

Blood Destiny



by Tessa Dawn

A Blood Curse Novel
Book One
In the Blood Curse Series

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Dedication

To you – for surviving what few others could.

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A Special Word to Readers

Dear Readers,

This book marks the second edition of *Blood Destiny*, reissued in December, 2013, after a wonderful, three-year run in circulation. The first edition was originally published by Charles River Press in December, 2010, and I am forever grateful to Jonathan Womack for believing in this project. Now that *Blood Destiny* has found a new home, I wanted to let you – the fans – know how much I appreciate your endless support of the Blood Curse Series. Your enthusiasm has been amazing. And I also wanted to let you what you can expect from this second edition:

It is essentially the same book as before – simply reissued with a new cover and minor, editorial updates. The only substantive change is in the Romanian interpretations that appear throughout the text: Following the release of book one in 2010, I began working with a new Romanian Interpreter on the series; and I asked her to go

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back and rework her beautiful, native language in Blood Destiny as well. This reissued edition reflects those updates; however, the story, plot, and characters remain the same.

Prologue

800 BC ~ Romania

“Your punishment has been decided.”

In the dark Romanian castle of their beloved homeland, the royal twins, Jaegar and Jadon, fell to their knees on the cold stone floor while the remaining males of their kind waited anxiously outside the castle walls to hear the edict. Their thick black hair fell forward, shielding their terrified eyes from their accuser, as torchlight cast eerie shadows upon the dank gray walls around them.

Their accuser was The Blood of countless victims.

Each one slaughtered without mercy.

The grim face of death eager to exact revenge.

“*Great Celestial Beings*, have mercy on our souls,” Jadon pleaded as the ghostly apparition drew closer.

“You make me sick, brother!” Jaegar spat the words, unable to conceal his rage or his arrogance.

The shadow weaved to the left and then to the right like a phantom pacing.

And then it bent into a horrible arc of darkness, dipping down until, at last, it hovered face-to-face with the trembling men.

Oh gods...

Flushed and swaying, Jadon Demir reached out with a firm hand to steady himself against the ground. He cast a sideways glance at his older twin, who was now as pale as moonlight.

“From this day forward you shall be cursed! And your sons shall be cursed. And their sons after them...unto all eternity.” The shadow drifted closer and a heavy mist settled on their skin. “And to make certain your suffering is inescapable, you shall be made immortal. Condemned to roam the earth in darkness as

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reviled creatures of the night. Forever forced to feed on the blood of the innocent to survive.”

Jadon inhaled sharply, his heart pounding in his chest.

Despite his iron resolve, Jaegar collapsed on the floor.

The ghostly aberration continued: “As punishment for your unspeakable crimes against women, you shall never know the love or companionship of a female, nor shall you be capable of producing female offspring. Your sons will be born in sets of twins. Two children of darkness. The spawn of human hosts who will die wretchedly upon giving birth—even as the firstborn of the first set will be demanded as a sacrifice of atonement.” The phantom glowered with fury. “Failure to yield the sacrifice will be met with a hideous and terrible death!”

The damp walls of the cavern creaked as if moaning beneath the pronouncement, and the torches flickered in and out as a deep red glow consumed the once-yellow flames.

Jadon Demir shook like a child unable to awaken from a nightmare. His chest heaved as he struggled for breath.

“I beg of you, grant mercy!” The words came out in a rush.

The phantom dipped and hissed, “Speak quickly.”

Jadon cringed and averted his eyes. “I beseech you before all of heaven, before the Ancient Ones who came before us, and in the presence of the Celestial Gods: *Remove this curse upon my house and the house of my descendants.*”

The shadow stood still...listening.

Then all at once, Jadon’s voice became a haunting song of sorrow, a sound so melodious that the room lit up, and the moon and stars dipped down to hear the beleaguered prince’s words. Beneath a wind of grace and power, his plea took wings and flew...

“While I have walked among the warriors who have sacrificed our women, I have never taken life with my own hands. Although I have failed miserably to save the innocent, I have tried to convict the guilty. And while it is true I have enjoyed the privileges of the mighty, my heart has wept for the weak. Your wrath is deserved. Your punishment is just. But I

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beg of you: Search my heart...and have mercy upon me and my house.”

Clearly disgusted, his older twin sat up and slowly turned his head to the side, his stark onyx eyes narrowing with contempt. He cursed Jadon beneath his breath and held his gaze in an angry glare.

“Remember your place, brother. That which curses us now is the blood of the slain, the wretched *females* we offered to the gods for our birthright: to be worshiped beside the Celestial Beings. Plead not with these *inferiors* for mercy. We are the strong. The powerful. What we did was justified. And I will not beg mercy of a female.”

The room erupted into angry flames.

Sparks flew through the air like fire and brimstone.

A revolting abomination of heat licked at the brothers’ skin, yet it did not consume their flesh.

And then the voice of the slain cried out from within the flames: “Ours was once a proud and noble race, before you led the corruption of our men beyond the abyss of evil.” A blast of rage scorched the dark twin’s eyes, turning his pupils from black to red as he was brought to his belly before his accuser. “In your thirst for power, Prince Jaegar, you have sacrificed the last of our females: our powerful sisters, mothers, and daughters. The keepers of the secrets of our race. *You have not achieved greatness.* You have brought an entire civilization to its knees! To the verge of extinction!”

The blaze then formed a halo around the body of the male who had pled so eloquently for mercy.

“And Prince Jadon, we have searched your heart and find your words to be true. You and your descendants—alone—shall be granted four mercies accordingly: Though still creatures of the night, you shall be allowed to walk in the sun. Though still required to live on blood, you shall not be forced to take the lives of the innocent. Though still incapable of producing female offspring, you will be given *one opportunity* to obtain a mate, and the sign of her arrival shall be heralded in the heavens.

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“Though still required to atone for the sins of your people, your twin sons will be born as one child of darkness and one child of light, and you shall be allowed to sacrifice the former while keeping the purer soul to carry on our noble race.”



And so...

Banished from their homeland in the mountains of Eastern Europe, the descendants of Jaegar and the descendants of Jadon became the Vampyr of legend: roaming the earth, ruling the elements, living on the blood of others, forever bound by an ancient curse.

They were brothers of the same species, separated only by degrees of light and shadow.

one

Present Day

The dark woods were eerily quiet. Not a single sound invaded the night. Not even the soft hooting of an owl overhead or the faint rustle of leaves in the trees as an icy wind swept through the darkness. The ancient, circular clearing was on hallowed ground. A spherical graveyard surrounded by tall, looming pines and enormous, jutting rocks—the final resting place for the fallen descendants of Jadon.

Nathaniel Silivasi knelt before a perfect, lifeless body as it lay unnaturally still upon an ancient stone slab. His fraternal twin, Kagen, crouched down beside him.

His heart was heavy with sorrow—his grief overwhelming. The gravity of the loss was almost too much to bear.

It was still hard to believe that their youngest brother had fallen. *Shelby*: the last born of the five, a soul so full of mischief and humor. *Shelby*: vibrant, powerful, and gifted beyond measure.

Only five hundred years old, he had died as a mere fledgling. Just another proud warrior lost to the original sin.

Nathaniel cursed the heavens against the fate of their kind.

Like all descendants of Jadon, he was a being of both darkness and light, a powerful prince of the night, protecting the earth and its inhabitants from the darker demons of their species—the descendants of Jaegar.

He bowed his head in silent resignation, trying to accept what could never be changed: Shelby had failed to complete his destiny, to obtain the one human woman tied to his infinite soul, the only being in a lifetime of immortality who could free him from the ultimate claim of the Blood Curse.

With piercing eyes the color of emeralds and long black hair

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that flowed like the wind, Dalia Montano's path had been chosen long before her birth. Chosen for Shelby and the future of their race.

It had been Dalia's fate to bear Shelby's twin sons: a child of light, who would forever lift the dark curse of death and spare his soul from eternal damnation, and a child of darkness, who would be offered in atonement for the sins of their forefathers.

Nathaniel trembled as the memory replayed in his mind.

Shelby had immediately recognized all the signs—just as he should have—the bloodred moon, the sudden appearance of his birth constellation in a pitch-black sky, even the matching birthmark on Dalia's inner wrist. But he had failed to consummate the ritual in time.

Wanting to make things easier on the beautiful human female who had turned his heart as easily as she had twisted his fate, Shelby had waited too long. And in doing so, he had created a lethal opportunity for one of the shadow descendants of Jaegar to get to Dalia first.

Valentine Nistor.

The true undead.

A living, breathing expression of evil itself.

As one of the oldest and more powerful of the Dark Vampires, Valentine had managed to take Shelby's life without ever lifting a finger—without ever drawing a single drop of blood.

Resentment stirred in Nathaniel's heart.

The Dark One was as cowardly as he was evil. He could have fought like a warrior, but he had chosen to go after his enemy by manipulating the Blood Curse instead. A descendant of Jadon was a very hard creature to defeat in battle.

Nathaniel sighed and resolutely shut his eyes.

He was fighting to keep his tears at bay, struggling wildly against the rage that was mounting in his soul. A single tear escaped, and he quickly wiped it away.

What difference did it make? What had or hadn't happened to Dalia? The bottom line was the same: She had not given birth

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to Shelby's sons, and when the Blood Curse had come for the unnamed one, without the sacrifice of the darker twin to stay his sentence, Shelby had died an agonizing death of retribution. Punished for a crime he had never committed.

Nathaniel set his jaw in a hard line. He refused to engage in *what ifs* and *if onlys*—speculating about the ancient curse or wondering what Shelby's life would have been if the damnable thing no longer existed. The Blood Curse did exist. And it would always exist for his kind. As sure as the sun would always rise in the east and set in the west. Like all vampires, Nathaniel had simply learned to accept it. It was an intrinsic part of their way of life.

Kagen reached out and placed a steadying hand on Nathaniel's shoulder, his dark brown eyes focused on the ground. "You know I share your pain, brother." His voice was a mere whisper. "Like you, I have lived long enough to know the deeper tragedy of this loss. So many proud warriors gone...and for what?" He shook his head with disgust.

Nathaniel swayed, feeling suddenly light-headed. "I never thought it would hit this close to home. How could this have happened, Kagen? *To Shelby of all males?*"

"One word," Kagen said, "*Valentine.*" He bit down on his lower lip, and his hand began to tremble. "But we cannot shed such tears, my brother. Remember, we must still guard our emotions."

Nathaniel knew his twin was right.

The force of such overwhelming grief spilling onto the earth from an ancient vampire could easily call forth an earthquake or command a flash flood. As it already stood, too many humans were going to die as a result of Shelby's passing, as a byproduct of the earth's grief.

Nathaniel nodded, his heart turning as cold and impassible as the stone slab his youngest brother now rested upon. He fisted his hands at his sides. Though he wanted to scream at the heavens, rage at the earth, weep until there were no tears left to cry, he knew he could not. His duty would not allow it.

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His honor would not abide it.

Betraying no emotion whatsoever, he silently cursed his ancestors in the ancient tongue, daring them to retaliate, urging them to try and stake their claim on him before he could seek his vengeance for Shelby's death.

And he intended to seek his vengeance.

Kagen read Nathaniel's mind effortlessly. "You may not have a chance to impose your retribution, Warrior. Not if Marquis gets to the Dark One first."

Nathaniel glanced at his twin, noticing the subtle red embers glowing deep in the centers of his eyes. Kagen's own anger was scarcely contained.

"That might be true, brother, but if Marquis feels so strongly, then why isn't he here?"

"Nathaniel—"

"Do not excuse him, Kagen!"

Kagen shook his head. "I wasn't going to, brother."

Nathaniel sighed. "I know *exactly* what you were going to say, but that doesn't mean I understand..." His voice trailed off. "Nachari's absence? Sure. He couldn't possibly make it home in time, and Shelby's journey couldn't wait. But Marquis? He sits at home embracing the torment in his soul even as the shadows grow deeper within him. It isn't healthy. He needs to say good-bye."

Kagen frowned, his dark eyes filled with shared understanding. "You know he could not attend, Nathaniel. What did you expect him to do?" His voice held no hint of judgment. "The sky itself would have rained down blood and fire had Marquis been forced to place this blessed one in the ground. Marquis is too old. Too powerful. *Too angry*. I know he's always been the strong one, but I fear this may be too much...even for him."

Nathaniel rubbed his temples in slow, methodical circles, trying to ease some of his tension. Marquis was, indeed, having great difficulty with Shelby's death. "Has he spoken to you?"

"Briefly."

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“And?”

“And he blames himself, Nathaniel. What do you think?”

Nathaniel shook his head. He knew that it was more than the injustice of the Blood Curse that tormented their ancient sibling, now fifteen hundred years old: Marquis was consumed with guilt over the *may* Shelby had died.

Kagen crossed his arms in front of him. “Marquis believes that the curse should have claimed him first. The Blood should have demanded a son from him long before it demanded one from Shelby. But it’s the fact that Valentine got to Dalia—” He cut off his words the moment his voice began to quiver.

Nathaniel hissed beneath his breath. “None of us saw it coming.”

“True.” Kagen shifted uncomfortably. “But *Marquis* is the eldest, which makes him the sworn protector of our family. In his mind, he was responsible for the safety of his less powerful brother. As a male of honor, he should have seen to the safety of the human woman.”

“It wasn’t his mistake,” Nathaniel insisted, knowing he felt guilty himself. “We all let Shelby down.”

Kagen rubbed his eyes; he looked weary. “I know that. And Nachari knows that. But Marquis—”

“Will never forgive himself,” Nathaniel supplied. He wiped his brow and shrugged his shoulders as if he could somehow lessen the weight of his grief with a gesture.

Kagen looked off into the distance. “Marquis will have to make his own peace with what happened in time.”

Nathaniel hung his head. “Will you, Kagen? Will I?”

A long moment of silence passed between them before Kagen spoke again. “At any rate, Marquis is far too stubborn to take counsel from either of us. Perhaps Napoleon can speak with him when things settle down...make him see that we are all equally to blame.”

Maybe, Nathaniel thought. “He has to know that his leadership is still needed.”

Kagen nodded. “More now than ever...” He cleared his

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throat. “Nachari should arrive tomorrow evening. Being Shelby’s twin, he was even closer to him than the rest of us. He is definitely going to need Marquis’s support.”

Nathaniel agreed, although he couldn’t imagine anything that would ease Nachari’s pain. “Perhaps they can console each other...now that they each walk the world *as only one*.”

The slip was inexcusable.

Nathaniel immediately averted his eyes and bowed his head in a slight nod of regret: a warrior’s apology.

It was rare for a vampire to refer to the missing twin of the blood sacrifice. It was simply understood that in every family, there would always be an odd number of sons—an eldest brother who walked alone, the firstborn of light whose twin of darkness had been sacrificed at birth. It was seen as rude to mention the one who had never been named. Impolite to even acknowledge his existence.

Kagen overlooked Nathaniel’s error. “This won’t be easy for either of them. I do not look forward to all the dark days ahead of us.”

“Nor do I.”

Nathaniel stood up then and drew in a long, deep breath. “It is time,” he whispered.

Kagen rose to his feet and slowly nodded.

With a wave of his hand, Nathaniel gradually began to lower the heavy stone slab deep into the earth, the body of his beloved brother resting silently upon it, uncovered, so that the earth would embrace him.

Nathaniel spoke softly in the ancient language of their ancestors, offering a prayer for peace—a final benediction—and then he requested *safe journey* to the Valley of Spirit and Light, making an impassioned plea to the Spirit of Jadon himself to grant Shelby absolution for his failure to relinquish a son.

Nathaniel watched helplessly as his cherished little brother descended deep into the ground, never to rise again. Despite his best efforts, two burning tears escaped his eyes, each one instantly transformed into a single heart-shaped diamond: the

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color, crimson red.

“Travel well, my brother. Go in peace.”

two

Jocelyn lifted the canteen from the weighty, navy blue backpack and took a long drink of water. She checked her compass once again, glancing furtively at the sky to determine the position of the sun. She was making great time. There was plenty of daylight left, more than enough to reach the cave before sunset. Placing the canteen back in the pack, she adjusted the weight evenly on her shoulders, her mind continuing to analyze information as she headed deeper into the forest.

Jocelyn knew that she didn't have permission to move on the tip her informant had given her. She wasn't supposed to be there. And if anything went wrong, she was on her own. But she also knew that it couldn't wait. *Human trafficking. Ritualistic killings.* The entire case was so bizarre.

As an agent of ICE, a highly specialized department within homeland security, Jocelyn Levi had been investigating one particularly shocking human-trafficking ring for months. Unlike more typical rings that forced young women into sexual slavery or sold children into forced labor, these victims were being taken for much darker purposes—to be used as sacrifices in ritualistic killings.

But by whom?

Jocelyn shook her head, carelessly tucking a handful of thick brown hair behind her ear. Over the last two months, her unit had discovered three freshly discarded bodies, each one showing signs of the same hideous brutality. The sight of the mutilated corpses had been abominable, but they were close to finding the head of the ring, or at least finding the man who was selling the women. Still, they had no idea who was doing the actual killings: what kind of cult could be behind such gruesome acts of evil. They had never managed to uncover an actual crime scene.

Jocelyn sighed, hoping that today would be a major

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breakthrough. If the information her source had given her about the cave was correct, then she was about to make a huge discovery.

Her informant had assured her that she was not walking into a danger zone, that the site he had told her about was no longer being used by the ring. As always, they changed locations frequently, moving around to avoid detection by the authorities. Unfortunately, this meant that there would be no fresh forensic evidence, but the information Jocelyn hoped to uncover was of a different kind anyway.

Jocelyn slowed her pace as a series of tall, reddish rock formations appeared in the distance, strangely shimmering into view like a desert mirage on a hot day. An eerie chill swept through her body, raising the hair on her arms, and a deep sense of foreboding settled into her stomach. She shivered and stared ahead. There was something about the peculiar canyons that shook her to her very core.

Although most people would have turned back, most people would not have been there in the first place.

Jocelyn was not most people.

Solving difficult crimes was her life. Stopping the *really, really* bad guys. And she was very good at it. She had always had a sixth sense, an uncanny ability to stay one step ahead of the criminal mind. It wasn't like she was psychic or anything. She just had a way of *feeling* things. Walking into a crime scene and *knowing*. As if the very essence of the place whispered secrets to her of the people who had been there.

Now, after months of dead ends, she finally had a reliable lead; and she had no intention of letting the information go to waste.

Jocelyn drew in a deep breath of crisp mountain air, her lungs working overtime to adjust to the altitude of the Eastern Rocky Mountains. The beautiful, expansive territory ran along the Front Range of North America, full of hidden canyons, dense forests, and towering, majestic peaks; under different circumstances, it might have been an idyllic place to vacation.

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Her sense of dread grew stronger with every step she took, so powerful that it almost felt as if there were an invisible hand holding her back, something warning her away. She shook her head in an effort to clear her mind as she pushed forward against the invisible barrier.

She had come way too far to turn back now.

The faces of the victims, their broken and tortured bodies, continued to replay in her mind like a gruesome, private slideshow, reminding her of just how much was at stake.

Picking up the pace, Jocelyn headed deeper into the canyon.



The oddly shaped underground cavity, at the end of a series of narrow limestone tunnels, was exactly where Jocelyn's informant had said it would be: beneath a thin-arc'd entrance at the back of the cliffs, just beyond a waterfall. Jocelyn wondered how something so beautiful could be used for something so evil.

It was well after sunset when she reached the cavern.

She had slowly worked her way through a long labyrinth of passageways, going deeper into the earth with every step, until she had finally emerged in a gigantic chamber with enormous cathedral ceilings and jutting white columns. The scattered limestone pillars were erected haphazardly, as if a divine hand had simply tossed them about, and there was a small pond of stagnant water toward the back of the chamber, just beneath a series of low ledges. The cave itself was eerily dark, humid, and chilly. The air was musty and damp.

Jocelyn abruptly shut off her flashlight as a faint sound caught her attention. She thought she heard an echo coming from one of the adjoining tunnels. It sounded like a woman softly moaning.

She instinctively crouched down, her senses fully alert.

She reached for her gun, removed it from the holster, and ran to the rear of the cavern. Then she quietly waded through

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the sulfuric-smelling water, slid down onto her belly, and crawled like a snake beneath an extremely low rock overhanging. She repositioned her slender frame in the tight space so that she could still see out into the chamber, and burrowed in as deeply as possible.

God, I hope there are no spiders or bats in here, she silently prayed as the sound from the tunnel grew louder. Whoever was out there was clearly coming her way.

It was then that she saw the firelight erupt—as if on its own—illuminating the entire structure like a dark sky on the fourth of July.

Crude, ancient torches were anchored into the limestone walls in perfectly spaced increments, running all the way around the structure in a flawlessly level circle, and Jocelyn almost gasped as her eyes took in the details of the ancient cavern for the first time. Fiery orange blazes illuminated every nook and cranny of the chamber, revealing carefully carved structures placed purposefully throughout the room. It was an amazing circular fortress, no doubt created naturally by the earth over centuries of dissolution.

But it had also been carved by human hands into a ceremonial hall.

Jocelyn held her breath, hoping she was deep enough into the crevice not to cast a shadow into the stagnant water. For the first time, she noticed that there were three ledges spaced diametrically apart like the points of a triangle along the cavern walls, and each one led to a steep drop. A certain death should anyone try to escape.

The thought was bone chilling.

In the center of the room, there was a large stone slab with a smoothed surface, much like a bed made of granite, and there were intricate carvings on either side, ancient symbols that Jocelyn didn't recognize. But the color at the top of the stone was unmistakable. Jarring and unsettling. Jocelyn cringed as she imagined its purpose.

The center of the stone was a deep crimson red, the obvious result of years of decaying blood that had crystallized into the

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stone's pores. This was clearly not the work of a serial killer or a regional group of fanatics. This chamber was ancient. And these crimes were generational. The room spoke of a hidden way of life that had belonged to a people—a *culture*—for hundreds of years.

Adrenaline coursed through Jocelyn's body as the horror of the chamber sank in.

She held her breath and strained to see more.

On both sides of the bloodstained slab, there were additional man-made structures carved into granite: a raised altar on the left with a small basin smoothed into the top, and a wide bench on the right containing a backrest with arm-holds for comfort. Each structure sat about three feet away from the head of the slab.

Jocelyn shuddered.

She could feel the darkness and the unspoken pain etched into the fiber of the chamber, and once again, her stomach lurched. The hair on her arms stood up.

It was then that they entered.

A tall, dark, heavily muscled man. He was graceful yet intense, striking but dangerous. He was definitely malevolent.

Not human.

And he carried a very pregnant woman in his arms, obviously the one who had been moaning.

Dear God...

Jocelyn didn't know how she knew the creature wasn't human. She just knew. He looked like any other man, except that he was far too stunning, handsome in a way that seemed impossible. His long hair fell just below his shoulders in perfectly groomed waves, and his chiseled features were flawless, as if he were a statue rather than a man. But what really gave him away were his eyes. They were vacant...empty...soul-less.

Dark as the night and just as lifeless.

They might have held a strange beauty if they hadn't been so...dead.

And the color of his immaculate hair was unnatural too: It was a deep raven black, interspersed with bloodred tendrils,

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highlights that had not been added with dye. Jocelyn thought it shimmered like the surface of a lake beneath the moonlight; it was almost beautiful...in a demonic sort of way.

She hunkered lower and held her breath as she continued to watch, mesmerized.

The pregnant woman's eyes were open, but she looked unaware, like someone in a trance. She appeared to be young, maybe nineteen or twenty, with beautiful black hair and stunning green eyes. Her pale face was etched with...something...like a frozen look of terror from a nightmare. Thank God she was so checked out.

With a wave of his hand, the chamber began to fill with the smell of incense, and a dense gray fog began to hover just above the ground. It surrounded the bloodstained slab in the center of the room, instantly adding a ghostly feel to the chamber. Jocelyn couldn't scoot any further back into the crevice, so she tried to make herself smaller, willing her physical body to disappear.

There would be nothing she could do if he saw her.

Somehow, she knew, even as she cradled her gun in her hand, fully loaded and ready to fire, that her fate rested upon remaining hidden. There could be no detection. Luckily, the creature appeared far too engrossed with the pregnant woman to scan his surroundings, far too confident in his overwhelming power to concern himself with checking the chamber for others. And the sulfuric water she had waded through was a powerful mask of scent. Or at least she hoped it was.

There was a strange exhilaration gathering around him now. A sense of great expectation. Power radiated from the male as if it were seeping through his pores.

He glided to the bloodstained slab in the center of the chamber and slowly laid the woman down on the pallet. For a moment, Jocelyn thought she saw a hint of tenderness in his actions until she heard a faint laugh rise from deep within his throat. A twisted cross between a leopard's snarl and a hyena's hackling that made her skin crawl.

"Dalia, awaken," he commanded. His voice was like a velvet

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song, a rich cello from a concerto, as pure as the night and deeper than the ocean. He bent over the pregnant woman and kissed her. She awoke as commanded.

“Valentine, help me!”

She gulped the words in a desperate plea for mercy. Her eyes were wide with fright, and then, as she surveyed the chamber, a shriek of unbridled terror escaped her throat.

Jocelyn was not prepared for the sound that filled the cave.

The cry was so full of anguish that it momentarily stole her breath, even as it filled the room with electricity. It was unlike anything Jocelyn had ever heard before—the woman’s misery was beyond comprehension.

Jocelyn had the sudden urge to vomit and had to struggle to remain quiet as her stomach protested, threatening to give her presence away. Fortunately, the agonized screams drowned out the sound of her gagging.

The woman was in labor, and something was terribly wrong.

She writhed and screamed. Tried frantically to crawl away. But the man simply leaned over her, watching with indifference as he placed one powerful hand against her chest, pressed her down, and held her to the stone.

Jocelyn shook her head and blinked several times, as if trying to wake up from a nightmare, hoping it was all a bad dream.

The pain continued.

The torture persisted.

The cries went on for what seemed an eternity, sweat pouring from the woman’s forehead, her hands clenched in a contortion of anguish, as the dark male sat quietly watching the whole scene with a look of pleasure gleaming in his eyes.

The man shifted back and forth on the hard bench.

He appeared to be deliberately controlling his breathing, and there was an erotic quality to his movement. It was as if he were deriving sexual pleasure from the woman’s suffering, struggling to restrain himself from touching her while she labored.

Unable to bring his excitement under control, he bent over and pressed a hard kiss against her mouth as she moaned in pain.

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It was beyond sociopathic.

And then, what happened next was so shocking that it left Jocelyn both hypnotized and repulsed at the same time: The creature's perfect lips drew back like a predator's snarl, and his canine teeth slowly lengthened into two razor-sharp...*fangs*. And then he scraped them back and forth over the woman's neck—again and again—leaving deep, jagged gashes in his wake. Groaning in a low growl of ecstasy, he finally sank them deep into her flesh, his body shuddering with pleasure as she cried out in pain.

The entire scene was unspeakably brutal. Jocelyn felt like time was standing still as she lay motionless on the floor of the cave, desperate to conceal her own presence from the monster.

Helpless to save the suffering woman.

And then the woman's struggle reached a fevered pitch. Her cries grew so forlorn that Jocelyn actually considered drawing her weapon and revealing her own presence just to end her suffering.

There was no time.

Muscles began to stretch. Bones cracked and ribs popped. As a terror that could only be described as unholy rose in the form of a plaintive wail from the woman's throat. The baby was not moving down through the birth canal, but up...*up*...into the chest cavity. Jocelyn fought to hold back her own terrified scream, and her mouth fell open in horror as the woman's rib cage exploded outward. Fragmenting as it burst open, it exposed her heart and lungs.

The dark creature sighed in contentment.

He stood up over the broken body, reached into the gaping cavity, and lifted out what appeared to be *two* perfect newborn infants—both males—with thick, raven black hair. Hair striped with demonic strands of crimson red.

When the creature strolled to the raised altar, he seemed to falter for the first time, like he was struggling to remain in control. He placed the firstborn of the two sons gently into the basin, pausing only long enough to stare into the child's eyes and

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place a soft kiss on his forehead. It was as if he knew he couldn't keep the child. The tenderness was bizarre.

Instinctively, he held the remaining infant close to his chest and moved back from the altar. He watched the abandoned baby squirm, and his eyes became as cold as ice.

The dark fog moved then.

It swirled, becoming increasingly solid and thick.

It took the form of two long arms with extended, skeletal fingers as it reached and grasped. Moaned and wailed. In a shrill, high-pitched cry of victory.

The wail became louder as the fog swirled closer to the altar, where the child lay waiting.

And then Valentine's muscles clenched. His forehead wrinkled with tension. And his gaze became a fiery red ember of loathing as he watched the fog approach the child.

Yet, he didn't move a muscle as the grayish-black mist surrounded the crying infant. As it reached out to tighten its ghostly fingers around the newborn's neck...

Then just like that—the child was gone.

Valentine growled a low, angry snarl, his powerful frame trembling with rage, and then he simply turned away, lifted the remaining child high in the air, and smiled, a twisted grin exposing his perfect white teeth.

“You shall be named Derrian,” he declared in a deep, resounding voice. “And now the Blood Curse shall never claim me. I am forever immortal.” A wicked smirk crossed his face. “While Shelby Silivasi—the *beloved descendant of Jadon*—is forever dead.”

He spat the words sarcastically, his laughter echoing all the way to the high cathedral ceilings.

“And this woman...” he gestured toward the stone where Dalia lay dead, her eyes still open wide in horror, “was truly a waste of a beautiful body, don't you think?”

He laughed again and held the newborn baby to his soul-less heart.

Waving a carefree hand over Dalia, he sent the tortured body

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up in flames, cremating her as he sauntered out of the chamber.
Softly singing a lullaby to his son.

three

Jocelyn raced frantically across the winding mountain path. She ran with all the speed she could muster, dirt and rocks kicking up behind her as her feet left the ground. The limbs of nearby trees reached out to scratch her skin when she got too close. Her heart pounded uncontrollably as images of the horror she had witnessed replayed in her mind.

She had waited in the dark cavern long after midnight, wanting to be sure the creature was gone before she attempted to make an escape. Taking only her identification from her backpack, she had placed her gun safely in its holster over her right shoulder and flung the half-full canteen of water over her left. Then, she had hastily thrown the heavy pack over one of the steep drops before sprinting wildly through the dark maze of tunnels in a frenzied effort to get out of the cave.

Jocelyn fell several times in her hasty escape, bruising and scraping her knees, but she barely felt any pain as her adrenaline carried her miles through the forest.

When she finally stopped to rest, her lungs labored for breath, even as her mind cried out for sanity. *It couldn't be!* What she had seen could not be real. What kind of creature was that?

And the poor, helpless woman...

How could anyone suffer such a heartless death?

Jocelyn bent over, panting heavily. Her hands were on her knees, and she fought to take in oxygen in the high, unforgiving altitude. She struggled to clear her usually organized mind.

Dalia.

The murdered woman.

Had she been one of the victims sold into slavery by the ring? Had that creature purchased her...*to breed?* To murder? Had he kept her for nine whole months? And if so, what in God's name had that poor woman endured?

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Most of the women involved in the ring she had been investigating were foreigners. Poor, unsuspecting immigrants forced to trust the wrong person in a desperate attempt to come to the United States. But Dalia had been American. At least she had looked American. And she had sounded American, too, when she had spoken the creature's name.

Valentine.

Jocelyn shuddered and blinked back a reservoir of pressing tears. The woman in the chamber had been beautiful. And she had suffered unbearably.

Jocelyn could not get far enough away...fast enough. She took a few more labored breaths, then forced herself to get moving again. She tried to keep up a steady jog even though her lungs felt like they were on fire. Her mind continued to piece the puzzle together as she ran...

What kind of a creature started fires with the wave of his hand? Who held down a struggling adult woman—pregnant or not—with only the tips of his fingers? *Whose children emerged from the body like alien beings as opposed to being born in the natural way?*

And the blood.

He drank blood.

Jocelyn tried to convince herself that he was just some sort of incredibly strong, psychopathic killer. Maybe a crazed addict pumped up on drugs, someone who had given himself so completely over to darkness that he no longer had a conscience. But she knew better. As impossible as it was, Jocelyn knew the truth: That thing was *undead*. Wholly evil. Dangerous beyond measure and definitely not human.

That thing was a *vampire*.

Even as the prospect settled in her mind, it was hard to accept it as true.

The narrow, uneven path beneath her feet was littered with branches, scattered with pine cones, and strewn with raised tree roots. The loose soil formed uneven divots beneath her feet, causing her to trip and fall far too often, having only a flashlight for a guide. The enormous gathering of shadowed, towering

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pinetrees, interspersed with quaking aspens, gave the forest a haunted appearance.

As if it were bursting with mystical beings. All of them lurking. Towering over and around her. Hiding just out of sight. Crouched and ready to pounce as she ran by.

Every shadow was a ghost. Every sound was the creature finding her. Every whisper was a vampire waiting to claim her.

Jocelyn put her hands over her ears. She could feel the desperate pounding in her head even as she tried to control her thoughts and keep her eyes focused on the path ahead of her.

One step at a time, she coaxed. *Just keep going one step at a time.*

A large, jutting tree root caught her ankle as she rounded a sharp curve in the path, just as a wolf howled from somewhere deep in the forest. The tree felt like two evil hands snatching her legs, and she was certain the howl was an insidious snarl, that the vampire had found her and was about to take her to his lair. She screamed a hair-raising shriek of terror as her knees struck the ground and her hands flew out in front of her to catch her fall. She clenched her eyes shut and trembled uncontrollably.

She was too afraid to open them.

Too afraid to move.

So gripped with terror she was paralyzed.

She huddled close to the ground, trying desperately to regain her composure.

As long as she lived, she would never get over what had happened in that chamber. No matter how tightly she held her hands over her ears, she couldn't shut out the echo of those anguished cries. Now, miles away from the bloody cavern, Jocelyn finally began to feel—not just to analyze or survive—but to deeply, intrinsically feel the full horror of what she had seen.

Like the rising tide of an ocean wave, the anguish swelled in her heart, and she began to sob. She gathered her knees to her chest, buried her face in her hands, and rocked back and forth while she wept.

Jocelyn Levi cried uncontrollably, maintaining a far too fragile hold on her sanity.

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Nathaniel had stood at Shelby's grave site deep into the night, so consumed by his grief that he'd lost track of time. It was only the harsh, desperate sound of a woman's cry, coming from deep within the forest, that brought him back to the present moment.

He lifted his head to scent the air, his mind becoming alert. The sound had come from the valley just beyond the Red Canyons. *The canyons once used by the Dark Ones to conduct their hideous rituals.* Was it possible that his shadow brothers had returned to the familiar chamber?

It had been many moons since a son of Jaegar had dared to sacrifice a human in the sinister ritual so close to the lands of his Lighter Brothers. The last Dark Vampire who had flaunted such arrogance had been Vladimir Lazaro, and he had paid a heavy price for his audacity when the sons of Jadon had punished him for his crime.

As was the only true way to destroy a vampire, a creature whose very life and power existed in the blood, Vladimir's had been drained from his body by the warriors. He had been dealt a lethal wound to enable his capture, and his blood had been siphoned from several major arteries to ensure a rapid loss of life-force.

Normally, his head would have been severed and destroyed along with his heart, but Vladimir's punishment had been much harsher. An example to the rest of his kind. He had been drained of *all but a few drops of blood*, leaving just enough essence to keep him weak but alive. The sons of Jadon had then staked him through the heart; anchored him to the ground; and surrounded him with their most powerful ancients, holding him there until the sun had risen the next morning.

Completely exposed, Vladimir's flesh had been incinerated beyond recognition, his unclean heart burned from his body in

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the most painful death a Dark One could endure. The Evil Ones continued to have children, to make human sacrifices, but like the cowards they were, they hid in the shadows and struck only when there was little chance of being caught. The Red Canyons, with all their hidden labyrinths and chambers, were far too close to the shared valley of Jadon's people. To use them was to commit certain suicide.

Nathaniel cloaked his presence and took to the skies, flying toward the canyons to investigate. He considered the world around him as he flew.

The night air was cool, but the skies were clear. The moon cast radiant shadows over the land. As Nathaniel basked in the glow, it occurred to him that the Rocky Mountains were not at all like the mountains of his ancestral homeland, a homeland he could only embrace through visits and genetically passed-on memories.

While the Transylvanian Mountains of Europe stretched from the mouth of the Vișeu and Golden Bistrița rivers all the way to the great Hungarian Plain, the Rocky Mountains were located in western North America and stretched all the way from Canada to New Mexico. The eastern edge of the Rockies had been inhabited by the banished males of his ancestry, those who had been forced from the Transylvanian Alps many centuries earlier as part of the Blood Curse. Eventually, they had settled along the central Front Range, building a lasting society and a legacy of wealth.

Nathaniel had grown to love this "new" land, with its enormous, jutting mountain peaks, reaching impossibly high into the bluest of skies. He adored the endless valleys and forests, with their mild spring and summer weather, and he practically worshiped the purple and orange sunsets.

And he never grew tired of discovering the endless channels of water—rivers bursting with whitewater rapids, waterfalls pouring out of steep cliffs, and sparkling, crystal lakes hiding deep within secret meadows.

As he approached the Valley of Shadows, he surveyed the

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land below. The descendants of King Sakarias had originally settled in the region some 2,800 years ago, separating the vast mountain ranges into two distinct regions: All the land to the west of the Red Canyons had been claimed by the Dark Ones, the descendants of Jaegar; while all the land to the east of the canyons had been inhabited by the descendants of Jadon.

The approaching valley below was a neutral zone that connected the two.

As Nathaniel slowed to make his descent, he could see the slender silhouette of a woman; she was rocking back and forth like a frightened child, kneeling on the ground.

Absently, he wondered how she had gotten so close to the Red Canyons. She should have been able to feel the dark hand of warning that safeguarded the region; it was set in place by the sons of Jadon to keep out humans who might wander too close.

Curious, Nathaniel landed out of view behind a small grouping of pine trees and watched the human female. She was clearly distressed, her narrow shoulders hunched over from the weight of her tears, but she did not appear to be in any immediate danger.

To be perfectly honest, Nathaniel was grateful for the momentary distraction from his grief, however slight.

Cautiously, he stepped out from behind the trees. His eyes immediately searched hers out to project a sense of calm.

“Hello,” he called softly.

About The Author

Tessa Dawn grew up in Colorado where she developed a deep affinity for the Rocky Mountains. After graduating with a degree in psychology, she worked for several years in criminal justice and mental health before returning to get her Master's Degree in Nonprofit Management.



Tessa began writing as a child and composed her first full-length novel at the age of eleven. By the time she graduated high-school, she had a banker's box full of short-stories and books. Since then, she has published works as diverse as poetry, greeting cards, workbooks for kids with autism, and academic curricula. The Blood Curse Series marks her long-desired return to her creative-writing roots and her first foray into the Dark Fantasy world of vampire fiction.

Tessa currently splits her time between the Colorado suburbs and mountains with her husband, two children, and "one very crazy cat." She hopes to one day move to the country where she can own horses and what she considers "the most beautiful creature ever created" -- a German Shepherd.

Writing is her bliss.

Books in the Blood Curse Series

Blood Destiny

Blood Awakening

Blood Possession

Blood Shadows

Blood Redemption

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