

— *Bloodline Trilogy 2* —

POISON

A Novel

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 **Kregel**
Publications

Poison: A Novel

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Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc.,
P.O. Box 2607, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

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ISBN 978-0-8254-4212-4

Printed in the United States of America

13 14 15 16 17 / 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 4

BLACK CLOUDS ROILED overhead as Nathan approached Ruby's in his platinum SUV, and his windshield wipers struggled to keep up with the rain. At the diner's road entrance, two squad cars remained to control the crime scene. Nathan stopped and erased the vapor from his driver's-side window then pushed his badge against it. The patrol officer gave a quick salute of two fingers off his forehead and Nathan proceeded through the barricade of their vehicles at a slow pace.

He parked toward the front of the paint-faded structure and buttoned up his black trench coat. Several additional officers were inside the restaurant gathering witness statements. They would need, at a minimum, their basic information before allowing them to leave.

The killer could be among them.

Nathan exited his vehicle and stood so he faced the corner of the parking lot where the Highlander was parked. The crime geeks were trying to keep a blue tarp over the vehicle, both as protection against the weather and as futile hope against the rain washing away precious evidence.

As he paused to take in the overall picture of the crime scene, he heard the bell of the diner clang against the glass as the door opened.

"Hey, Nathan. Where's your old standby?"

He turned around. The officer, Danny Smith, seated his cap on his head. "Brett's taken an extended leave for a family issue."

"Rumor is the two of you are splitting up as a result of your wife's case."

Nathan pulled his chin up. Brave for a man he barely knew to question an unsubstantiated dissolution of a partnership. "Brett's a big boy. He can admit it when he makes a mistake. His mother is dying. That's why he's not here." Nathan looked purposefully at the diner, then back to the officer. "Anything from inside?"

The young man rubbed an index finger under his nose. "A few people saw the man Keelyn described sitting with her but none of them saw him in the vicinity of the SUV. Of course, we probably haven't caught

everyone. There may have been a few who left at the time of the crime. Those”—he shrugged helplessly—“we’ll never know about.”

“Make sure everyone’s comfortable as can be inside. Let me take a closer look at the vehicle, and we’ll see about starting to let some of these folks go home.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ruby’s sat in a rural part of the community, just off Colfax as you headed east out of Denver. Arapahoe County was large and the eastern-most part was relatively undeveloped. South of this location, the area was growing, but Ruby’s remained a hallmark to the past. Open fields surrounded the restaurant from where it sat off this well-known road.

No hope of another business’s surveillance video capturing his ghost killing a woman here.

What was Lucent’s relation to the woman?

If Lee’s story held a grain of truth, Nathan’s life had just become infinitely more complicated. How could he explain a psychotic hallucination coming to life?

The same psychiatrist who told him seven years ago Lucent was a hallucination had been killed here today by someone using that same name. Could this man have somehow been involved with the ghost that influenced John Samuals to kill his wife and two children? Nathan ran the toe of his polished shoe through the water, watching the ripples race toward the edge.

Was Raven the answer? Was she really missing? Was this child her daughter?

Lucent’s placement of the vehicle in the lot was clearly purposeful. From Nathan’s position near the front door of the diner, the white SUV was to the right and not easily seen from the entrance unless you took a couple of steps out onto the pavement and looked that direction. No other cars were parked close. Nathan paced across the lot.

Was he trampling on the killer’s DNA as it floated by in these rivulets of rain and oil?

He approached the CSI van. Owen hopped out of the back, and they shook hands briefly.

“What do you think?” Nathan turned his collar up against the biting wind.

“I think she was shot at this location.”

The tall, heavysset man motioned him to follow, and tugged on gloves as he trudged the short distance. They approached the car from the driver's side, which stood open, Nathan presumed, as Lee had left it.

"The VIN and registration confirm this is the good doctor's car. It appears the woman was shot with her back up against the passenger's door. We found a slug near the armrest. Were there any signs of restraint on the victim?"

Nathan shook his head. "Unknown."

"Then I'm guessing the killer met her here. There's a purse with her ID on the passenger's floorboards and what I assume are her keys in the ignition. Question is why she was on the passenger's side."

"They just declared her dead when I arrived at the hospital. I'll have to make a trip to meet with the medical examiner later today. The girl was in the back?"

Owen sniffed sharply with a nod, and Nathan wasn't sure if it was to supply needed oxygen for his large frame or to clear the snot dangling from his nose. The rumbled honk made him lean toward the latter, and he had to resist the urge to grab the handkerchief from his pocket.

Why ruin one of Nana's hankies?

"Where's the car seat?" Nathan asked.

Three officers combed through the waist-high brush that lined the front side of the parking lot. The wind picked up and pressed the rain into a slant.

"Wasn't one," Owen said.

Strange. It would be unlike a woman, especially a doctor, not to secure the child safely. What were the circumstances that brought the three of them together?

"Any luck on prints?" Nathan asked as he leaned into the vehicle, pulling his jacket tight against his chest to prevent contamination of the scene.

"Yeah, lots. We're going to need Miss Blake's for exclusionary purposes. Watson's will be on record."

"How far into processing the scene are you?"

"We've done interior photos, diagrams, and a quick scan for trace evidence."

Rain specked the leather. Owen motioned Nathan back so he could close the driver's door. "There's a pull cover over the cargo space. Just need to quick pop the back gate to make sure there aren't any surprises back

there before we seal it up and tow it back to the evidence lot for a more thorough inspection.”

“Weapon here!” one of the officers shouted.

Owen lumbered that direction with Nathan a few short steps behind.

“Grab me a few shots before I pick it up.” Owen waved to the photographer as he bent over and pulled the dried shoots of grass to the side. “I need an evidence bag over here!” he yelled. Owen laid a hand on his thigh for support as he bent down to grab the revolver. Keeping his beefy, gloved fingers well away from the trigger, he examined the barrel at close range.

“Any blowback?” Nathan asked.

“Not grossly. We’ll get it processed. Have more info in a week or so. Maybe sooner if you buy me dinner.”

“I can arrange that. Let’s take a look in the back. After that, I’ll let you get it sealed and towed.”

Thunder cracked, and Nathan’s heels lifted off the pavement. Lightning flashed clear light into the gray day. His vision spotted with yellow halos.

“Yeah, we’re going to have to get the tarp down before we get electrocuted.”

Nathan contemplated whether Owen’s big frame or the thin metal poles placed him more at risk. He slipped on a pair of gloves himself as they rounded the end of the vehicle.

Booms of thunder concussed the sky, and Owen placed his hand on the latch release. Nathan held his breath. A faint whine sounded in the vacant wake of the thunder as the door rose slowly toward the storm clouds.

A Mexican-style blanket lay haphazardly over a bulky object.

Owen leaned in and pulled away one side of the blanket.

“Now, who do you suppose this is?”