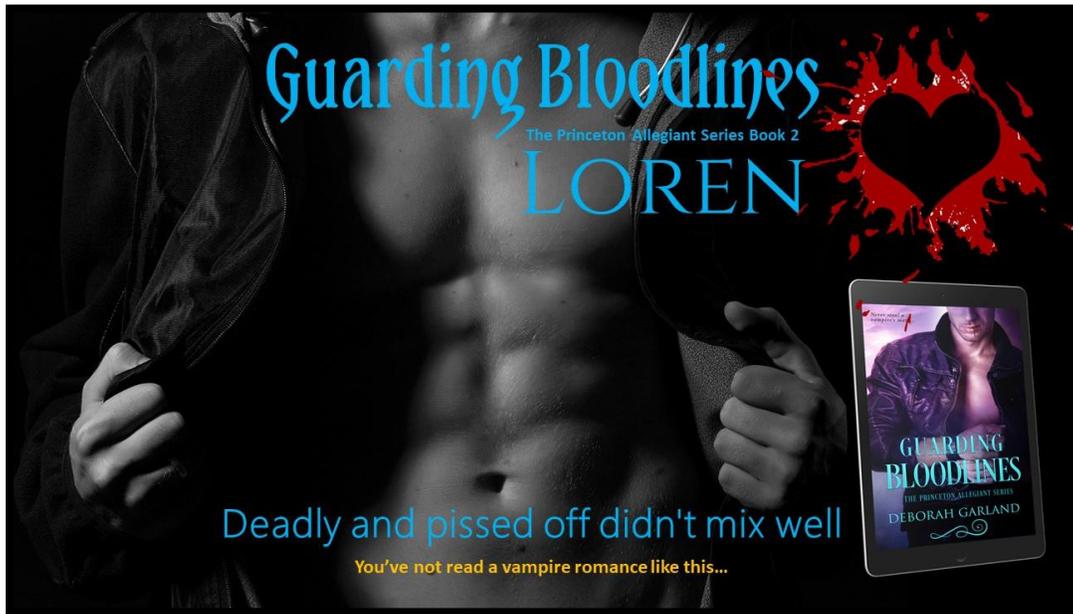


Excerpt from:

*Guarding Bloodlines* by Deborah Garland



Loren was welcomed into the lobby of the rundown building on Amsterdam Avenue by the pounding footsteps of an army thundering from the stairwell. Within seconds, he was surrounded by at least two dozen guards.

As they escorted him down several levels to stand before the four Lords who made up the New York Vampire Command, the guards' minds were shattered with fear. Their faces were blank and their shoulders squared.

If they coordinated themselves properly, they would have a chance at surviving if Loren attacked them. They were vampires, able to burst into a gasping level of speed with the strength to crush concrete to a fine dusty powder. The high-powered rifles

tight in their shaky grasps could pummel enough bullets into his brain and kill him instantly. The show of force was meant solely to remind him he wasn't *completely* invincible. Just mostly.

Loren hadn't asked for the deadly powers he'd been given by his maker, a mysterious vampire who appeared and disappeared just as quickly. He had not heard from Noah in nine hundred years. The three hundred years since he'd found Julianna about to be roasted and on the brink of death seemed like a blink of an eye, in comparison.

The slow march continued even though Loren could disappear from view and reappear behind one of the Lords with a knife to the throat. However, he knew it was unwise to remind New York of his gifts when he was about to get on his knees and beg for Julianna's life. He wondered if it was a moot point. She'd vanished again.

His attempts to speak to Cecilia again had also been thwarted and he was prepared to take finding Aiden into his own hands. Except he didn't want to do it alone. If he included Julianna in the hunt and they were successful, New York might change their view of her. Let her join an allegiant so she could be part of the vampire world.

That was the goal. The terms of his loyalty truce with New York was a basic agreement not to kill any of them in exchange for his freedom. He was prepared to renegotiate for Julianna.

The official New York Vampire Command center located in Downtown Manhattan was a palace. The pageantry and glitz akin to a Hollywood Oscar ceremony

were meant to intrigue clueless humans who thought the Lords were just a bunch of sexy European investors, with their expensive suits and model-like glamour.

There was no red carpet or gold anything in the dank hallways leading to the Lords' secret chamber. Someone had carefully chosen that location. Clever, Loren admitted bitterly to himself.

New York knew what he was capable of. The nineteenth-century concrete and steel beams would challenge his abilities to escape if the meeting went terribly wrong.

The musty smell and dampness would choke a human. He'd grown accustomed to the finer things over the centuries. He shook his head, aggravated at the rude hospitality. How dare they force him to meet in such a clammy, foul-smelling sewer.

If any vampire deserved to be treated like a king, it was Loren.

At the door, the guards separated and made a path. Their beady eyes stayed on him as he passed each one. Loren catalogued their faces into his superior vampire brain. Even behind their iron masks, their features registered. He released the faint message that would pass through their minds like a hot breeze, *I see you. I can find you.*

Loren had an incredible arsenal of mental talents. He'd have located the abandoned underground cellar with tunnels that led to primitive confinement cells even if he hadn't been given the location.

Now that he knew where the Lords held their trials and executions, Loren had the advantage if he needed to strike against them.

Was it coming to that reality? The Lords didn't get where they were by being stupid or naive. So, how could they not see what was coming?

As a sign of respect, he strolled into the chamber slowly, guardedly, eyeing each Lords' sinewy face.

They sat high upon a dais in exaggerated Queen Anne chairs that resembled thrones. The long steel table bolted to the floor separated him from men he'd been forced to respect. There wasn't any other furniture in the room and Loren wondered if that had been on purpose given his ability to make shit fly with the flick of his wrist.

"Ah, Loren," the voice he recognized to be Hamish greeted him first.

"Yes, my Lord," he answered and bowed his head slightly. "Thank you for allowing me this opportunity." New York didn't grant just *any* vampire permission to address them.

Loren wasn't just any vampire.

"Where is she?" the sharp voice of Samson cried.

*Sniveling coward.*

"Silence!" Hamish roared at his fellow Lord.

They were smart to be frightened of her. Julianna was an unsworn soul with the power to destroy them.

"I can see we're going to get right to it. It doesn't matter where Julianna is at the moment." Saying her name stabbed at him. "I should have addressed you about her decades ago."

She'd done such a good job at being a ghost. The Lords would have thought Loren was insane, arguing to them, putting his precious freedom at risk for someone

who didn't even trust him. Despite her running off three months ago, he'd seen something in her eyes. Like him, she too was tired of being alone.

"I made her. She's my responsibility." And he needed to guard her.

"Made nothing. She's not vampire." Giordan studiously pointed out.

The Lords simply did not recognize Julianna as his progeny.

"I hear she's a witch!" Samson crowed.

Ugh, that again? "How many three-hundred-year-old witches have you met?" he snapped.

The mystery of why she never fully turned had eaten at Loren for centuries. His powerful bloodline gave Julianna immortality but perhaps there *had* been magic buried deep within her.

Whatever the reason, his venom hadn't done its job. A vicious death, followed by a glorious resurrection as vampire – cold, hard, bloodthirsty. Beautiful predators, and when aroused, ravenous lovers.

"Julianna is as close to being one of us, as any non-human can be," he argued.

"You mean, one of *you*." Samson snarled at him.

"Yes, and let me remind you, she's part of my bloodline, *Noah's* bloodline."

Loren took several steps forward ignoring the Lords' gasps. "She can do nearly all that I can do."

It was a calculated risk to emphasize how deadly she was but meant to enforce that only a progeny from his bloodline could have those abilities.

The shock on the Lords' faces suggested their decision to send their guards away had been an asinine one. Only Samson had openly protested, fearful of being around the deadly vampire unprotected.

They were all very old, therefore very strong. They *could* take him down, only because he'd naturally hold back.

Without New York's control, the allegiants would descend into chaos. That would be bad for humans. Alexander was now human, as was his new family.

"Stand down, Loren." Hamish rose slightly.

Damn, this fuck-tard of a situation he kept finding himself in with respect to Julianna was going to be the death of him. A rock and a hard place was like jerking off and then accidentally coming all over yourself. Messy but still blissful.

Not *this* mess. He'd turned someone who hadn't turned. Now they considered her a rogue. The vampire directive to stay hidden was one of the rules he didn't have a problem with. Yet, he sent a half-human/half-vampire out into the world.

*Running* around. Running from him. From New York. For three centuries, he let it go. Let her go. He had his own life to live. Women to fuck. Veins to drink from. Julianna ran off. That was her problem.

Yeah, that's what he told himself, but never really believed it. Any time he'd gotten wind of where she was, he'd send her the same message:

*We do not destroy what is ours.*

No response. Every damn time.

Realizing he needed to relax and play nice to get what he came for, Loren backed up.

“Go on, Loren.” Giordan’s shoulders relaxed, the grip on his dagger loosened.

Who he’d use it on was unclear.

Loren nodded politely to the one reasonable Lord he would spare, even guard his throne personally if Giordan were to survive the uprising Loren could feel coming.

“As I was saying—”

“Do you have plans to mate with this *woman*?” Hamish asked.

*Crap.* “I uh . . .” His jaw trembled.

“You say she’s one of us. A vampire. She can be taken to mate. Do you not want her?” Giordan added.

He *wanted* to bed her all right. But *mate* with her? Vampires mated for life and forever, unless something terrible happened. They were also forbidden to mate with humans. And most vamps despised *him*, so mating for life had never been a consideration. Falling in love fell into that same category. Not happening.

“Pity, you can’t get her to submit to you.” Samson licked his dark red lips. “You make us doubt your powers, Loren.”

“Oh yeah?” He released his hands and shook one of his wrists.

The blast of fire created a hole in the wall behind him. He glanced at the smoke and then back at the Lords. Stepping into a shimmer of light created by a burning lamp, he let the Lords see the fire in his eyes. Orbs that could send a bolt of lightning into their thick skulls.

“You have a bigger problem than Julianna, my Lords,” he spoke calmly. “I have intel that Aiden from Philadelphia is being held captive. And DC was involved somehow. That’s a conspiracy. I’m offering my services to find him in exchange for a promise to stop your pursuit of Julianna.”

“We reviewed the report you submitted.” Hamish lifted the papers Loren sent via messenger because they don’t use email for command business. “You’re asking our permission to go to war with not one but two of our allegiants?”

“If they’re insurgents, yes.” He’d grown uneasy by the week about DC.

The more he investigated George’s command, its leaders, guards, its sworn vampires, there were more questions than answers. Philadelphia was a cunning and ruthless command, but at least they were organized.

“I’m here to get your verbal assurances Julianna is safe so long as she is with me. Her gifts can help me find Aiden. There could be others.” Loren didn’t like offering empty promises.

He had no idea where she was. But she knew the meeting was today. His stomach had unclenched when the email he sent to her hadn’t bounced back.

The Lords mumbled among themselves and Loren discreetly checked his phone for the time. And a response from Julianna. With no signal down in that rancid smelling dungeon, he wanted to punch more holes in the moldy walls.

The arguing volume would have reached his ears even if he’d not been a vampire with superb hearing. He glanced at the dais. How did they make decisions

anyway? Knowing how polarized they were on certain matters, four Lords meant many decisions ended in a stalemate. Which often lead them to the decision of no decision.

The debate raged on several feet away. But only three Lords were actively engaged. Kane, older than Loren, had not said a word to anyone. He kept his dark eyes forward with steady scrutiny on him.

After a few more minutes of noisy deliberations, he tore his gaze away from Kane. “My Lords.” Loren had enough and spoke loudly to get them to shut the hell up. “You made me wait three months to address you. You’re sitting here wasting more time. What is more important to you? Restoring a strong and well-respected commander to an important and powerful allegiant, or the comings and goings of a woman who, in three hundred years has leveled no threat against anyone. Who’s kept her secret, *our* secret, all this time?”

“You’ve hardly been interested in our politics before now, Loren.” Giordan folded his hands lazily. “Why the sudden concern?”

“He wants to blackmail us!” Samson spit out venom so bitter Loren could smell it.

“Per our truce, I am unattached to any allegiant. But my other progeny, Alexander, was caught up in one of your schemes. We defend what is ours. Julianna is mine as well. Either you grant her —”

“I want her for myself.” Kane silenced the conversation.

The Lord had a short temper and a heinous disregard for life — human and vampire — and he was dangerous to cross.

“Excuse me?” Loren glared up at the man who matched his six-foot-four height and was just as good-looking, except with golden hair.

Kane’s mind was littered with past memories of cruel deaths, and the women he’d taken against their will. Loren’s stomach heaved and his venom kicked up something fierce.

“You heard him,” Samson needled in a grinding annoying voice. “If you can’t get that woman to submit to you, she’ll submit to us. *All of us.*” When Kane hissed at him, he cleared his throat. “Okay, *not* all of us.”

Loren’s anger shot through his hand sending a bolt of electricity into the ground beneath him, cracking it open. He stepped over the dislodged stone.

“Do you seriously think I would let that happen?” He raised his hand to send a blast of fire right at Samson’s head.

“My fellow Lords!” Giordan jumped up. “We speak as one voice. And that is not our collective desire. Is it?” He glanced at the men on either side of him and then back at Loren with a depleting level of patience.

Hamish said nothing, just shrugged.

Forget the allegiants rebelling. Loren might destroy the Lords first. Then where will the commands be? Who would they seek out for leadership? Him? Ha! Not happening.

“Do we have a deal or not?” Loren clenched his fists tight enough that blood trickled through his fingers.

The Lords mumbled to themselves once again. Heads shaking, fists pounding.

“Thirty days,” Samson said bitterly.

“Thirty days, what?” Loren’s patience had also run out.

“Find Aiden,” Giordan said humbly. “Restore our faithful commander and we will close the matter of Julianna.”

Loren let his fingers loose of the cramped knot they’d been in. He wasn’t ready to celebrate. That’d been too easy.

“However.” Hamish raised his index finger confirming his suspicion. “It would be to the benefit of everyone if she were mated to you. And as your mate, we would expect you to control her.”

Did they really need to be told it didn’t work that way anymore? Have they met any female vampires lately? Or human women?

“Loren, if that woman is mated to you, we will consider her yours and make her a party to our truce agreement,” Giordan attempted a positive spin to this mess.

“And if I can’t find Aiden in that time? Or Julianna has not agreed to mate with me?” He pondered which would be harder to do in thirty days.

Kane stood and spoke in a low dangerous voice. “Our guards will find her and take her into custody. Then she’ll be *mine*.”

Loren blanched when those disgusting thoughts he’d seen earlier now included Julianna. “If I fight you?”

“Our truce will be considered null and void,” Kane responded coolly. “You too will be hunted down.”

“I *will* find Aiden.” Loren stepped back to turn and evaporate away; remind them that while he may stand before them, cold-blooded and marble like any other vampire, he could sneak up on them at any moment. Make a dagger in the throat look like an accident.

“It is our hope that you do,” Giordan pressed.

Loren nodded to each Lord with a half-cocked smile. But his face was dark and angry finding Kane. “Julianna will mate with whoever she chooses. If it’s you, so be it. But if I have to come back here to *rescue* her because she’s been taken against her will? All of you and your guards will be dead. I will burn this place to the ground, drag you out in front the humans you’re hiding from and slaughter you all on the sidewalk.”

*Coming this October...*

