

# Blood Crescent

Divine Series Book One

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Do You Want to Be a Vampire?

The shoe box was covered in newspaper clippings pasted on with Elmer's glue; we'd made it together the day I asked my father why I didn't have a mother. Over time it had been layered with so much history it became a hard cast, buried deeper the more events were added. It was eventually used as a bookend and forgotten; no one would know it had anything inside it, unless you picked it up and shook it. More recently, my father had been adding layers to it for an entire year, one article at a time. The box didn't make a sound anymore.

Two years ago, he told me to open it as he drove me to the bus station. That was the last time I ever saw him, alive.

"You remember the memory box we made together." It wasn't a question; the box was seated right next to me. His face was paler than usual. Gray shadows under his eyes and cheekbones. My father didn't always look like a ghost—that was recent. He had been forgetful lately. Food was one of those things he couldn't seem to remember either; our refrigerator was empty, and I never saw him eat.

I used to think of him like an older version of Superman, but now he looked like he'd been stuck in a cellar with kryptonite for the past few months.

"This one?" I placed my hand on the papier-mâché box. I didn't remember putting anything in it, even though I always

thought of it as a memory box, and it used to jingle from the items bouncing inside it. He was getting more frail by the moment.

“That’s the one.” He scratched behind his ear, creating red streaks along the way.

I wanted to ignore the box on the backseat, so removing my hand from it, I climbed over the middle console to be at his side, sitting on the front passenger seat. He smiled gently, saying not to worry, it was just eczema. It was hard not to believe him when the lie was followed by a soft chuckle.

Several minutes passed in silence as he drove. Until his hands trembled, and his back became stiff. He flexed his fingers over the leather steering wheel, reasserting his control. Even then, at his weakest, he held strong and the car held steady before he pulled into the bus station.

“Crystal.” My name was said through chattering teeth. In a hushed tone, soothing like a warm wind wrapping you up and promising you sweet nothings.

But I wasn’t precious, as he believed I was, just an everyday human experiment. Hard and strong, made in a science class out of sugar or salt, some boiling water, and a string. I had to be strong after what I’d seen, and for him, he needed me to be strong.

I remembered this moment more than most, because it still tore at my insides.

“You’re the next in line. They’ll come for you if they know. I promised your mother that I’d keep you safe. Don’t let them know, don’t let anyone know.” My father’s face sunk deeper, shadowed, and his eyes were wide in frenzied turmoil.

I wasn’t stupid, I knew he was losing his mind. But I was too naïve to know I was going to lose more than sanity. Maybe it was genetic, or maybe he wasn’t that crazy after all, but my heart raced to meet his quick plea.

Anxious, ready, and believing, despite myself, that the shadows I saw were real. That something or someone was after us, but his mind was too far gone to tell me why. Deep in my

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bones I felt it—he was trying to protect me, and I wouldn't let him down, even if that meant running away from something I didn't know existed. But he knew. And I saw them, sometimes I saw them, and panic reentered my father's eyes when he noticed.

"They're coming...I can't remember your mother's face anymore. I know they're here...they'll clean up everything. Me...even you. Only a matter of time." He rambled incoherently.

I chewed on the brown hair that fell in front of my face. My father wanted me to stop nibbling my fingernails, so I transferred my nervousness to the next best thing. I only needed a few strands to glide across my tongue to help distract me, and he was too preoccupied to notice.

It was in that hazed moment that I suspected my father knew more about my mother's disappearance than he would tell me. It was the things that followed us that were responsible.

"What are they?" I would foolishly ask of him.

"Serpents." He closed his eyes and rounded his shoulders back against the seat before slumping into it.

But it wasn't until now, stepping into my new life, that I wished I had pressed for more answers, instead of asking him to stop, telling him he just needed some rest. Maybe then I would have known more about why serpents were so dangerous to us...to me. It wouldn't be until later that I made the connection that they weren't merely snakes in the shadows.

They were vampires.

When you're halfway through transforming into a monster, wishing of any way to change back to save your life, those moments of lost opportunities come back to haunt you. I missed feeling like I had opportunities. Missed my chance to ask who my mother actually was, and why vampires would be after me. Missed my chance to believe Aislin when she told me magic was real, but even my weird roommate couldn't have predicted that her current charge wasn't going to hunt down vampires like her predecessors.

I used to have a heart that told me when I was tired, excited, and alive. And as choices go, most of the time they were between

bad, better, and best. Currently, the options were more along the lines of bad, worse, and unknown. The sand ran out on my response time, and whatever options there were...disappeared along with it.

I was turning into a monster, and silly peppered me:

Do you want to fall in love? (I don't know, who doesn't?)  
When will Victor come over? Why can't life be as freeing as music? What is Victoria's secret anyway?

Those questions felt like ages ago, along with why pimples are attracted to hairlines.

But the most concerning question asked of me yet was: Do you want to live?

That one was a bit more complicated. My options weren't yes or no. If I said yes, then I'd be a monster. If I said no...then I'd just be dead. Saying yes meant saying yes to not life, but also the death of who I was. Who I still believed I was.

Worse yet, the longer I waited to answer the question, the more I didn't have a choice in the outcome.

When you're compelled by magic, anything was possible.

Do you want to be a vampire?

I wouldn't let the creatures in my life dictate my future anymore.

I was making a choice, completely off course...fates be damned.

Stepping back, I dragged a monster by its collar with me into the moonlight's glowing embrace. His violet eyes stared back at me wide. I rubbed my thumb against the ring loose on my finger, steadying it and praying it would work. I hoped my instincts were right. I was running away again, but I wouldn't leave alone.

I picked option C: the unknown.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Run Away

*Three Months Ago*

Some small part of me hoped my mom was still out there, looking for me. That she would see through the new last name, new birthday, and new location. Two years ago, I lost a few years of my life. I needed to work to help Aislin out; managing the ballroom dance studio didn't afford us many luxuries, contrary to popular belief. Now, according to everyone except me, I was eighteen years old.

It wasn't so bad being older, though it didn't offer much more in terms of respect, people still occasionally scoffed at being taught to dance by a child.

Eighteen or sixteen years old, I was still more adult than them any day. What hurt wasn't them, but that she hadn't found me yet, though neither had child services, so we could call that a tie for wins and losses. I still believed my dad that my mom was out there, and someone had stolen her from us, that the serpents had taken her.

Over time, though, that thought had morphed from thinking they were monsters to thinking they might have been a local gang that got the wrong idea about my family.

My dad used an old photo of her to make me look older, for the ID he gave me before dropping me off at the bus station. I didn't recognize her except that she looked like me...or I looked

like her. We could've been twins if I didn't have my dad's dark brown hair. She had high cheekbones; big, green eyes; and platinum-blond locks tied back revealing a tattoo just below her ear of five thick black lines. It was a strange tattoo to get, but it was a mystery I'd never know the answer to...unless she were alive. And in all honesty, in my heart, I knew she was. Alive, I mean.

"So, that's your mom?" Victor traced the picture with his finger.

"Yah, I know."

"She looks exactly like you." He confirmed what I already knew he was thinking.

"You don't think she's alive...do you?" I took the picture back and stuffed it in my back pocket. We both sat on a worn-down bench, made out of a fallen tree trunk, my initials carved in its surface: CLD (Crystal Lynn Dylan). The breeze was cool on my skin; I didn't feel cold, but that didn't stop a shiver from working its way down my arms, forming goosebumps in its wake. I tugged down my sleeves to hide them.

"It would be a very elaborate plan if she were." He hesitated. I was sure he would understand, but all I felt were the doubts closing in on my hopes...and crushing them. I didn't need anyone else to think I was crazy.

"No, you're right. If she is alive, she hasn't come back. And if she is gone, so are the answers about her disappearance.

"It doesn't matter, forget I said anything," I added, explaining my question away. I moved my hopes into more sane prospects, like having him ignore the insanity of my disillusioned belief that my mom was kidnapped by monsters called serpents.... So well planned that no one would question anything. Yup, even that thought convinced me of my inner conspiracy theorist.

I never got to meet my mom, at least not outside of the very first moments of my existence, and my memory wasn't on par with computers. So, infancy wasn't really something I could press a button and be like, "Oh yah her, that lady," but my dad described her all the time as a hero. Apparently, she used to be

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some sort of bounty agent, finding criminals who were dangerous and making sure they didn't hurt anyone ever again. I wanted to be like that one day.

Then he surprised me.

"Thoughts, even crazy ones..."

A smirk crossed that face while emphasizing my *crazy* in a way that didn't make me want to punch him. It was almost endearing, almost.

"...Are rooted in a sort of truth," Victor finished.

He sounded so smart, and yet that's what I was saying all along, yet not so eloquently.

Victor had been there for me, since the first time my dreams scared me. Seeing shadow creatures in your dreams that wanted to take you away to meet your mother wasn't exactly something I could share with him at the time, but he had been there to comfort me even if I couldn't tell him why he was.

My renewed sense of finding my mom wasn't just those dreams, but the last one was just after my dad dropped me off at the bus station. A man hovered near him floating in ash and smoke. He placed a hand on my father's shoulders and plunged his other into his chest to pull out a still-beating heart, before I woke up screaming.

I shivered.

"Then you believe I could be right?" I was finally feeling comfortable around him ever since he told me he believed in the supernatural. If Victor could believe in monsters, why not believe in mysterious disappearances, right? It seemed logical at the time. And he would tell me about vampires—he didn't think they were all that bad, if they existed.

"Anything is possible." Victor shrugged and I felt my heart lift. Finally, someone to confide to, I thought, before he asked, "Have you done any research on her?"

My brow furrowed, and I knew where this was leading to. I thought about everything, round and round the information would flow, but research, I hadn't done a lick of it. Obviously, I was more of a thinker than a doer.

"Nothing that's helpful, or that I didn't already know." I breathed through my nose, trying to squelch the feeling I was failing before I had ever really started.

"Do you know what funeral home came by?"

"No," I said soft, under my breath. I hadn't even thought of that angle. How stupid could I get? "I mean no. I didn't look into them."

"That's where I'd start, if I were uncovering a conspiracy." He ended with a deep breath through his teeth, mouth thin and barely noticeable, if it weren't for the rise of his chest. I felt weak staring at those lips, and I shook my head at the thought. He was nearly like a brother with how he'd always looked after me; I'd never want to spoil that.

"I always thought that if it were a conspiracy theory, the funeral home wouldn't be a real one anyway, like a fake magnet slapped on a van or hearse." I literally thought of that now. Rationalizing why I hadn't looked into funeral homes in the first place... I tried to hide the fact that I was too focused on other things to think about the obvious solution to call up the funeral homes in the area. Why had I avoided doing any research at all before the intense desire to find her became so heavy that I revealed my secret to Victor before examining anything?

I cleared my throat and looked away, hoping he wouldn't see through my lies. I was turning out to be a horrible detective. At this rate I would never find my mom.

And I needed to, because I was lost. Don't be daft, I knew where I was, I just didn't know who I was anymore, or if I ever really did.

"Or it was a real funeral home. Many people have been sent to funeral homes and buried alive, though not recently. Dead ringers would have a safety coffin with a string they could pull to ring a bell."

"Saved by the bell," I said with as much amusement as I could muster. I rolled my eyes. She would have come back if it were as simple as being dug up again. If she were buried in the first place,

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my dad would have had a funeral. He didn't mention anything. And I distinctly remembered him saying she was taken.

"Of course, you knew that." Victor rubbed his neck and looked up at the sky, gloomy with cloud cover. He did that a lot, avoided looking at me. I twisted in my seat, crossing my legs to settle myself.

"I like that you know that," I reassured him. Now I was the one looking up at the sky, the air felt damp. And I felt like I was being watched.

I turned to look at the bushes that we passed. Pennsylvania National Park was our spot, where we met the first time, crying on my bench at dusk as the sun set behind us.

"You're too sweet to tell me that you don't."

I didn't look at him, but knew he was smiling. I couldn't bring myself to do the same. My lips stayed neutral, and I wondered why, even Victor, fell victim to the distance I placed between everyone else. Couldn't look at him, couldn't let myself smile, couldn't let him know everything.

Couldn't let him know I felt a shadow behind us. He followed my gaze to the bushes and for a brief second I thought he could see what I saw, before it disappeared.

I changed the subject. "It's going to rain."

"Seems so, my sweet."

My cheeks flushed, and my stomach heated with the way his nickname for me flowed from his lips. Mouth dry I coughed and stood. "We should get back."

I turned away hoping he didn't see my face, not daring to look back. His footsteps joined me and I felt a weight over my head as he placed his hooded jacket over me. Then the rain tapped on the fabric, slow and then steady. It drenched my jeans from the knee down. I stole a peek from the hood to see his eyes, closed and letting the water run down his face and through his soaked chestnut hair.

He breathed in deeply, and his skin looked like glass how the water slid from his near perfect features. When I thought he wasn't looking I would stare at his eyebrow, where some of his

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hair never grew, forming a line like he should have a scar there. It was silly, but that imperfection made me smile despite myself.

Hiding my face behind his hooded jacket, I knew that as long as he was with me, the shadows would leave us alone.

# STEVIE MARIE

is the author of young adult paranormal fantasy and the Divine series. Born within the apex of another universe, where magic flows like leaky faucets, and forged from the fires of the Underrealm she dug her way to Earth and reluctantly participates in human society, secretly returning to her home world to relay the stories of her monsters and the troubled love of her people. When she isn't writing she's crafting clothing in her sewing room, cuddling her significant-other creature, or pretending to adult by managing a portfolio of properties for an accounting business in the rainy city of Seattle, Washington.

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