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—Kariss Lynch, author of *Shaken*

PERIL

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*Bloodline Trilogy*

*Proof*

*Poison*

*Peril*

————— *Bloodline Trilogy 3* —————

# PERIL

*A Novel*

JORDYN  
REDWOOD

 **Kregel**  
Publications

*Peril: A Novel*

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For Mom and Dad.  
Thanks for teaching me that hard work  
pays off and dreams do come true.





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## Prologue

HE WAITED AT THE EDGE of the trail for her to pass, hidden in the gap where the underbrush transitioned to a mixed grove of lush aspen and skeletal Rocky Mountain lodgepoles scoured by tiny black insects.

Actually, he considered himself a kindred brother to the scourging pine beetle. Amazing little creatures. It impressed him how something so tiny could topple a stalwart of the forest—something more colossal than it could ever hope to grow. In order to reproduce, the beetle laid its eggs under the bark. When the eggs hatched, the larvae cut off the tree's circulation, consuming it for growth, and severing the life force of the specimen. This life cycle of the beetle served as executioner for the tree.

It mimicked his preferred method of killing.

He smoothed his fingers lightly over his upper arms, tracing the faces of those gone before. Usually, he kept his tiny charges tucked under long sleeves—like children with their heads plunged under bed linens to hide from the boogeyman—safe and protected under his clothing. Why take a trophy when you could have an image of the prize forever imprinted onto your body? Besides, he liked the vibrant color of the ink against the paleness of skin. And the pink burn from sitting days under the sun tracking her added to the sense of hell he had wrought upon their lives.

He eyed the vacant, hairless patch where her picture would be injected. Not one previous victim had shared his own characteristics of blond-tipped brown hair and brown eyes.

Until today.

His first tattoo had been a gift to him from a local citizen in a land of unrelenting heat, sand, and wind who thought if he curried favor with a foreign military force it would ensure his freedom. The idea of offering such a beautiful image for hope of liberty stirred something deep inside him. Why give away something tangible to get something intangible? Was the idea of freedom, even in light of certain chaotic governmental transition, of greater value than the safety of the status quo?

Being unhindered.

Wasn't he offering the same with death? Wasn't freeing the spirit from its physical entrapment the ultimate gift?

Yes—he was that generous.

Another perk of his killing—relishing the aftermath of the terror he created. Better than the act was seeing the tearstained faces of relatives as they cried for their children to be found. Television anchors didn't understand how much he cherished these moments and how they were one reason he continued on . . . to have many more of the mindless masses watch.

His ears perked at the soft tapping of running shoes against the path. Routine was every hunter's gift, and she was always generous. She was just rounding the bend, jogging steadily, earbuds in place, hands pulsing down to the beat of the music.

The air was heavy, full of the promise of rain and the odor of recently discharged *eau de skunk*. Even though he sat in the thick of it, right next to a fly-swarmed rabbit carcass, he was comfortable with the cover the stench provided.

One thing he had yet to discover was how his prey sensed it was about to meet the monster it feared lived under its bed. The very shadow that pulled parents from their slumber, groping for flashlights to assuage the blown-up, neuron-fired night creature of their child's imagination.

The world was a dark place. If only parents were smart enough to share what they knew and were constantly reminded of on the news every evening. That going to a movie at midnight could hold just as much risk as going to school, as eating at a pizza parlor, as running alone down a woodland trail. That men waited to hunt young girls who chose this form of enjoyment, by themselves, assured that nothing bad would ever happen to them.

*Pride.*

Relying on one's self was always the last nail in the coffin. Pride fueled a false sense of security. It ran against nature's design where things worked better in unison.

Where relationship protected against imprisonment of the spirit.

As his prey grew closer, her body betrayed her subconscious instinct that his sitting amongst the fragrant smell of decay did little to cover the scent of murderous lust that leeches from his pores. Mere feet from his position she stopped cold in the middle of the trail and looked around.

She drew her hand up and plucked out one of the earbuds. The tinny sound of music raced through the cool air. A country tune to encourage her feet to keep moving.

Something on the other side of the trail caught her eye, and he followed her gaze to a rabbit racing back into the bushes. Her chest rose as she inhaled deeply; fingering the earpiece back in place, she restarted her pace.

Like a sprinter at the starter's gun, he bolted from his position.

He tackled her, linebacker-style, pushing her into the underbrush on the other side of the trail. The only noises were her breath as it exploded from her chest and the rustle of trees that sounded more like two small animals fighting than a girl about to lose her life.

It always surprised him how little they fought. Purposefully, he rolled her over the ground a few times then stopped, his body pinning hers, his hand clamped tight over her mouth. Wide, pale brown eyes met his. Torn grass and leaves clung to wisps of dark brown hair with blond highlights. She shook her head to communicate what her lips could not and began to pound her fists against his arms. Pink, manicured nails slithered up under his dog tags, grabbed them, and snapped the chain in two as she yanked them off.

*Have to remember to find those when I'm done.*

He repositioned his body so her arms were trapped by his knees, which freed up his other hand to place his index fingers over his lips.

Her forehead scrunched. The unspoken promise of his mannerism increased the doubt in her eyes. The finger from his lips dropped to her neck, and he felt her pulse race unfettered under his fingers at her carotid artery. With his thumb, he found the echo of it on the other side.

Many did not understand how the act of strangulation killed. It was never about the airway but about choking off the blood supply to the brain. Just as the pine beetle larvae suffocated and starved the tree by consuming the very thing that ensured its life.

He grew lightheaded as he pressed his hand tight over her neck, the muscles in his arms bulging as they contracted under his desire. If he could apply even, tight pressure for just a few minutes, she would pass out, and the remainder of his liberating acts could be realized. Like a cat toying with a hatchling fallen from a tree.

His prey began to buck and twist her pelvis in an attempt to throw him

off, but his weight surpassed hers by over one hundred pounds, and he merely smiled as the increased exertion would hasten what he ultimately planned.

She screamed through muffled lips and attempted to bare her teeth under his fingers.

He squeezed harder, pushing the mass of his upper body into the hold.

Her eyelids fluttered as her body attempted any maneuver to stay the coming darkness. Slowly, her tense muscles grew lax and her hands flopped into the dry pine needles.

He waited until her breath slowed and then stopped. This phase took several more minutes. As he released her neck from his grip, his peripheral vision caught something on the trail.

His leather wallet lay in the middle of the path like a beacon of light to any law enforcement officer who discovered the body. He would have left it where it was until he finished had he not heard voices and footfalls coming up the path. He could see their faces over his shoulder as they came around the curve.

Pushing himself off the body, he raced back over the trail and grabbed the wallet mid-stride before crashing through the brush on the other side. Just as he feared, the voices stopped. Then they began to question one another.

“Did you hear that?” *An older male.*

“You don’t think it was a bear, do you?”

*A scared, younger female. A possible next victim?*

He shook his head against the urgency for killing that filled his mind. He turned and kneeled in the grass.

“I doubt it.”

“You know there was just a sighting not far from here.”

“Don’t worry.” A faint pat of flesh against something solid. “You know I always come prepared.”

“I don’t know if it’s wise for the group of Boy Scouts just behind us to see you carrying a weapon.”

*Great. An armed, concerned male and a peace-loving, griping female.*

Exactly one of the reasons he enjoyed his hobby. Definitely not something that would work in his favor. He was ready to get up and hightail it out of there when he saw his victim’s pale hand stretched from the underbrush. He hadn’t rolled her far enough, and the ashen extremity was easily

seen against the dark green and brown of the forest floor. On the path, something had slipped from his wallet. A piece of paper. For the first time in a long time, he felt dread course through his veins.

Quickly, he flipped open the worn black leather. The essentials were present. Driver's license. Credit cards.

Was it something that could identify him?

As he backed farther into the trees, his vision obscured, his worst fear realized.

"Hey, what's that?" the woman asked.

"What?" her male companion answered.

"Don't you see it?"

"That's not a hand . . . is it?"

Quickened footfalls.

"Is she alive?"

He quietly turned and walked away.

"She's warm. I'm starting CPR. Call 911."

And he heard the rustle of her body being dragged from its cover.





## Chapter 1

*Morning, Monday, June 11*

THE ER CREW BURST INTO the pediatric intensive care unit like a Civil War battalion trying to crash through enemy lines.

One nurse was on the gurney giving compressions. Two others propelled the bed while trying to maintain the upright position of IV poles that resembled a mechanical Christmas tree of syringe pumps pushing lifesaving medications into the patient.

Morgan Adams stood from her chair at the nurses' station and motioned to Eric Gregory, one of her coworkers. "Clear out bedspace six."

*Why is it the one day I need to leave work early the PICU falls apart like a sand castle crushed under the rising tide?*

They'd been alerted that this admission was coming. What they hadn't been expecting was that the fourteen-year-old girl would be coding when she entered the unit. It was too difficult to move a patient during a code onto the bed that awaited her. Better to shove the ER gurney into an empty space and continue what needed to be done to save the girl's life.

In the wake of the ER crew, there appeared to be a police detective, accompanied by a uniformed officer.

*Definitely not getting off work early today.*

Morgan turned to Lucy, another of her nursing cohorts. She was a woman whose skin tone was just a shade lighter than her dark brown eyes, and whose Jamaican accent worked like intravenous valium to scared children.

"Lucy," she said, "page Dr. Ayer. Eric—"

"I know," Eric said. "The code cart."

Morgan neared the patient as the ER gurney braked in position. "What happened?"

An ER nurse dressed in navy blue scrubs eyed her. "Her heart rate dropped into the twenties on the elevator."

Morgan slid two fingers under the C-collar to the young girl's neck to see if she could feel the carotid pulse. The open windows of the plastic revealed blotchy, angry patches of red and blue on each side of the neck.

*That's unusual. The normal method of strangulation leaves circular ligation marks.*

Faint petechial bruises, caused from capillaries rupturing under pressure, dotted the girl's face like freckles.

*Except these aren't innocent sun-induced skin blemishes of her youth.*

Under her fingertips, Morgan sensed the pulsatile flow of blood rushing by. "Pulse present with compressions. Let's pause to see if CPR helped her out any."

The nurse stopped. Morgan eyed the transport monitor, noting the still too-slow rhythm. The rate persisted in the twenties—a slow, faint echo of the heartbeat.

She withdrew her hand and turned to pop the lock on the code cart. "All right, continue compressions. Let's get a CPR board underneath her. Eric—"

The young man's dirty blond hair dropped over his hazel eyes as he pulled open the top drawer that housed the emergency medications. "I'll get the epi and atropine ready. Do we have a weight?"

"We're going by fifty kilos," the other ER nurse stated.

From the door, Morgan caught sight of a couple she guessed to be mid-thirties, holding on to one another.

*The parents. And everything the medical team says is in earshot.*

She looked Eric's direction. "After you get those meds ready, let's page the chaplain, too."

Morgan drew her eyes away from the couple and settled them on her young charge in the middle of the bed. A nurse at the teen's chest rocked up and down to stave off the grim reaper. The girl's brown hair flickered with chunky blond highlights.

*The only part of her with color other than the bruising around her neck.*

Many nurses thought they could understand the outright terror this girl's parents were feeling at the possibility of losing their child. She doubted they could. Morgan had lived through the death of her infant daughter, and she prayed silently for the coming darkness to stop.

*There've been too many deaths. Am I even living?*

Morgan grabbed a penlight from her pocket and pulled up the girl's

eyelids. A ring of light brown and dilated black pupils stared vacantly back. She placed the light back into her scrubs and then tucked her blond curls behind her ears.

“Pupils are sluggish. Now, all we need is a—”

Dr. Ayer rushed through the doors. “Is this Zoe Martin? What the hell happened? I thought she was stable in the ER.”

The ER nurse rolled her eyes. “She was.”

There was always contention between units. Generally, all staff disliked who they received patients from and who they had to admit patients to. The ER hated EMS—particularly when they continued to bring patients despite notices for diversion. The ER hated the ICU—particularly when they had open beds but refused to take patients because they didn’t have enough staff to care for the children. The PICU hated the ER—particularly when they brought an unstable patient through the doors.

Ayer yanked his lab coat straight. “Well? Can anyone here offer any insight as to why she’s currently coding?”

Morgan eyed the ER nurse and gave her a friendly smile. There was nothing like being in the middle of a critical situation and having a doctor snidely question treatment. Ayer wasn’t known for having a soft and fluffy side.

“She dropped her heart rate on the way up here.”

“Stop compressions. Let’s see what we have,” Ayer ordered.

The nurse raised her hands in the air like someone held at gunpoint. Ayer had a gift of making the most seasoned nurses feel incompetent by the constant scowl on his face. The residents hated rounding with him.

He nodded after examining the rhythm. “Is there a pulse present?”

The nurse with the raised hands reached down to check. “Yes, still has a pulse.”

Ayer circled a pointed index finger back at the patient. “Resume compressions.” He eyed Eric with the ready syringe of epinephrine. “You weren’t going to administer that without a doctor’s order, were you?”

Eric shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Because that would be outside your scope of practice. Looking to get fired after being here only a few short months?”

“Absolutely not, sir.”

Morgan clenched her hands at her sides.

*Why did he insist on doing this now? A Napoleon complex?*

A good ICU nurse always anticipated what the patient needed so it was ready as soon as the doctor asked for it. How would Eric feel during the next code? Would he wait to draw up the med until it was ordered, delaying lifesaving treatment for the patient because of today's public chastising?

"Let's get her loaded with epi," Ayer ordered.

Eric approached the bedside and began tracing the line from the main IV bag down to the patient's hand, where he injected the drug.

Ayer cleared his throat and rocked onto his heels, which generally meant he was gearing up for an academic lecture. Even in the absence of a resident to enjoy the lesson, Ayer couldn't help but test those around him with his wealth of knowledge and their lack thereof.

"This patient presented to the ER as the presumed victim of strangulation, correct, Morgan?"

Morgan's heart thundered in her chest.

*Can I not have one free moment to stabilize a patient without getting lectured?*

Then again, Ayer had two full minutes to torture them before the next decision could be made regarding the patient's treatment.

"Yes," she answered.

"Anyone know her downtime?" Ayers asked.

Another ER nurse shook her head. "We can only guess. She was found by a couple and a group of Boy Scouts. They state they saw a man running off. She didn't have a pulse when they found her, but they felt that they had interrupted the attack so attempted to save her life."

Ayer's eyes narrowed. "My report from the ER doc stated she did have a pulse when she hit the ER."

"Yes, sir. She did," another ER nurse affirmed.

"So our fine, trusty citizens saved her life enough to put her in a vegetative state for the remainder of it. Morgan, what do you think our overall problem is?"

Morgan's vision hazed. An iron fist of grief constricted her heart. The team continued to do compressions. In the emergency department, they'd already intubated and the ER respiratory therapist now provided the necessary ventilations.

*Why today of all days? Another child dying, exactly one month after my daughter's death. Is nothing sacred, God? Please spare me from having to witness another parent's grief. Please.*

“I’ll go make that call for the chaplain.” Eric handed her three syringes—one more epinephrine, one atropine, and a syringe full of flush solution. Both meds were designed to help increase the heart rate.

Normally PICU staff wouldn’t prohibit parents from watching them code their child. It often helped provide closure for families if they could see every effort made to save their loved one’s life. However, in Morgan’s experience, it was most beneficial when another person separate from the medical staff could explain what was happening at the bedside.

Most units overhead-paged their code events, which prompted the in-house chaplain’s response. However, a couple of units managed their own codes without paging overhead—the ICUs being some of those units.

“Morgan!” Ayer shouted.

She jumped. A headache brewed behind her eyes, and she gritted her teeth against Ayer’s insolence. Her mind offered many words she refused to say out loud.

Ayer took a step away from her. Still, her glare wasn’t enough for him to fly off his perch and abandon the point he wanted to make.

His superiority over everyone else.

He glowered at her. “What is Zoe’s problem? Why is she trying to die today?”

*Besides the man who held his thumbs over her neck to deprive her brain of oxygen?*

Morgan placed her heels together, shoulders straight, before she fired the heavy iron ball directly into Ayer’s head.

Lowering her voice, she said, “Dr. Ayer. Zoe is likely suffering from the onset of rapidly progressing cerebral edema caused from the anoxic injury at the hands of her attacker. This is why her heartbeat is slow. She is exhibiting Cushing’s triad, which is high blood pressure, widened pulse pressure, and bradycardia. This signals that her brain no longer is in its happy place and is at risk of being shoved into her spinal cord and therefore complicating her situation further, as it could lead to brain death. I would suggest that we load the patient with mannitol to combat the swelling in hopes that pulling off extra fluid will reduce the pressure. And if it is her brain causing the slow pulse, it should respond by increasing. Can I draw that medication up for you, doctor?”

*Don’t. Mess. With. Me.*

Morgan fought the urge to keep her fingers from snapping in his face.

Lucy gave her a wink and the slight shake of her head in lieu of a sassy retort of her own. For several seconds Ayer looked at her blankly as if he'd stroked.

"Two minutes of CPR. Should we check a rhythm?" The ER nurse stopped compressions again.

Ayer checked the monitor. "Pulse with that?" The nurse gave a thumbs-up. "All right. Since it remains low, let's give a dose of atropine and load the patient with mannitol. Continue CPR." He nodded curtly at Morgan. "Nice work, Ms. Adams."

Morgan handed off the atropine to another nurse and left the bedside to grab the mannitol when the man whom she assumed was a police detective grabbed her elbow. His brown eyes were nearly the same shade of his slightly curly locks. "How's it looking?"

She glanced at the hallway. The chaplain still hadn't arrived. How could she offer any response with the parents staring at her like she was in fact the angel of death?