as he walked the short gap between them. But her eyes had already slid away from him to the glass in front of her.

As he watched the young girl, Lee put his arms around Keelyn. He couldn't help thinking about her half siblings who'd died that day, and as she settled her head into his shoulder, he knew she was thinking about them, too.

He saw Detective Nathan Long walking their way from the end of the hall, his hands buried deep into the pockets of his trench coat. Determination set his jaw. Years of police work creased a constant look of worry into his forehead. Heavy blue eyes full of a sense of responsibility.

His wife, Lilly, stopped him in the hall, and he pulled her into a quick embrace. Her lips grazed his cheek as she pulled back and then thumbed the lipstick mark from his face.

Their relationship had been born from violence, as well.

Lilly's fingers combed Nathan's dark brown hair, ruffled from the wind outside, before she turned away. Nathan let his touch linger at her spine until she was out of reach. The love evident between them.

Lee eased away from Keelyn and beckoned Nathan to follow him. Nathan straightened his coat and walked to Lee. They shook hands briefly.

"Captain said you asked for me specifically to handle this case. I'm a little surprised since you weren't too happy with my decision making the last time we worked together."

"People died, Nathan."

Nathan raised his eyebrows. His mouth opened, but he held his comments and shook his head as if to toss the statement away. "Hospital is on my way to the scene so thought I'd drop by quick to get your take on what's happened."

Lee nodded toward the victim's room. "They just declared the woman dead."

"Why ask for me?"

"Seems our past has come to the present to play."

Nathan looked beyond Lee. "Is that Keelyn Blake? Why is she here?"

Lee opened the door to a small family-consultation room. "She was at the scene, too. Let's go in here and sit."

"What's going on?" Nathan asked.

Lee motioned him inside. "There's a lot we need to catch up on."

"Are you and Keelyn together?" Nathan asked as he passed through the door.

"We're engaged."

Nathan's jaw dropped, but he remained silent. Was he censoring what he really wanted to say?

"When did you start seeing her?"

Lee eased the door closed. "About two years ago. After seeing how the department reacted to you seeing Lilly, I thought it wise to keep my involvement with her quiet. Please tell Lilly how thankful I am. She's been very sweet with Keelyn."

Nathan sat on the olive chenille love seat. "Lilly's rape has helped her

identify with the trauma of other women. She knows what it's like to be victimized and then have the system fail her."

"I'm glad she was able to get on staff here at Blue Ridge and she's still practicing medicine. The system got it right in the end, and Sage made a mistake in not taking her back."

Nathan gathered up the strewn magazines from the coffee table, tapped them into a stack, and then fanned them out. "When you help put a serial rapist in jail, the justice system tends to be more lenient. Her assault charges were dropped, and frankly, it's nice for her not to work at a place that didn't believe in her integrity."

"I'm curious . . . I noticed she didn't take your name."

"Personal decision on her part. Maybe if we have children she'll do the hyphenated thing."

"Glad things are good for you two."

Nathan clasped his hands together and looked at Lee expectantly. "They are. But my relationship with Lilly isn't why you called me, Lee. What does this have to do with our past? Do you know who the homicide victim is?"

"Keelyn identified her as Lucy Freeman."

Nathan slumped back. His head cracked against the floral wallpaper. "The psychiatrist her stepfather was seeing at the time of the incident?"

"Maybe I should start at the beginning." Lee sat in the wing chair. "Keelyn and I meet every week about this time, if work doesn't keep me away, at Ruby's Diner."

Nathan let out a low whistle. "Not wise . . ."

"I know, but it's special to Keelyn. She used to go there with her mother. It was a place that reminded her of happier times. It helped fill the void of all those losses." Lee tugged at the collar of his shirt. "On the five-year anniversary of that day, I happened by Ruby's, and she was there. We struck up a conversation. It broke me to see her so sad after all that time had gone by. I still felt partly responsible for what happened to her family, so I started meeting her there to talk. We started hanging out, and eventually we fell in love."

Nathan shook his head. "She's younger than you."

Lee bristled at Nathan's accusatory tone. "Four years is not a bad spread."

Nathan dropped his eyes and retrieved his notepad. "What happened today?"

“While she was waiting for me, a man approached her, said his name was Lucent.”

Nathan’s eyes snapped up to meet Lee’s look. He slowly rolled his pen between his thumb and forefinger. “Could it have been? Did we miss him in the house that day?”

A nervous creep coursed through Lee’s chest. “It’s not possible. At the time, even Keelyn said Lucent wasn’t real. A hallucination. How do you find an apparition?”

“I guess we’re going to have to.”

Lee cracked his knuckles. “This man told Keelyn he had Raven’s daughter.”

Nathan leaned forward. “Raven has a child?”

“You didn’t know? I was hoping you were still keeping tabs on her.”

“Lilly’s case tied me up for a year.”

“I guess a serial rapist can do that.”

“It consumed every spare moment I had. Raven dropped off my radar. I’m just starting to feel like things are normalizing for me and Lilly, and now this pops up. Is the child really her daughter?”

Lee shrugged. “We’re not sure. It seems Raven dropped off the map for a lot of people. Last time Keelyn saw Raven, she was late in her pregnancy. Keelyn never met her niece. We’re coordinating DNA testing through social services with a local private lab run by a good friend of mine. Should have the results back in a couple of days. Until then, the child will have to go into foster care.”

“What’s your take on it?”

Lee exhaled slowly, his mind a jumble of possibilities. None of them good.

“I’m not sure. I know you feel like I do, Nathan, guilty for those lost lives.” Lee edged forward, invading Nathan’s space. “You hope for the well-being of those left behind. I know you’d want to help Raven. You’re attached to one another. She adopted your nickname for her. For a while, you replaced the father she lost to psychosis and prison. I want to protect Keelyn. This man threatened her.”

“How?” The word sounded heavy with the weight of Nathan’s remorse.

“Showed her a gun in his waistband. Told her if she looked for Raven, he’d come back for her and the girl. Nathan, I can’t let anything happen to Keelyn.”

“Lee, we’ll get this creep. Could be some sick freak fascinated with Raven’s case. That nightmare was just highlighted on one of those news shows last week.” Nathan jotted a few notes. “We need to determine Raven’s welfare. Has she truly given the girl up? Is the child really a kidnap victim? Is Raven even alive?”

Lee’s stomach twisted tighter as acid clawed up his chest. “He may have already murdered this woman—the psychiatrist. What could his motive be?”

“Only he knows right now.” Nathan tapped his pen against the pad. “Can you help me with a few things here before you leave?”

“Anything.”

“I need the woman’s and child’s clothes bagged for evidence. Can you coordinate that from here and call a patrol officer to transfer the evidence?”

“Absolutely. Anything you need to get this thing solved.”

Nathan pulled out his phone. “After I’m finished at the crime scene, I’ll check on Raven. See if that part of Lucent’s story holds up. Let me quick call the last number I have for her . . .” Nathan frowned. “Disconnected.”

“You’ll check for any current missing-persons reports filed that might match her description?”

“Of course, Lee. I know how to do my job.”

Lee took a deep breath to bury his response. “What about amber alerts for missing children?”

“There is a current one. Someone nabbed a child off a front porch. Five-year-old male. Doesn’t fit this case.”

“Have they said if there’s anything from the diner’s security tapes?” Lee asked.

“A scene officer says there’s only one camera from the front of the diner. The SUV was out of video range. All you can see is cars and people coming and going. Nothing looks suspicious. I’ll take a closer look at them when I get there. Did you see this man?”

Lee shook his head.

“We’re going to need Keelyn to take a look at the footage.”

“Do you think it would help to talk to John Samuals about this?”

Nathan considered the statement. “A man claiming to be a manifestation of his psychosis shows up at an off-beat diner and threatens a member of his family. Yeah, we probably need to pay him a visit. Why don’t you

and Keelyn come by the station later? Let's have Keelyn review the tapes. If this Lucent is not there, we'll have her sit with Tim and get a computer image generated."

"I don't know if she's up to it."

"She's strong."

Lee steepled the tips of his fingers and rested his chin. "She's not like Lilly. Things affect her more deeply."

A pulse of exasperation flared in Nathan's eyes. "Lilly's good at hiding her trauma. It doesn't affect her any less than other victims."

"Nathan, that's not what I meant."

"It took her a long time to get to where she is." Nathan scribbled on his pad, tore the sheet, and handed it to Lee. "See if Keelyn knows anything about Raven living here. It's the last address I have for her."

"When do you need her at the station?"

"Not for a while. Stop and get some coffee before you come in. Take a step back. Things may become clearer for her, and she'll be able to recall details she can't think of right now."

They exited the small room. Lee hung back as Nathan approached Keelyn sitting with her head buried in her hands. Long strands of her hair draped her body—a river of dark waves swallowing her arms and face. Nathan kneeled down, and she caved into him as sobs racked her body. Coming to her aid, Lee eased her into his arms. Nathan gave a quick nod before leaving.

Lee found a small box of thin tissues on a table and pulled a few sheets. Wrapping the tissue around his index finger, he dabbed her face and let the tears absorb into the paper fibers. He had always been fascinated by Keelyn's eyes—the brown center washed into a yellow halo like angelic light spreading into the darkness. "Let's go down to the cafeteria. I'm going to need some caffeine."

He held Keelyn to his side as they made their way down the stairs. Keelyn took a deep quivering breath as they walked through the cafeteria door. Lee grabbed coffee and doughnuts before they sat. The only sound between them was the quiet squeak of the vinyl chairs. He took several swigs of diluted swill and a couple bites of stale pastry, then brushed the flakes of dried glaze from the table. Suddenly he realized she was studying him.

"I can see you're worried," Keelyn said.

“What are you feeling right now?”

“I think you probably know. What I want to know is what’s on your mind.” She fingered her engagement ring. “You never really told me your side of that day. What it was like.”

He sat silent for several minutes, slowly sipping his coffee as he mulled over her request. Before long, his excuse to stay quiet sat as dregs and he crushed the foam cup between his hands.

Lee wanted Keelyn to break the secrecy, what had always been unsaid between them, but he knew it was her nature to let him speak first. She spent her days listening, interpreting body language, the things said between the words. Her silence was a trained response from interviewing hundreds of witnesses. It was a career she had chosen in an attempt to silence her past. And her volunteer work at the domestic violence shelter served as a self-induced penance for not saving her siblings.

“Domestic violence calls are always the hardest.”

“I know.”

“Yours was the worst.”

She caressed his forearm. “Why?”

His lungs burned as his heart threatened to breach its bony compartment, an unwelcome prison for the surge of adrenaline as memories washed over him in a flood of regret. Lee’s hand tightened on hers.

“Because we could have gone in sooner, but Nathan made the call to wait. We could have saved your mother and the other kids.” The words came out harsh and angry as the sadness sank his soul. He held her eyes. “How can you *not* blame me?”

Lee’s voice caught. He set the broken coffee cup aside and massaged his forehead to ease the headache building behind his eyes.

There it sat in the open. What was once unspoken now stood between them like an enormous elephant on center stage at the circus. Keelyn had never said anything about how she felt the police acted. He held his breath as he studied her face. Her eyes now drawn to the speckles on the table.

Why did she agree to marry him when he was responsible for the death of her family members?

Her silence drew his confession. “When Nathan and I came to the ambulance, it was the worst thing I’d ever seen. The three of you sitting there, terrified, wounded, bleeding. Your brother, a baby, nothing but a sharpening tool for your father’s knife.”

His eyes burned as he willfully quelled tears. Her eyes glistened, a mirror of the memory of their shared horror. By far, her terror was worse than anything he could fathom. Taking her arm, he gently pushed up her sleeve. He traced his finger over the healed ridges of pain, Keelyn's body scarred by her stepfather's illness. "When it became obvious what was happening, we took the house."

She wiped her eye with a knuckle. "What did you see on the inside, Lee? I want to know."

He remembered the heat of that day, and it replaced the chill on his skin. Felt the thick, weeded yard under his boots as he'd jumped from the back of the ambulance and shouted orders through his radio. The concussive waves from the flash-bang grenades hit his chest. Dust and smoke clouded his vision as he crossed the threshold and stumbled over the four police officers who wrestled to pull John Samuals from his spider's nest.

"They were all in the middle of the floor, piled up on each other. Nathan and I pulled them off but—" He choked over the words. "Their throats slit. Raven alive but injured."

Guilt tugged at his soul. He looked at her then, into those hazel eyes that always hid something from him, and he saw pools of despair slip down her cheeks. He held her face.

"I'm sorry." Keelyn pulled his hands down.

"For what?"

"I never want you to think I blame you."

"But how can you not?"

She wiped her eyes. "Because there are four of us still alive. If you'd been inside, you would have understood that there was little hope for *anyone* to live."

"We never even considered Lucent might be a real person."

"The Lucent there that day was not a person. That's one thing I know for sure."

Lee eased back into his chair. "Nathan left the FBI after that. He was the lead negotiator. Did you know he'd been keeping tabs on Raven?"

She dried the last of her tears and straightened in her seat. "Yes, I knew. Nathan was the one thing that held her together . . . for a while at least. What do you think is going on? What does today mean?"

"I think I need to know more about your interaction with this man. What did he look like?"

A cascade of shivers rippled over her body. “His hair was blond, green eyes. Pale. He exuded this confidence that grabbed your attention. It’s hard to explain.”

“What did he say to you? Start from the beginning.”

“First, he knew you were going to be late. He said he was an old friend of yours.”

Lee waited as Keelyn paused. He could see the dark clouds brewing in her eyes. A subtle change when she remembered living under her stepfather’s illness. Her shoulders sagged like a heavy cloak had been draped across them.

“He knew Raven and I were estranged. That I’d never met my niece.”

“That’s not too surprising. There was just that two-hour *Dateline* special about your case. Raven said as much in her interview on the show, that the two of you weren’t talking.”

“Lee, she never talked about her child on the show. Otherwise, I would have discovered she’d had a little girl.”

“What else?”

“That he’d left her there. Are you sure that call you went on was a suicide?”

“Absolutely, why?”

“Lucent insinuated it was a murder he was partly responsible for.”

“The guy shot himself in the head. The house was locked up tight. No one inside. No signs of forced entry. He’d texted his wife a suicide note.”

She pulled her hair off to one side and leaned back in her chair. “He just knew things he shouldn’t know.”

“Explain it to me.”

“It’s like he knew how to tap into my worst fears.”

“What else did he say to you, Keelyn?”

“He knew it was my decision to break off my relationship with Raven.”

“Why did you break it off?”

“I felt her slipping mentally. It’s like she wanted to pull me into that craziness with her. Odd things began to happen. She wasn’t getting any better with her psychiatrist. She kept saying he was doing something experimental. I begged her to see someone else. She refused. It became this never-ending quagmire.”

Lee wanted to push her more to talk about things she didn’t want to consider. Was this something she could just walk away from? What

was Lucent's reason for involving them in this situation? For himself, Lee knew he couldn't live with the guilt of knowing Lucent was real and he hadn't stopped him years ago. Why had he shown up now? And why was he involving Keelyn? Then there was the girl. Why not just kill her? Why give her to Keelyn? To save her? To torture Keelyn?

"Whoever Lucent is, I think he's crazy," Keelyn said.

"He's more than mentally ill. It's obvious from his history he hasn't been on the good side of things. I mean, whether he was physically there or not, he influenced the murder of three people seven years ago. Maybe another one today."

Lee felt his BlackBerry vibrate. It was a text from Nathan.

He'd verified Raven's last address.

"We should go."

"What about the girl?"

"The hospital staff contacted social services. They're going to arrange a DNA test. You're going to have to give a sample, and we'll see if we can find one for Raven. We'll need to confirm she is Raven's daughter. That she's related to you."

"And after the test?"

"They'll find a foster placement for her."

"What's the point of proving she's related to me if she's going into foster care?"

"It's more to prove Raven is her mother. And if she is, where is she? What's happened to her?"

"I can't live with that," Keelyn said.

"What do you want to do?"

"I feel like I'm . . . we're supposed to take her." She placed her lithe hands over his, a gesture of promised expectation. "I think Lucent is a stone that was dropped in the middle of a big lake that caused these ripples to flow out. I need to have her close."

Lee swallowed heavily and slid his hands from hers. He couldn't have imagined that putting a ring on Keelyn's finger might mean an instant family.

"That's not smart. If he's targeting your family, having the two of you together will put you in more danger."

"It's my job to protect her. I need to do for her what I didn't do for Raven."

“Keelyn—”

“It will be easier to protect us both if we’re in the same place.”

“I might have to move in.”

A smile brightened Keelyn’s eyes, and Lee’s spirit lightened. “No, no, Mr. Watson. Not until you say those two simple words at the end of a long aisle and I’m dressed in something expensive and white.”