

— *Bloodline Trilogy 2* —

# POISON

*A Novel*

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Publications

*Poison: A Novel*

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## Chapter 5

KEELYN SAT ON THE passenger's side of a squad car in front of the house where Nathan said he'd known her sister to last live. The patrol car's lights flashed ominously into the night, the alternating red and blue a signal that trouble may have passed through. Raven's home resembled an old barn, red brick with a gray slate roof, and was located in an older area of Denver where the houses were small and tightly packed.

Lee and Nathan just completed a search of the home. Raven wasn't there, nor was there any evidence of a child's presence except for one simple book, *Pinocchio*, found on a bookshelf filled with glass vases that no sane adult would have within reach of a cruising toddler. No child's clothing. No child's bed. No child's fingerprints smudging the stainless steel appliances in the kitchen.

Nothing.

Only mystery. Where had Raven gone?

First, the note on her kitchen table: *Sorry about last night, Clay.*

Who was Clay? Did he know where Raven was? Could he be Lucent—the man that had approached her in the diner?

Lee collected a baggie of syringes from the bathroom medicine cabinet, and insinuated that Raven used drugs. Why jump to that conclusion first? It wasn't the stated fact that bothered her but his unconscious covering of his observation.

Was he hiding something? His body language suggested it was probable.

Lee also grabbed Raven's toothbrush for the DNA tests and then led Keelyn into the garage where there were boxes and boxes of Bibles with a stickered bookplate listing information for North Creek Church.

This was particularly mysterious because Raven had sworn off her faith or even the tiniest belief in a loving God.

What anchored like hooks in Keelyn's heart were the unopened letters she'd sent to Raven over the last couple of years. Letters inviting her sister to be with her. To stay with her. All unopened, except the first one. A

letter sent long before her child was born. Raven would have been almost fifteen, a constant runaway from social services.

In her hands she still held her note as evidence of the anger her sister harbored for her. The edge of the envelope was hacked open.

Although she already had suffered through it once, Keelyn pulled the note free again. She knew what she had written. Keelyn had been ready for Raven to live with her.

Raven had scrawled two words in red marker diagonally across the face of the note. Large, red dots appeared at the beginning lead of each letter, as if the pen was held there intentionally to let the ink leach like blood into the paper's fibers.

*TOO LATE.*

Keelyn, a young woman of twenty-three at the time of the incident, had begged her father to take the three survivors of John Samuals's rampage in. He refused. The court stated that since she was an adult, if she proved enough income, she could garner custody herself. Social Security death benefits weren't going to cover full-time daycare, an apartment, and everything that went along with raising three children.

The challenge provided much needed direction. Keelyn had earned a basic psychology degree, but since graduating, nothing had struck her fancy enough for solid commitment. Her father allowed her to live with him and do as she pleased as long as she kept the house straight and his meals on the table.

Then, suddenly, her father died as well.

At first, Keelyn tried minimum wage jobs but the income never provided the amount she would need to care for her siblings. More education was the answer, and she finished her master's in three years. Interpersonal communication with an emphasis on nonverbal patterns. Unfortunately, the two youngest had been legally adopted by their foster families.

Only Raven floundered.

Keelyn leaned against the headrest and closed her eyes.

Her stomach grumbled under her hand—the same sensation she had when she first awoke that fateful day.

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Keelyn cracked her eyes open to see Ariana's face peeking around her bedroom door. Not a bedroom exactly—it was nearly empty except for

the cot she slept on—but where she slept when she was there. Her half siblings, five altogether, slept in gender specific rooms across the hall. She gave a half-hearted smile and waved the preteen in. Ariana crossed the room and sat on the wire frame, her black hair tangled from last night's sleep, her brown eyes brooding.

“Hungry?” Keelyn asked.

It had been days since any of them had eaten a full meal. A sleeve of saltine crackers shared between seven people didn't go far.

“The police are here.”

Keelyn edged up onto her elbow. “What?” she asked, tilting her head toward the door at the sound of a child crying. Was it her three-month-old brother? “Where's Dustin?”

“In his crib. They're saying we have to leave.”

A shotgun fired, shaking the whole house. A cacophony of children crying competed for decibels. Keelyn grabbed Ariana and held her close. Who was firing? Were the pellets going out or coming in?

Another boom.

With shaky arms, Keelyn pushed Ariana off the cot and onto the floor. “Get down, get down.” She shoved her hand into the middle of Ariana's back and pushed her into the dirty, threadbare carpet, away from the window.

Another blast. Now screaming. A man in pain. Outside.

“Daddy's mad.”

They were on the ground facing each other, Ariana's brown eyes dark against pale skin and pink lips. Keelyn threaded Ariana's hair behind her ear, her fingers trembling. “Why?”

“He made me.”

Keelyn's eyes locked hers. “Made you—”

The screen door slammed. Her mother, Sophia, pleaded with John between sobs. The words smashed together nonsensically like a bowl of alphabet soup.

Keelyn placed her finger to her lips. “Stay here and be quiet.” She crawled to the window, drew the once-white lace curtains to the side, and peeked out.

A deputy's car sat on the front lawn, but she couldn't see the officer. Sirens sounded off in the distance.

John Samuals unhinged . . . again.

Keelyn turned back to Ariana. "Can you help me?"

Ariana sat up, uncertainty crossed her face. "Do what?"

"We need to get the others in here so I can keep you safe." Keelyn thought quickly. It would be easier for Ariana to grab their sisters, since they could walk on their own. "You get Cheyenne and Carissa. I'll get Micah and Dustin."

She grabbed for her. "No! I want to stay here. Stay with me."

Ariana huddled into a fetal position and began to cry. Keelyn crawled back to her position and placed a comforting hand to the small of her back. Ariana reached up and snaked her arms around Keelyn's neck, tipping her forward.

Keelyn lay next to her again. "It's going to be okay."

Now, the sirens were loud. Tires screeched to a halt. Doors slammed.

Cheyenne and Micah piled into her room on their own. Keelyn patted the floor so they would get down. Everyone accounted for except the baby and two-year-old. Where was Carissa? No more crying. Had Dustin gone back to sleep?

For over two hours, they rested there listening to John's ramblings, their mother's pleading and intermittent crying jags. Why didn't the police storm in? Why weren't they helping? Few other sounds came from inside the house. Where were the other children? Why weren't they crying? Were they still alive?

Keelyn's side began to cramp and she shifted her position. Ariana pulled her arms back from her neck and placed a palm against her cheek. "Will you check Carissa? Tell her I'm sorry."

What was she talking about?

Keelyn took her hands in hers. "Of course. Now, Ariana, under the cot and promise me you won't move." Her sister scurried under and turned around, her eyes wide with pleading. There it was . . . the reason Keelyn would never stop coming to this desolate acreage of lost dreams.

"Cheyenne . . . Micah . . . into the closet until I come back and get you."

They hustled into the small space and closed the door behind.

Keelyn peeked out her door. John paced at the bottom of the staircase, twirling a knife in his hand.

A large hunter's knife.

Keelyn stepped slowly down the stairs.

John's voice, steely and hushed. "Please, don't make me. I don't want to kill them."

Her fright over those words caused her to stumble down the remaining stairs. When John heard her footsteps, he snapped the blade up where it rested against his forearm.

A thin line of red imprinted on his skin.

Blood.

Keelyn's stomach squirmed like an octopus trapped in a fishbowl. Its slimy, cold tentacles slithered out and seized her heart and lungs, making it painful to inhale. John backed up, a sneering smile on his face, as he approached her on the landing. Her mother was seated with Carissa, a dingy bundled towel at the child's neck, her brown hair slick with sweat as she whimpered.

"What's going on?" She eyed John first, then her mother. "What happened to Carissa?"

Her mother clamped her quivering lips together.

"I told you to be quiet!"

Keelyn jumped, her gaze bounced back to John who wasn't looking at her, but off to the side where no one stood.

"You know I don't want to. You shouldn't have made me do that. She's just a little girl."

Keelyn stepped into John's line of sight and waved her hands at his blank gaze. "John!"

He focused in on her. "He made me."

"Who?"

"Lucent." At that name, Keelyn's knees weakened. John caressed his belly at the scar line of Lucent's last insistence that he take his own life.

"John, Lucent's not real. Remember? Are you taking your medication?"

He turned away from her, pumping his arms down on either side of his face. "I told you to shut up! I don't want to do it. They're my babies."

Keelyn backed up to where her mother sat on the couch and pulled her sweaty hand away from Carissa's neck. There, a laceration down the side of her neck. "How did this happen?"

Her mother moaned and cried more. Keelyn grabbed the child from her lap and cuddled her against her chest. Exhaling heavily, Carissa closed her eyes, her chest rose and fell against her and faint relief warmed Keelyn's chilled skin.

She began to back toward the stairs, glancing back every so often to make sure she didn't trip over something. To her mother, "You need to get him to surrender."

Her mother shook her head against her words. "He won't listen. Only to Lucent."

Voices penetrated the thin walls, but Keelyn couldn't make out the words. John covered his ears with clenched fists, the knife still tight in one palm.

Then he laid his head back like a werewolf howling at moonrise and the scream wrest from his soul rattled Keelyn's skull. Carissa startled in her arms and began to cry. Keelyn had one heel on the stairs when he lunged at her, grabbing her arms, sending Carissa to the floor where she landed flat on her back, her eyes desperate to draw breath but nothing came from her gaped mouth.

Keelyn tried to pull her arms free but John yanked her close, the stench from his fear-fueled delusion suffocated her. The child on the floor behind her began to wheeze as her lungs risked drawing air again. John now had Keelyn in an embrace, her arms trapped between them, and he drew his blade across her back.

Warm fluid slid down. Then, slowly, as her surge of adrenaline began to wane, her nerves began to Morse code pain signals to her mind. He hummed a childlike lullaby in her ear. Carissa grabbed at Keelyn's pajama bottoms and began to work her way up her leg to a standing position.

"I always wanted to do that."

Above her, the floorboards creaked as the children wandered between rooms—trying to be quiet but failing miserably. There was the soft opening and closing of wood against wood. What were they doing? Why didn't they stay where Keelyn told them to?

John's eyes drifted upstairs. Not his eyes, vacuoles of matted black evil that had snuffed out what little soul he had left. She clenched her eyes closed and held her breath. He pulled her in tighter.

"Keelyn," he sang. Easing her back, he grabbed her wrist and drew the blade down the length of her arm. It stunned her, how little it hurt—at first—and then how painful it became when the blood flowed over cut skin and dripped off her arm.

She yanked back again. His hand tightened around her forearm. "Death or life. Which do you choose?" He settled the knife against her throat.

Carissa was outright screaming behind her.

Keelyn inhaled to sooth her rapid heartbeat. “John, let me take Carissa upstairs. I’ll watch the children. Keep them out of your way.”

He slithered his fingers up the bloody trail of her arm until his hand clasped behind her neck and he pulled her face close to his, the knife slicing into her skin. With everything in her, she tried to pull back, the muscles of her neck taut against his fingers.

His lips mere inches from hers, he seethed. “I want them all down here.”

“Mr. Samuals. John Samuals! My name is Nathan Long, and I work for the FBI.”

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A sudden tap at the window caused her heart to leap. At first glance, Lucent peered through the glass. She blinked rapidly, and Lee’s dimpled smile replaced the malicious leer.

How odd she would see a resemblance between the two.

Lee eased her door open and drew her out of the car then pulled her close to his chest. She collapsed into him, desperately willing her head to stop spinning. “Take a deep breath, babe.” His whisper soothed and settled her. Taking a stuttering breath, Keelyn slid her arms around his neck. She closed her eyes and was reassured by the sound of his steady heartbeat.

Ariana was twelve the day John murdered their mother, Cheyenne, and Micah. The scar at Ariana’s neck a thick white line of remembrance. When Ariana was in the hospital healing from her injuries, Detective Long had been a frequent visitor and had shared the story of why he nicknamed her Raven—for her black hair and deep brown eyes noticeable from a distance. Ariana adopted the name Raven because Nathan assumed the picture of fatherly love she’d never experienced. Long visited her regularly, made sure she was doing well in school, and brought her gifts for her birthday.

But assuming the name also marked a transition in Raven’s life, and despite Nathan’s efforts, she slowly enveloped herself in darkness like the blackness of the bird’s feathers.