



The Vampire Oracle:

LIFE

By

A.L. Debran

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Dedication

'Tis the good reader that makes the good book.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Chapter One

Jaxon Granger crammed his cowboy hat on his head as he bolted out the front door with his shirt tail flapping. He alternately hopped on each foot as he stomped into his boots then raced across the yard. His heart pounded from coming out of a dead sleep to the sound of the emergency buzzer.

Bursting through the side door of the indoor exercise arena, he vaulted the metal corral panels then walked calmly across the dirt floor to the injured horse. His younger brother, Steve, held the thoroughbred stallion by a halter and lead rope as their foreman, Mac Hartley, kept pressure above the horse's wound to stem the bleeding.

Jax talked in a low tone and patted the stallion's rump as he rubbed his hand along the big bay's back, slowly working his way forward. Blood oozed from a horizontal gash across the stud's meaty chest, and another slash went up his shoulder. The horse danced around and tossed his head, unwilling to stand still.

"Vet coming out or are we hauling him in?" Jax asked.

Mac replied, "Doc Bohlinger's taking a couple weeks off. He's got a new vet working with him. She's on her way now."

Jax looked up sharply. "She?"

Mac nodded, grinning.

"Shit," Jax complained. He tried to inspect the wounds again, but the stallion would have none of it.

Mac eyed him. "What's your problem? Afraid someday you might

have to give a woman credit for being capable at her job?"

"The last female vet Doc sent out here passed out from the blood."

Steve disagreed. "Hey, there was a shit-load of blood. Even made you queasy."

Jax tried to look at the wounds again. "What about Miss Prim and Prissy last spring? She wasn't strong enough to handle a horse, and she got herself hurt worrying about her manicure." Jax gave up his inspection and looked at Steve with a hard expression. "Doc needs to stop hiring women and get men who can do the job."

Steve disagreed. "I think you'd better reserve judgment with this one. She started working for Doc about three months ago, and she's already in hot demand with horse owners. Seems to be her specialty." Steve punched Jax's arm. "And she's single. With any luck, maybe she hasn't heard anything negative about you, and she won't think you're a total dick the minute you open your mouth. You might have a chance to ask her out before she's too jaded."

Jax shot him a go-to-hell look. "You know how I feel about women like her. They have no business trying to do a man's job."

Prodding, Steve continued, "You didn't think jockeying was for women either, but Allison Keane sure kicked your chauvinistic ass all over the racetrack when she rode Sailor Boy across the finish line in record time last summer. If I recall, you dropped a wad of cash on that bet. And lost."

Mac joined in as if Jax wasn't there. "And I seem to recall Jackie Burke walking circles around him as a farrier, too."

Steve snapped his fingers. "That's right. And wasn't it a female orthopedic surgeon who patched him back together when he broke his shoulder? I mean, what's the world coming to? It's downright criminal. Why, women are taking over the very jobs men need to support their families." He made a histrionic overture of pseudo alarm.

Mac chided, "Well, it didn't seem to stop him from getting in their pants every chance he could."

"What exactly happened between you and Allison anyway? I liked her a lot. She was a keeper. I was looking forward to finally having a

sister-in-law. I even heard a rumor that you'd actually bought her a ring."

"Yeah, what really happened with Allison?" Mac pushed him.

Jax bristled. "Your rumor mongers are wrong, and none of your fucking business."

"I remember that night you two broke up. I was just going back to the house from making the night rounds, and I saw Jackie half-dressed in your doorway, and Allison was storming to her car calling you names I'd never heard. There was something about *unprepossessing misogynistic Neanderthal prick* just before she punched you in the nose. You ever look up *unprepossessing misogynistic*..."

"Shut up, Steve. I know what it means."

Dogs barking, headlights shining, then the sound of tires on gravel interrupted the ensuing guffaws. Steve handed the lead rope to Jax. "Here, hold him. I don't want her to get the wrong idea about me. You? Well, I don't really give a shit."

Despite his façade of nonchalance, Jax was curious. When she walked in beside Steve, the sight of the old-fashioned, worn-leather medical bag in her grip amused him. It reminded him of Doc Adams' from *Gunsmoke*. She carried herself with confidence and was asking Steve how long since the horse had been hurt.

A visor cap over a blonde ponytail and the round blue-lensed glasses perched on her face suggested an outdoorsy veneer. Much as he didn't want to admit it, her gender-indeterminate, faded green medical scrubs and scuffed leather work boots fit with his predetermined expectation of a veterinarian, and he nodded approvingly. He was surprised at the medicinal whiff he caught as she brushed past him.

Evidently she doesn't marinate in perfume. He glanced at her hands. No artificial nails nonsense, either. At least she hasn't tried to feminize the profession. Let's see if she can get her hands dirty.

The stallion snorted and rolled his eyes as she neared, tugging the lead rope taut, but Jax held him without fighting his head. The woman murmured soothingly and stroked the horse's neck as she held her open palm under his muzzle. He sniffed warily then munched the compressed pellets she offered. She continued to talk to him until he nuzzled her

clothes for more. Bending down to check the damage, she said, "I'm Melissa Price, DVM. Call me Lissa."

Steve said, "This is Mac Hartley, our foreman. This goofy bastard ogling you is my brother, Jax. Along with our paren—dad, we own this outfit."

Jax shot Steve a quizzical look, but Lissa interrupted the question leaving his lips. "Nice to meet you. So, what happened here?" She placed her bag on the ground, opened the center hinge, and brought out a bottle and syringe.

Steve explained, "Got a mare in heat a couple of paddocks over from his, and he apparently wanted to answer her mating call."

She nodded. "It's not as bad as it looks. I can fix him up here instead of taking him to the clinic. I assume you have the facilities to keep him quiet for a few days."

"Got a fresh stall for him over there," Mac pointed.

She clamped the filled plastic syringe sideways between her teeth as she swabbed alcohol on the stud's neck, offered him another alfalfa pellet, and gave him a shot. The stallion flinched, but Jax held him steady.

"I just tranquilized him. Now would be a good time to move him while it takes effect. Can I drive in here so my equipment's handier?"

"Sure," Mac said. "I'll open the outside doors."

A few minutes later, Lissa had everything she needed laid out on the open horizontal table doors of her mobile vet unit. She gently wiped the periphery of the wounds with a disinfectant then injected a local anesthetic around the bloody lacerations.

With Steve holding the stud and Mac standing in the open stall door, Jax leaned against the panels, observing her cool efficiency and deft skill with grudging admiration. She continued talking to the horse, and he stayed calm, head hanging and patient.

The men knew to let her work without distraction, and she didn't chat. Jax waited until she was nearly finished before he spoke. "You're not from around here."

She didn't look at him. "No, I'm not."

"Steve says you've been working for Doc Bohlinger a few months."

"That's right."

Silence for a minute, and Jax shifted his weight to his other leg. "Where'd you work before?"

"Thoroughbred tracks back east. Off and on at all night emergency clinics."

"Where'd you go to vet school?"

"Alaska and Canada."

"Been doing this long?"

She paused long enough to look at him. "Is it my credentials or gender that bothers you the most?"

Steve whistled. "She pegged you right off."

Jax ignored him. "Just curious. I haven't encountered a female veterinarian yet who could do the job better than a man, and there aren't many vets who make night calls nowadays. You must not have much of a social night life."

"That depends upon your definition of night life." She finished with a shot of penicillin. "I prefer working nights." She rubbed the drowsy horse between the ears and inspected her handiwork, then abruptly left the stall and began cleaning up and putting her equipment away.

"Well, Doc, it was nice to meet you, but I'm going to bed," Mac said as he latched the stall gate.

"I'm heading home, too," Steve said, "G'night."

"Nice to meet you both. I'll come back in a couple of days and see how he's healing."

Watching her, Jax speculated whether she was wearing anything under her scrubs, while estimating how many times he'd have to take her to dinner before she slept with him. With Mac and Steve out of earshot, he asked, "Why is that? Working nights, I mean."

"I'm sensitive to sunlight."

"What sort of sensitivity?"

Without missing a beat, she said, "My skin starts to sizzle then slough off. It's a nasty sight." She closed a door and walked to the other side of her truck. "Takes a lot out of me to regenerate the damaged skin. I

don't care for it."

Chapter Two

Jax liked Lissa's flippant, quick wit and light-hearted humor. Chuckling, he asked, "Where did Doc find you? 1-800-DRACULA?" he attempted a dramatic and campy Bela Lugosi impersonation.

Her smile went straight to his heart.

"What's that look about?" he asked.

"You have more personality than I anticipated."

"Personality?"

"I phoned Doc on the way over. He warned me about you."

He laughed. "So, meeting Jaxon Granger may be hazardous to your health. Proceed at your own risk." He liked the way her dimples deepened and the sassy turn of her pouty mouth when she smiled.

"You don't care what others think, do you?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, Doc told me something else."

"What's that?"

"That you have a notorious reputation as a lady killer, and all you'd be thinking about is getting me into bed."

Eyebrows up in mock dismay, he asked, "Did Doc say *anything* complimentary about me?"

Shutting the last door, she said, "Well, he does consider you a good friend. However, he thinks you're too opinionated and sexist for your own good."

"Sounds like I'll have to fire Doc as my PR agent." He checked his

watch. "It's about one. How about an early morning snack? Coffee? Sandwich maybe? A drink?"

"Coffee sounds good." Lissa grabbed the hem of her smock and pulled it over her head. Tugging the elastic waistband of her pants down her hips, she peeled them off. Jax smiled at the snug fit of her jeans over the swell of her tight ass and nodded in appreciation at the long, lean line of her thighs. Her double-layered tank top formed nicely to her athletic build, and he particularly liked the firm, ample cleavage taunting him when she bent over to pull her scrub pants over the toe of her boots.

Go ahead, sweetheart, take it all off for me.

Wadding her soiled scrubs into a ball, she tossed them on the floor of the cab. "I saw that." She balanced her glasses on the dash and grabbed a denim jacket from the seat.

"What?" he asked, faking innocence.

"You finished undressing me. Doc said you'd do that, too."

Joking, but half serious, Jax said, "Doc should mind his own damned business." He opened the metal panel gate and pointed through the arena doors. "Drive over to that tan stucco. I'll close up here."

Satisfied all the doors and stall gates were secure, Jax shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and hunched his shoulders in his long-sleeved flannel shirt against the wintry night. Snow swirled, and the blue-white glow from the mercury vapor lights normally cast enough light to see everything in the yard, but there was no sign of Lissa. *Maybe she went inside.* Passing her vet truck and crossing the redwood deck, he grasped the screen-door handle.

"You're not very observant."

"Shit!" Jax whirled, searching for the disembodied voice. Lissa stepped from the shadows of the large cottonwood tree trunk. "Where the hell were you hiding? I didn't see you."

"Obviously, but I wasn't hiding. I was right here watching you."

The moonless night and brisk breeze wasn't the sole cause of the shiver that went down his spine. He stared at her, his chill deepening at the eerie bloodless corpse-aurea of her face under the mercury lighting.

"Something wrong?"

Jax opened the door. "It's just that these damn mercury lights tend to make people look like the living-dead. Remind me to switch to amber sodium vapor. They're more flattering." He swept his arm across the threshold. "Come on in where you can't sneak up and scare the piss out of me."

Low music playing in another room greeted them, and Jax gestured toward the island bar. "Have a seat. I keep coffee on 24/7. I'm an insomniac. I sleep when I can, prowl around when I can't."

"Hmm. Me, too." She sat on a high-backed swivel bar stool and looked around the kitchen then across the open adjoining area where it merged with the living room. Idly, she picked up a *Daily Racing Form* and glanced through it.

Jax placed steaming mugs on the bar top and took a tall chair across from her. "Insomniac, too, huh? Do you take anything in your coffee?"

"Just black, thanks."

When he moved his scattered mail aside, a plain white envelope fell facedown on the floor. Lissa retrieved it.

"Thanks. Hey, maybe you can explain this voodoo shit to me."

"The what?" She blew into her cup then took a sip.

Jax reached into the envelope and pulled out a small piece of stiff paper roughly the size of a playing card. "Don't know who it's from. No return address, only a postmark of El Dorado Springs, Colorado. Came in the mail yesterday." He held up it up, flipped both sides for her to see, then tossed it down between them.

She glanced at it and shrugged, uninterested. "Looks like an Oracle card, not voodoo. There's a difference, you know."

"Oracle, tarot, voodoo. It's all the same hocus-pocus horse shit to me." He stuck it to the fridge with a magnet and said, "Now, seriously, tell me why you like working nights."

She sipped again. "I was serious. I can't handle extended periods of sunlight, and there's always something better to do than sleep."

"The sleeping part I understand. What about the sunlight? Is it something like lupus and too much sun aggravates your condition?"

She considered a moment. "It's not lupus, but close enough."

"All right, I get it. You don't want to talk about it. So, I'll change the subject. You're not only good with your hands, but you also seem to have a way with horses. The stud's not usually that easy to handle."

"Well, he was tranquilized, but thanks. I've had years of practice."

"No, it was more than that. There was something about the way you talked to him and touched him. It soothed him."

"I've worked with horses most of my life."

Jax argued, "It can't be very many years. You don't look more than thirty-five or so."

"Forty-one, actually, but thanks for the compliment. It's been a long and eventful forty-one by ordinary standards."

"What does that mean?"

She exhaled with a sigh. "To paraphrase the Grateful Dead, going from Vivaldi to Van Halen has been a long, strange trip."

Snickering at her exaggeration, he lifted his mug for a drink, but the intensity of her gaze stopped him. It was unnerving. He'd slept with his share of women, but he'd never been this instantly enamored. It was more than just his usual physical attraction. He couldn't look away from her spellbinding emerald-green eyes. She seemed to be pulling him, bringing his thoughts into hers. He was drawn by the brazen lust in her eyes, but he shuddered and goose bumps prickled his arms at suddenly feeling like prey to a stalking predator.

Feeling the need for space, he nearly knocked over his chair when he stood. "I'm going to check the fire. You're welcome to hang out and help me finish off the coffee."

"All right."

With each step away from her, his mind cleared of the disturbing predator sensation, and he returned to his comfortable world of figuring out how to get laid. He glanced at her as she swiveled her seat toward the wall of framed pictures. She topped off her mug then went to the photo gallery.

"This is an impressive collection of win pictures." She leaned closer and studied several in detail. "Are you the little boy in these?" She looked at him over her shoulder.

"I am. They're more or less chronological from left to right."

"I'm going to guess that the smaller boy is Steve and the older man beside you is your dad because the trainer's name listed here is Patrick Granger."

"That's right."

"Who's the attractive woman in these earlier pictures? I don't see her in the later ones, but there's a family resemblance. Your mother?"

Jax didn't answer. Stirring the coals with the poker, he tossed in wadded newspaper and kindling then blew on it to ignite the embers.

"Did something happen to her?"

Jax's laugh wasn't pleasant. "Yeah, she fucking abandoned us."

Chapter Three

The kindling caught fire and blazed.

"When?" Lissa asked.

Tossing on a log, Jax worked the poker to situate it. "I was just a kid. Fifteen or so."

"Your voice says you're carrying a grudge."

Jax hooked the poker in the iron tool stand and leaned an arm on the mantle. Slowly, he nodded, thinking back as he stared into the flames. "You could say that." Every time he thought he had a grip on his anger, it seemed to rise up stronger and blacker than before.

"I understand holding a grudge."

They looked at each other a moment, then she turned away. Jax walked to her. "What are you holding a grudge against?"

Staring at the pictures, she said, "A life and death decision I made a long time ago."

"Your life or someone else's?"

She didn't look at him. "Mine."

"So how was deciding to live a bad thing?"

"It wasn't. At least not at the time."

"So I ask again, why would you hold a grudge for that? You're obviously alive. You look perfectly healthy. I assume you make a decent living."

She nodded. "Well, two out of three isn't bad. It just didn't occur to me at the time how lonely living would be. I'm tired of it."

Jax frowned, clearing his throat uncomfortably. "You're not...um...suicidal...are you?"

She laughed. "No. I'm not suicidal. In fact, quite the opposite. I intend to live forever."

Jax scoffed. "It's good to have a goal in life, but there's also reality."

Musing, she asked, "What's your life's goal?"

Jax took her cup and turned her toward him. Leaning boldly into her, he said "To kiss as many beautiful women as possible."

"Just kiss?"

A devil-take-the-hindmost grin touched his mouth. "Well, kissing is a good place to start. And I have a feeling you wouldn't be opposed to that or even to staying until morning." He slipped her jacket off her shoulders, and it fell at her feet in a heap. When he slid his arms around her waist, her eyes narrowed, and the tiny smirk touching her mouth stopped him.

A warning or a challenge? He didn't have time to contemplate longer when she grabbed handfuls of his shirt and slammed her mouth on his in a deep kiss. A cloudy haze filled his mind, and he pushed her against the wall, lightheaded and unsteady.

Picture frames crashed to the floor when she yanked his shirt snaps open and snaked her hands under his T-shirt to run her fingers through his chest hair. The heat radiating from her mouth blocked all his thoughts except fucking her right there. Pushing her top around her neck, he nimbly undid the front hook of her bra and greedily took a nipple into his mouth. He kissed down her belly and in a second had her jeans unbuttoned and down her legs as she kicked off her boots.

His cock bulged and strained against the zipper, demanding release. Lissa answered his need with a twist here and a quick zip there. He tried to kiss her while bracing the toe of one boot on the heel of the other to pull his foot free. When she plunged one hand inside his briefs and grabbed his cock as she pulled his waistband with the other, it was more than he could manage.

"Shit. Shit—" was the only warning he mustered as he lost his balance and took them to the floor.

On her hands and knees, but grinning mischievously, she observed, "Not much of a multi-tasker, are you?" She pulled his pants and briefs to his ankles and heaved one of his boots carelessly over her shoulder. He kicked his bootless leg free of his clothes as she tossed her visor cap.

"Multi-task this." He grabbed her ass cheeks and ground his cock along the crotch of her black lace bikini panties. The darkening lust in her eyes sent a convincing message to stop wasting time. "Let's get my face between your legs."

"Ladies first." She scooted down and teased the head of his cock with her tongue then clamped her lips around it and sucked hard. Waves of shivers coursed along his arms. Then she was all over him. It was a frenetic blur of sensations as her mouth and hands found every responsive place on his body. It was too much when she circled her tongue around the curve of his ear. He arched his hips into her, desperately wanting to fuck her until she begged him to stop, but at this rate, he wasn't going to have any staying power at all.

In self-defense, he sat up and held her on his lap with one arm encircling her waist and the other hand kneading her breasts. With a nipple in his mouth, he mumbled, "That's enough. It's my turn."

She took his face between her hands and plunged her tongue deeply into his mouth as she pushed his shoulders down. "I don't think so. I'm not finished with you yet." Her iron grip on his biceps struck him how buff she was. Not a body-builder's physique, but just right, not skinny and not muscle-bound. In fact, more than just right and obviously not one of those bronzed sun worshippers. *No tan lines on her creamy white skin.*

She worked her hips on him, the cotton barrier of her panties tormenting him. His eyes closed involuntarily when she brushed her pillowy soft lips along his collar bone and her moist, warm breath sent shuddering need straight to his cock. He pushed the crotch of her panties aside, fingered her clit, then pressed his cock to her pussy. *She's ready, and I can't wait.*

"Are you going to just play with yourself or do you know how to use that piece of equipment?"

Teasing in return, he said, "Just rubbing to warm it up." *Rubbing. Rubber. Christ. I need a goddamned condom. "I—"*

She shut him up with a hard kiss and just the right move, and precaution leaped straight out the window. He grunted at the unexpected force with which she took him. At her wild, gasping moan, his mind clouded again. Her muscles clamped around his cock, and she ground her clit down on him. She was warm and magnificently tight. Eyes closed, he drifted blissfully with their rhythm. When she uttered a little moan, he tried to open his eyes to gaze into the emerald greens of her soul, but he couldn't. He could barely keep hold of the moment.

The soft music wafted far in the distance, and he was falling, losing all sense of himself and awareness. Something was happening in his head. Murky oblivion overtook his willpower. The predator-prey feelings surfaced through the tenuous grip he had on conscious thought. Anxiety gripped his stomach, and he wavered in semi-alert awareness.

"Shit!" His eyes flew open at the sharp stab in his neck.

Lissa instantly rolled to her knees beside him, crouching and wide-eyed, with the back of her hand over her mouth.

"What the *fuck*?" Jax sat up with a start and slapped his hand to his neck. He stared at the blood on his fingers then slowly raised his gaze to stare at her.

She hastily pulled on her jeans, grabbed her boots and coat, and headed for the door. "I'd better go."

He gaped stupidly as the door slammed behind her. Wiping at his neck again, he got his jeans back on, but gave up the vain attempt at finding a comfortable position for his engorged cock. Walking to the kitchen door, he watched the receding taillights disappear down the driveway as she turned onto the main road.

What the hell was that about?

He inspected his neck in the reflection of the window pane, but only found a bloody smear. Wincing as he rubbed his cock, he complained, "Damn. I hate it when that happens. Get a good fuck going, and she bails out."

The Oracle card caught his attention when he grabbed his mug.

Slipping it from the magnet, he studied it closely, eyes narrowing. He glanced out the window then back at the card. With the slow realization that the image on the card bore an uncanny resemblance to Lissa, he suddenly had to be with her. He wanted to jump in his four-wheel drive and follow her, but even as he thought it, he realized he didn't know where she lived, and she was too far down the road to chase. Bringing the card closer, he examined the tree in the background. *Old and dead. Hmpf. Wonder if that's significant?*

He read the words on the card with serious consideration. "New opportunities lie ahead, but those new doors cannot be opened until those of the past have been closed. Key words: judgment and journey." He tapped the card against his palm as he looked out the window, wondering what this woman had done to him in the couple of hours he'd known her.

Chapter Four

Gravel flew as Lissa spun out of the yard. Her only thought was getting away from as fast as possible. *What the hell happened?* He wasn't supposed to feel her bite him. He shouldn't have been aware at all. Granted, she'd perfected her limited mind control over the years, but never, not even the first time she'd tried, had it failed. But there it was. Jax had been aware and somehow resisted her telepathic intent to block his conscious memory. *How had he done that?*

A few miles down the road and her nerves calming, she took a deep breath. She'd been warned by others older and wiser that someday her cavalier disregard for the emotions of her victims would come back to bite her, so to speak. She'd been indifferent to the men, and occasional women, she'd fed upon...until tonight. The moment she'd looked into Jax's eyes, he'd turned her inside-out, drawing her into him at a visceral level.

Initially, she'd simply planned to lure him into her sexual feeding ritual, but she'd lost complete control and had bitten him before either was ready. At the taste of his blood, the room had spun wildly, sending her into spiraling vertigo, but his reaction had hurled her into the instinctive flight for safety. In that instant, her world had shifted frighteningly out of sync. *Was I unable to manipulate his mind because I had such an intense emotional attraction to him?*

Peering down the oiled road, she smiled as she recalled his magnificently long, thick cock inside her. She couldn't remember ever

having a man of his size. With that first thrust, she'd nearly passed out from the pain-pleasure of accommodating him. *Great, nothing like being at the mercy of a big dick.* But when she'd slipped her lips over his cock, the blood pulsing through his femoral artery just inches away had lured her, beckoning her to taste it. Maybe the combination had broken her connection with his mind. Thinking about it left her wet and badly needing relief. She rubbed her hand hard on the seam of her crotch. *Damn. I left too soon.*

A guy who remembered the bite was something new. Unless she moved away in the next few days, she'd have to figure out how to explain it to him if she planned to continue working here. She wasn't opposed to disappearing. She was good at it, but this time, for the first time, she didn't want to go. She wanted to stay around and actually get to know him in a non-parasitic way, but having an intimate relationship without quenching her blood thirst was out of her experience. *Surely I can control myself.* But her better judgment argued with her emotions. *Dangerous. Too dangerous. Caring means eventually confiding.*

The very essence of what allowed her to live also kept her alone. It cut both ways and was the cause of her cynical attitude toward love. Suddenly, she was tired. She was tired of staying one suspicion ahead of people when they questioned why she didn't seem to age. She was tired of hiding what she was, and tired of constantly fighting her craving for human blood. Tired of moving. Just...tired. *What good is immortality if I have to endure eternity alone?*

Sighing, she knew there was no getting around it. Through her own arrogance, she'd overplayed her hand. The way she saw it, she had three choices: disappear and never see him again, convince him she has a biting fetish, or tell him the truth. *The truth. Now there's a novel concept.* She could picture it. *Jax, about the other night. Well, I'm a vampire. I get off biting people. It's what I do. What can I say?*

Amusing herself, she thought of her two favorite things. Sex, and feeding while having sex. *Hmm. Julie never mentioned those in her song.* Though she grinned at her cleverness, she knew it was either leave or face him. *Well, I did promise to check on the stud in a couple of days.* She wasn't

fooling herself. She was rationalizing a reason to see him again. In fact, she *had* to see him again, and when she did, she'd just go with whatever transpired. After all, disappearing was always an option.

* * * * *

An hour before dusk, Steve waved the long-handled grilling fork over Jax's shoulder. Jax followed his point and saw Lissa driving in. Steve's Catahoulas ran to meet her, and she took the time to rub their ears as she glanced around the yard.

With beer in hand, Jax went to greet her as Steve yelled, "I've got a steak with your name on it, Doc."

"I can't. I'm on call."

"So don't drink beer with us, but you can still take time for supper."

She laughed. "All right, thanks. I will."

"How do you want your steak? Boot leather or rare?"

"As rare as you can cook it and not have it cold."

"You got it."

Jax looked her over as he crossed the yard. She was dressed much the same as the other night. Blue scrubs and work boots, hair pulled back under a ball cap. Seeing her again energized him with the prospect of finishing what she'd walked out on.

"How's the stud?" she asked.

"Good, I'll show you."

Inside the stall, Jax took hold of the big horse's halter, and Lissa slipped him an alfalfa pellet as she inspected her handiwork. "Looks good. You can let him out for light exercise now. Can you remove the sutures and staples or shall I?"

"If it means you'll be back again in a few days, you can do it."

She patted the bay's neck and offered more pellets. Looking at Jax, she said, "You're a flirt."

He shook his head, closing the stall door behind them. "Not me. You're the one who left me in a sorry state the other night. What

happened with that?"

There was no shame or apology in her face. "I changed my mind."

"That's it? You got me all worked up just to change your mind?"

"Yes."

He eyed her. "Are you always this mercurial? Hot one minute, cold the next?"

She seemed to debate within herself. "Pretty much, yeah."

"You still haven't explained why you left in such a hurry."

Her eyes sparkled. "We didn't have the protection we needed." She leaned against the wooden stall panels.

Jax crossed his arms as he studied her, nodding slowly. "Protection. Yeah, the thought did cross my mind, but you sort of took over all of a sudden and it was a little late for a condom at that point."

"Hmm. Condom wasn't what I was thinking."

Scoffing, he said, "No shit. I needed neck protection. You fucking bit me."

She pursed her lips, and her nose wrinkled in a little cringe. "I did, didn't I?"

"Yeah. You might have warned me, though. It was a nice touch, just surprised me. I can handle it rough. In fact, the rougher the better. You should have stayed around."

The corners of her mouth twitched in a growing smirk. "You don't know what rough is."

He was intrigued, and his grin showed it. "If you have the chance, will you bite me again?"

She looked right at him. "Yes."

He caught himself laughing. "You're serious, aren't you?"

She wiggled her eyebrows. "Biting is my specialty. It adds to the orgasmic moment. Heightens the pleasure."

"For whom?"

"Me." She shrugged. "I'm a hedonist. I'm all about wanton sexual gratification at the expense of others." She looked him over for a few seconds. "Actually, we're alike in that aspect. We both use others selfishly for our own pleasure with complete disregard for their feelings."

He eyed her curiously. "Okay, I'll give you that. So, from one hedonist to another, when are we getting back together?"

Lissa shook her head. "No time soon."

"Why not?"

"Because you can't handle what I've got to give."

A smirk played at his mouth. "Oh, sweetheart, don't underestimate me."

She chuckled. "Why don't you show me around the place before this conversation goes south?"

"All right, but I'm not giving up on this. We'll come back to it."

As they walked, he pointed around the premises. "You already know I live there, Mac's is the other stucco. Steve in the big brick ranch. That's where we grew up. It's still my dad's house."

"Does he live with Steve?"

"No, he runs a string of thoroughbreds in Phoenix. He usually comes home for a couple of weeks in March and again in the summer."

They crossed the hundred yards to another stable and walked down the center alley-way and out the back doors. There were paddocks with shelters and the indoor stalls had outdoor runs that joined the larger fenced pasture. Horses grazed or ate from feeding tubs.

"Is that a full mile track?"

"Yeah." Jax gazed at the track spread out on the flat beyond the two hot walkers enclosed in round pens near the wash rack. "We just got a new starting gate. Haven't had time to settle it in the chute extension on the backstretch."

"There's a half-mile track at my place, but it hasn't been used in years. It would make a good training track if someone took a disk to it."

Jax perked up. "Oh, yeah? I've been looking for another track to trailer some colts to for a different experience. I'll haul my tractor over and work it up. Where do you live?"

"Nice try."

He grinned. "What?"

She waved him off. "I assume then that you don't just board lay-overs or injuries."

"That's right. We do conditioning also. We get horses back in shape to race. We've also got a transport service. We haul horses all over the country. That's really where we make our money, but our driver retired a month ago and I've been looking for one to replace him. I'm going to have to go back to making runs myself if I can't find anyone soon."

As they walked back, Lissa asked, "So, Steve is your only sibling?"

"Yeah. What about your family?"

"I have none."

"No one? That's hard to believe. Everyone has someone."

She shook her head. "Not everyone. Who do you have besides your brother and father?"

"Grandparents in town. Aunts and uncles, cousins here and there."

"Have you ever been married? Any children?"

"No to both."

"Never even close to marrying?"

He shrugged. "Maybe once. A jockey. I haven't seen her in months. You?"

"I was married once, years ago."

Chapter Five

The unexpected sadness in Lissa's voice touched him. "What happened?"

"He died."

"Children?"

She nodded. "A daughter, but she died a year before her father died."

Jax wanted to ask more, but they'd reached the patio, and Steve interrupted. "What would you two like to drink?"

"Coffee."

"Beer."

"Coming right up. Lissa, this is my gorgeous and sexy wife, Kay, and these are our three rug rats, Jake, Marci, and Lindsey. Every morning I wake up and ask who they are and why they're calling me *Dad*, but Kay swears they're all mine."

Kay smacked his arm. Holding out her hand to Lissa, she said, "I'm so pleased to meet you. You'll have to ignore Steve and Jax. They think they're witty and charming."

The brothers exchanged pseudo hurt expressions then Steve asked, "Aren't we?"

Kay laughed as she scooted Lindsey's highchair closer to the table. "No, you're not, but I love you both anyway."

As dishes went around the table, Steve commented to Lissa, "Kay's sort of in your line of work."

"What's that?"

Kay passed the salad bowl. "Horse chiropractor. I also do massages."

"Really? That's good to know. It's becoming more and more popular with horse owners. Show horses as well as race horses."

Jax was quiet through supper, mostly listening and watching Lissa and liking the easy way she visited with Steve and Kay and their children. For being the first social encounter with them, they were as comfortable as if they'd been friends for years.

Two hours later, Lissa's pager went off. "Sorry, I've got to call my service. Supper was great. Thanks."

Kay hugged her without pretext, and Jax saw her shrink from Kay's embrace, then catch herself and accept it graciously.

Steve put his arm around her shoulder. "You come back anytime."

"Thank you. Good night."

Steve looked at Jax. "You've been pleasantly mute tonight. Think you can keep it up and walk her to her truck without pissing her off? In spite of you, we'd like to see her again."

"Shut the hell up."

Jax was a few steps behind Lissa when she opened the pickup door. She sat on the edge of the bench seat with one boot braced in the dirt and dialed the answering service on her bag phone. After listening for a few seconds and jotting notes, she hung up. Jax stood over her, one hand on the top frame of the open door, and the other on the roof.

Depressing the clutch, she turned the key. "Dog v. porcupine. I have to go."

"What are you doing in the morning? Say around seven. We're galloping some two- and three-year-olds. Should be some fine entertainment, and it wouldn't hurt to have a vet on site. Seems like one of the silly things always gets hurt the first couple of times out in a group."

"I'll see what I can do."

Jax smiled and leaned inside the cab, but she stopped him with a firm hand on his chest. "Don't."

"Why not?"

"It's just not a good idea. Not yet."

"Oh, but I think it is." He managed to plant a solid kiss on her mouth and snake his tongue between her lips before she let out the clutch and the door swung shut between them.

Looking in her side mirror, Lissa saw him watching her drive away, his silhouette illuminated by the mercury light. She licked her lips as if to catch a lingering taste of his mouth. He was a bad boy. She knew it. But the combination of his self-assured masculinity, baby blues, and the way he smelled of horses, barn dust, leather, liniment...it sent a shimmy down her back.

Turning onto the asphalt, she sighed and squirmed uncomfortably in her seat to ease the aching need between her legs. It was going to be a long night, trying to keep her mind on her job and not on the minutes until she saw him again.

* * * * *

Lissa turned off the main road at the large sign directing her to the *Granger Ranch, Training and Layover Facilities*. Once on the graveled driveway, she couldn't help smiling at the signs she encountered. *Private Property. Trespassers will be shot. Survivors will be violated*. Then nearing the main complex, another warning sign read: *Old dogs. Young dogs. Several stupid dogs. Please drive slowly*. She liked the Granger brothers' twisted humor.

Parking beside the arena, she walked to the rail fence of the track and watched the half dozen riders and horses galloping in a close bunch. Jax yelled a greeting as he breezed by. The group pulled up on the backside, and by the time they reached her again, they'd brought their young horses to slowing trots.

On this pass, Jax pulled up and flipped his goggles over his helmet brim. "You do any galloping?"

"Occasionally. Why?"

"Come to the barn and take one out with me." His colt insisted on catching the group and Jax gave him rein to go. Lissa reached the barn as

Jax jumped off his mount and handed it over to a groom.

"Nice to see you in broad day light."

"Long sleeves and sunscreen SPF 5000. I'm good to go for a few hours."

He just shook his head, grinning. "I do like your sense of humor."

Mac called to Jax from inside, "Ready for another one?"

Jax removed his helmet and held it in the crook of his arm, then ran his hand through his wavy hair. Cocking his head toward Mac, he yelled, "Bring two out. And another helmet."

"Coming right up."

"Long night pulling porcupine quills?"

"It wasn't too bad. I got a couple hours of sleep before I drove over here."

Mac and Steve appeared with a sorrel filly and a chestnut colt. Lissa took the filly and checked over the tack. She tightened the girth on the flat saddle, gave the stirrup leathers a quick measure and shortened them each a notch. Tugging the helmet over her ears, she buckled the chin strap and slipped on her leather gloves. Jax watched, appreciating her practiced pre-ride preparations.

"It's a fast track this morning. Dry and even," Jax said as Mac gave him a leg up.

"Damn well better be. I worked on it all day yesterday."

Steve held the bridle and boosted Lissa to the filly's back with his free hand. She took up the slack in the reins as the horse immediately stepped out, ready to go. Steve led them to the track with Max leading Jax right behind. Steve drew the pole closed across the gap as they took off. Lissa and Jax walked-trotted their mounts for one round to limber them up, and a crowd of on-lookers gathered to watch the show.

Jax jutted his chin toward the crowd. "We've got spectators. It's a hard and fast rule that only employees can exercise the horses. Not even the owners. They're wondering how you managed to get around that."

Side-by-side, they broke into a slow canter no more than five feet apart.

"Well, I hope I don't disappoint them."

"Not likely. You ride like you've done this a time or two."

"Once or twice. Chicago, Cleveland, Louisville."

"Don't tell me you've galloped at Churchill Downs?"

She only answered with a Cheshire grin.

Shaking his head in amazement, he said, "Keep 'em together. We'll do a mile at a slow gallop while they get their legs under them."

The filly tugged at the bit, but Lissa kept her in check with Jax's colt. Finishing the mile, Jax called to her, "This time, let her have her head. Think you can handle blowing them out down the stretch?"

"Can you?" she shot back.

Jax grinned at the challenge. As they came around the far turn, Lissa laid low over the filly's neck and urged her on. The little sorrel stuck her nose out, stretched her neck, and left Jax a length behind as they raced along the back side then hugged the inside rail around the Clubhouse turn. Jax caught the filly coming out of the turn and they thundered neck and neck down the home stretch.

Fifty feet from the imaginary finish line, Lissa gave out a rousing yell, and the filly surged ahead to beat Jax by half a length. Lissa immediately stood in her stirrups, tugging on the reins to brace herself and get the filly slowed down. Jax rode in a similar stance, and they slowly brought the horses to a slow canter, then trot, and finally, a cooling, prancing walk.

Jax fell in beside her. "Not bad for a lady vet."

"Not bad for a macho sexist cowboy."

He grinned. "Do you have time for another?"

"Only if you're willing to have me outrun you again."

He laughed. "Bring it on."

At the barn, Steve and Mac took hold of the bridles as Jax and Lissa jumped off. Steve complimented her. "Well done, Doc. It's about time we got someone here who knows what the hell they're doing on the back of a horse."

"Thanks." From the corner of her eye she caught Jax flipping Steve off. Their good-natured bantering made her smile. For the first time since being turned, she thought of a human as a friend, not as quarry, and she

liked the way that felt.

Another trip around the track and her pager went off. Jax walked her to the truck and waited while she took the message. Closing the door, she rolled down the window and started the motor.

"Doc needs me. Thanks for inviting me to ride with you. I haven't done that in a long time. I enjoyed it."

"I'm glad. How about dinner tonight? Seven-thirty."

She hesitated, but all the reasons to refuse were unconvincing next to how much she wanted to be with him.

"You know you don't have a decent excuse to say no."

If you only knew the truth, you wouldn't say that. Logic said decline, but she gave in to her emotions. "All right. Where?"

"The Colonial. I'll pick you up. What's your number and where do you live?"

"I've heard it's elegant and formal. I'll meet you there at seven-thirty, and you don't need to know my number or where I live." She took second gear and left him standing in the yard again.

Chapter Six

Jax took a table at the back of the dining room where he could watch both the door and the parking lot through the plate-glass window across the room. For some idiotic reason, he expected Lissa to show up in her vet truck, so when she got out of a canary yellow Mini Cooper, he chuckled at himself. *Not the car I pictured her driving.*

He watched intently, but a couple passing by blocked his view. Fixing his gaze on the doorway in anxious expectation, he was surprised at how nervous he was. It wasn't his usual way. The couple came in, but there was no sign of Lissa.

His heart sank. *Shit, she backed out —*

Then she was coming toward him, and it took his breath. Black stilettos, form-fitting, low-cut red cocktail dress split up one side with thigh-high black nylons revealing the provocative peek of a garter strap with each step. Her lips were blood red, and her blonde hair hung loose, barely touching her shoulders. When she reached the table, he gathered his wits and stood up to pull her chair out.

"Hello, Jax," she said as she placed her evening clutch aside.

He took his seat across from her, still staring. "Good evening."

She tilted her head in amusement. "What's wrong?"

"You're absolutely stunning."

"Thank you. You cleaned up nicely yourself. I didn't picture you as a suit and tie sort of guy."

"I'm not, but when I need to, I can, uh, rise to the occasion, so to

“speak.”

Her mouth twitched in a suppressed grin. “Yes, you have a more than adequate...rise.”

“Just adequate?”

She smiled coyly, and he envisioned sliding her slinky red dress to the floor and making love to her on the table. To distract himself, he picked up the wine bottle. “May I?”

“Please.”

The waiter took their order, and Jax sat back, looked at his wine glass then at Lissa. “Do you like the wine?”

She sipped again. “Yes, but then, I like most Argentinian Malbecs for their ripe blackberry and plum flavors. They’re like rich jam, not overly fruity, yet sweet enough for a pleasant aftertaste. It leaves a sense of earthy-wood in your mouth. Rustic.”

He was impressed. “So you know something of wine.”

She swirled the wine. “It’s an interest. A hobby you might say. I’ve collected some rare vintages over the years.”

Their dinner conversation centered on the Granger family’s history in horse racing, and by the time their espressos arrived, there was only one other couple in the back room with them. Jax relaxed, contented in the cozy ambience of their corner nook, but when Lissa placed her linen napkin down and pushed back from the table, he had a disheartening feeling their date was over. Grasping for any reason to keep her from leaving, he started to offer another bottle of wine, but she interrupted him. “Dance with me.”

It was unexpected and he looked around. “Here? There’s no band and no dance floor.”

She stood up, kicked off her heels, and took his hand. “Take off your jacket.” She draped it neatly over the back of his chair. Chiding him, she said, “Don’t be so limited in your imagination. We have elevator music and a dim corner. That’s all we need.”

A Frank Sinatra wannabe crooned an old slow tune and Jax took her into his arms. Barefoot, she was still tall next to his six-foot-four inch frame. He brought her closer, and she formed her body into his. Silently,

they swayed in each other's embrace, lost in their own private worlds. Lissa playfully undid his tie and draped it around her neck.

"Nice accessory. It would look even better if that's all you were wearing."

"Maybe when the time is right, I'll just tie your arms with it and take total and shameless advantage of you."

Intrigued, yet bewildered, he said, "Sometimes you make the most outrageous comments, and I can't tell if you're teasing or serious."

"Maybe I'm just seriously teasing." Undoing the top three buttons of his shirt, she breathed in his scent and rested her head on his shoulder. "Your cologne is heady. Musky, not sweet. I like the way it blends with your other telltale aromas."

Jax frowned. "You're saying I smell funny?"

She gave him a playful grin. "No, but there is a lingering hint of leather, alfalfa, and horses about you. It's very...disturbing."

"Disturbing bad, or disturbing arousing?"

"Definitely arousing."

He hugged her to him, smiling and satisfied in that. Taking a deep breath of her hair, he said, "Well, you usually have a sterile, medicinal aroma, but tonight you just smell wonderfully like a woman. Soapy fresh, summery. " *What the hell's happening to me? I've gone from just wanting to get her into bed to never wanting this dinner to end.* He held her a little tighter.

Three tunes later, Jax asked quietly. "What are you thinking?"

"That I'd like to kiss you," she leaned her head back to see his face. "But I'm not going to."

"Why not?"

"Because I want it too badly."

"I want you, too." He leaned down to kiss her, and she touched his lips with her fingers.

"No. Now isn't the time."

He shook his head. "Now is a perfect time."

She stepped out of his arms. "Jax, dinner was wonderful, and dancing in your arms has been the nicest, most romantic experience I've had in years, but it's time for me to go."

His stomach knotted. "I don't want you to go."

She nodded. "I know, but that's exactly why I have to say goodnight. I don't want to leave you, either, but I have to prove to myself I can. If there's going to be more between us, I have to be able to control my emotions and not let them rule me."

He was suddenly encouraged. "So you do care a little for me."

"More than is good for either of us."

"I was hoping it wasn't just me feeling this way." He took her back into his arms and placed a soft kiss on her cheek then whispered close to her ear, "Stay with me tonight. My place or yours. Just don't leave me."

She shook her head and kissed him lightly on the lips as she stepped away. Putting on her shoes, she said, "The temptation is strong...but not tonight, Jax. You're not ready." Taking her purse, she gave him a little wave of regret. "And I'm certainly not ready for you. Thanks for the evening."

He stood there wondering why he was always watching her leave. *Jax, old boy, you're going to shit around and let her walk clear out of your life if you're not careful.*

* * * * *

Jax had no choice. Without a transport driver, he had to deliver a load of horses to Chicago so Steve wouldn't have to leave his family to do it. He really didn't mind, it was what he'd done for years before giving up the road to help Steve run the business from the ranch, but he would have liked to have had Lissa accompany him. It would have been a perfect opportunity to get to know each other, but as it was, he'd only been able to leave a message with her service that he'd be gone for about two weeks. He'd ended feeling like a fool as he fumbled his cell number in case she wanted to call.

After Chicago, he went on to Thistledown Racetrack in Cleveland, then up to Saratoga Springs where he waited for a week to get a full load for Penn National. From there, it was back to Thistledown, then down to Columbus before he headed across the Midwest for home. The miles of

windshield time nearly drove him crazy with missing Lissa, and the longer he was gone, the more he regretted leaving the Oracle card behind. He could picture every detail of it and he'd memorized the words. Lissa's likeness to the woman on the card still disturbed him.

He was nearly three weeks on the road when Kay's call came in. "Happy Birthday."

Adjusting his hands-free set, he smiled to himself. He'd forgotten. "Thanks. What's up?"

"Where are you?"

"Just outside of Chicago heading for Omaha then home. Why?"

"Your dad's here. I want to have dinner for you both this weekend. Can you make it by Saturday evening? Say sixish?"

"I should pull in around noon on Saturday."

"Great. How's the trip going?"

"No problems, just seems like I've been gone a month." There was a moment of silence and Jax tried to sound casual. "Has Lissa been around?"

"Yeesss," she drew the word out. "She was here twice this week." He heard the grin in Kay's voice.

"Did she, ah, ask about me?"

"You sound smitten, Jaxon Granger. That's not like you."

Suddenly he was an embarrassed lovesick adolescent and annoyed with Kay's teasing. "Well? Did she?"

Kay laughed. "Yes, she said she was going to call and wish you happy birthday. She's also coming to dinner."

Jax's heart alternately soared and fell. That Lissa was going to call was as exhilarating as the agony of Saturday being a thousand miles away.

"Are you driving straight through?"

"I am now." Jax laughed and they said goodbye.

The miles wore on too slowly for his patience. He checked and double-checked his phone for reassurance of service and that it carried a full charge. His anticipation for Lissa's call waned as the hours passed without hearing from her. Just as he pulled into a truck stop in Omaha, his

phone rang. He immediately checked the number. *Unavailable. Shit.*

Hitting the send button, he said, "Speak. This is Jax."

"I hear you're thirty-six today."

Lissa. For a second he couldn't find his voice.

"Are you there?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm here. Yup, thirty-six. I'm getting to be an old man."

She laughed. "You don't know what old is. Where are you?"

"Just pulled into Omaha to refuel, grab a bite to eat, and hit the track. I imagine I'll be here awhile." He rolled to a stop at a diesel pump and set the brakes. "Are you on-call?"

"As a matter of fact, I am. I've only got a couple of minutes before I meet some people at the clinic. They're bringing in a mare with colic. I'll likely be here the rest of the night."

"Well, if you get a chance, give me a call. I'll be on the road." He didn't know what to say, but he didn't want her to hang up.

"All right. If I can, I will, but don't count on it. Anyway, happy birthday."

"Thanks."

Another silence.

"Well, I've got to go."

Wanting to keep her on the line, Jax said, "Kay told me you're coming to dinner Saturday night."

"That's right. When do you anticipate arriving?"

"Noon or so." The inane conversation was about to kill him. He wanted to say something personal, but nothing came to mind. "Lissa?"

"Yes?"

Say it, just say it. "I've missed you."

When he didn't hear a response, he thought they'd been cut off, but then she said, "I've missed you, too, Jax. Goodnight."

"Night."

She hung up.

Leaning back in his seat, he hit the disconnect button and just sat there. *She missed me.* Right then, life was as perfect as he'd ever known it.

Finally, at midnight with a thermos of coffee, sandwich and chips, both tanks full of diesel, and horses in the van, Jax hit the highway. Light-hearted and counting off the miles, he went through every truck driving song he could remember as he sang his way west on I-80. Heavy rain near Lincoln slowed him down, and then somewhere between Omaha and Grand Island, he knew he was in love.

I'll be a son-of-a-bitch.

Chapter Seven

Jax dropped the horses he'd hauled from Omaha at their destination outside of Brush, and thirty minutes later, he backed his outfit into the space between the indoor arena and stable. Grabbing his duffle from the sleeper, he walked toward his house with the single-minded intent of a shower, scotch on the rocks, and a nap. As he crossed the yard, his dad and Steve came from the indoor arena. Jax greeted them, and his dad slapped him on the back.

"Good to see you, Jax. How was the trip?"

They walked on together. "Uneventful. Interminable. Kay called and said you were here. What's the Phoenix racing season shaping up like this year?"

"Same as usual. I'm running twenty to twenty-five head. It's good."

Jax nodded. "How did you get away from Steve's kids? I'm surprised they let you out of their sight."

Their dad glanced at Steve. "Lindsey's napping, and the other two are impatiently waiting for her so they can go gadding around town. I think they're going for fast food and a flick this evening."

In the middle of the yard, Jax said, "Tell Kay I'm going to catch a few Z's and be over around six."

"You got it."

Inside, Jax checked his phone messages, hoping to hear Lissa's voice, but no luck. He poured two inches of scotch over ice and went to his bedroom. He went straight to the mirror and ran his fingers over the

image on his Oracle card, wishing he didn't have to wait until supper to see Lissa. Stripping down, he took a long drink and headed for the shower.

At six, he crossed the yard to Steve's and spied Doc Bohlinger's pickup beside Lissa's little Mini Cooper. His pulse picked up in anticipation of seeing her.

Kay met him at the door with a hug and rubbed his jaw. "What's this? Growing your beard out again? Added the mustache this time. I like it."

The Bohlingers wished him happy birthday. Steve handed him a beer, and he wandered into the living room. Lissa sat on the couch beside Jax's dad, and when she looked up, Jax caught a split second of unguarded emotion in her eyes that said *tonight*. She quickly covered her exposed feelings with a sip from her glass.

Resisting the urge to walk right over and kiss her, Jax tipped his beer instead. "I'm glad you came by tonight."

She smiled. "I'm glad you're back."

Jax caught the knowing smile on his dad's face as he said, "I've just been telling Lissa to come to Phoenix if things don't pan out here. There's always work for good vets on the track."

Jax didn't like that. He didn't like the idea of Lissa going anywhere unless he went with her. He started to say just that when Kay called them to the table. The meal and conversation passed amiably, but he was impatient to get Lissa alone. He knew there was no getting away from Kay this early, and he didn't really mind waiting. It was nice to sit with his family and visit. He hadn't done that in a long time, and Lissa seemed comfortable with it.

Jax saw Kay check her watch then exchange glances with Steve and his dad who gave an imperceptible nod. Kay said, "Okay, everyone. I have a special birthday surprise for Jax. Grab your drinks and follow me into the office."

Jax looked around the group then at Kay. "A big cake and a stripper with big—"

"Keep it clean," Kay warned as she guided him ahead of her.

"Then what is it?"

"A little peek into your future." Indicating the chairs in front of the computer, she said, "Jax, take a seat. The rest of you might want to stand over us so you can see the screen." When she wiggled the mouse, a website appeared with the words *Tarot Readings, Let the Cards Guide Your Future*.

Jax grimaced then glanced at Lissa. "Do you know about this?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Not a thing. I'm just an objective bystander."

He shot a glare at his brother. Steve immediately pointed at Kay. "Blame her. She concocted this idea. I'm just here for the beer and fireworks when you find out what's really going on." He grinned as only a brother does when tormenting a sibling.

"So, what the hell's really going on?" Jax poked Kay in the ribs, and she flinched and batted his hand away.

Jax's dad held a Corona in front of him. "Here. I put a shot of tequila in it. Slam it. You're going to need it and a few more before this night's over."

Jax started to protest, but Kay interrupted as she rolled Jax closer to the monitor. "Drink your beer and shut up. Now, just follow the instructions."

"Where did you come up with this hair-brained idea?"

Kay made a face at him. "It's not hair-brained, and it's your own fault. While you were on the road, I gathered your laundry to send it into town. I saw a card on the dresser mirror, so don't play innocent with me. You've been hiding a mystic side that we never knew existed, so I thought it would be entertaining to have you do a tarot reading."

He looked at her sharply. He didn't like that she'd seen his card.

"By the way, where did you get that card? There's something familiar yet beautifully disturbing about it."

He shrugged and tried to sound uninterested. "I got it anonymously in the mail. It's probably some sort of promotional gimmick. I thought the image was attractive, that's all. You know I don't believe in this shit."

Kay raised her eyebrows, mocking him. "If you don't believe in it, why didn't you just throw it away?"

He gave her a go-to-hell look, but she ignored him. "Follow the instructions on the screen. It's all set up for you. Here, I'll get you started. It says to concentrate on this question: *What is essential for me to know right now in my life?*"

"I know, I can read." His tone was sharp to mask his discomfort. Taking a long pull on his beer, he clicked the mouse and chose four cards.

Jax mumbled to himself as he read. "Okay. This is a modified four-card Karmic Spread."

Steve goaded him, "Karma huh? Now we'll all know what kind of life you've really been living."

Jax leaned back. "My karma is just fine the way it is. Anyway, this is bullsh—"

Wagging her index finger in his face, Kay admonished, "Don't be so judgmental just because you don't understand it. There are influences in our lives that none of us understand, and I believe tarot cards are one of them. I've dabbled with them for years, and I've learned not to take the cards lightly." She touched the screen. "Now, it says that in this spread, you are the seeker of your karmic lessons."

Jax took another swig of beer and let Kay take over. "The purpose is to help you sort out why you continue to repeat certain behaviors and hold on to emotional baggage that keeps you from moving to the next phase of your life."

"So this *spread* will show my level of insanity."

"Insanity?"

"Yeah, Einstein said that doing the same thing over and over the same way and expecting different results each time defines insanity." His intent was flippancy, but Kay took him literally.

"Oh, no, it's not insanity at all. It's all about the spiritual and emotional journey that you must take in order to reach your destiny."

Jax frowned and crossed his arms, forcing himself to endure the nonsense. Kay tapped her fingers on the edge of the table. "Pay attention."

"All right, all right. I'm reading." Jax skimmed.

More positive than negative energy in the layout. Wheel of Fortune always means fate greeting in a positive way...it's a reminder that the time is now to attend to destiny...turning point in your life...you will begin to experience great change...card is reversed...

He started reading with interest.

Reversed indicates lack of momentum in your life right now. You're stagnating in your same old habits, and they're getting you nowhere. You have to regain control of where your life is going because the wheel of your life is on an uphill turn right now. If you want influence over the outcome, begin an honest internal dialogue with yourself. You'll start to recognize patterns of behavior in yourself that have outlived their usefulness, so you need to prepare yourself for a powerful epiphany in the near future. It will be life-altering.

Frowning, he read carefully.

The Two of Cups indicates the union of two people and the emotional connections and the power of love and friendship that can heal wounds of the heart. Key word: symbiosis. This card always means the arrival of a new partner in a potentially loving and romantic relationship. The sentinel watching over the couple represents a higher authority that influences the joining of the couple. Upright, it is all that is good in a relationship.

Jax shifted in his seat and glanced over his shoulder at Lissa who was reading intently.

However, in the reversed position, the protection from the sentinel is distant and not as powerful, which can mean disharmony of major proportions for the couple.

It didn't take a tarot card to tell him he was a miserable failure with long-term relationships.

Internalize the futility of your old habits. A new relationship can be successful if stubbornness doesn't impede communication...point of caution with the Two of Cups reversed...emotions run completely wild.

Kay interjected. "Now, look at this. Take the last two cards together. They're both upright, which is encouraging."

"What? How are *Judgement* and *Death* encouraging?"

Chapter Eight

"Jax, the *Death* card in a reading rarely suggests actual death, although it can. Interpret it as symbolic death. It represents the closure of something old with something new arriving to replace it." Kay pointed to the screen. "See what it says here. It's telling you that your life has been full of frivolous excesses and disregard for what is truly important. You've been superficial, and it's time to cut yourself free from that so you can be reborn, figuratively, of course.

"It indicates radical change and a turning point in your life as a consequence of your past behaviors and attitudes. Transformation is its key descriptor." She looked at him seriously. "Jax, there are inexorable forces at work here. This is a powerful layout."

Steve broke in, leaning over Jax's shoulder as he read. "So the *Judgement* card signifies your awakening and your life moving into a new cycle. It says it's a rite of passage that brings a paradigm shift."

"Paradigm shift. Now that's a trite and used-up cliché."

Kay tapped his arm. "Then think of it as your cosmic wake-up call. The end of your present world as you know it. Think epiphany, discovering a higher purpose in life other than your self-centeredness. It says it represents redemption for your past transgressions and opportunity for atonement toward those you've hurt. Revelations, letting go of value judgments, forgive and be forgiven."

"Christ, I feel like I'm back in Sunday school."

"Quit complaining, we're nearly finished. Now, click the arrow and

get to the overall summary." Kay read aloud. "'The number two is woven throughout the cards. Two means balance, relationship, and intuition. The reversed cards are a reminder to pay particular attention to their messages as you need to learn to handle relationships better. These are your karmic lessons. The three Major Arcana cards—'"

"Major what cards?"

"Arcana. Just listen. Where was I? 'With three of the four cards you chose being Major Arcana, what's happening in your life now is fated to happen whether you work with it or not. Events are already in motion, and you can't change them. It is destiny and out of your hands.'"

"That sounds like giving up my free will."

"To a point, you have, but you're still in some control of the choices that are yet to manifest. You can still have influence on the outcome of your life if you truly pay attention to the messages in this reading and learn from the past behaviors that have gotten you nowhere." Kay looked at him. "I'm not an expert reader by any means, but I do know enough that the *Wheel of Fortune* reversed also warns you to pay special attention to a chance encounter. It will change your life whether you want it to or not."

He admitted the chance encounter with Lissa had already changed his life, and it made him uncomfortable that the messages in the tarot cards were weirdly accurate as they applied to his life.

Kay hit the print button. "Now, Jax, you have to admit there's some truth in the cards. They don't lie."

Jax nodded absently, thinking as he clicked back through the pages, scanning the information.

Kay handed him the printout. "Keep this handy for reference." Looking at the clock, she said "Well, that was a nice segue for the rest of the evening, and the kids should be home any minute. I'm going to start their bath water. Everybody go back to the living room and have another drink."

The Bohlingers said their goodnights and Steve and his dad followed Kay out of the room. Jax swiveled his chair to look at Lissa. "You believe all this fortune telling crap?"

Lissa nodded. "Yes, I do. I've seen enough in my life to know there are mysteries at work in our lives that we shouldn't question. We should simply take them on faith."

"Faith? Like religion?"

"No. Like influences outside ourselves that mold our lives in ways we can't see or even imagine. There are some things you should accept and not question."

She didn't resist when he pulled her down to his lap. "Then don't question this." He kissed her lips lightly then moved her hair aside and kissed her neck. "Things got a little exciting last time we were alone like this."

She closed her eyes to his lips on her skin. "Yes, they did."

"I need to talk to you. Stay with me tonight." He kissed her again, testing her response, then tightened his arm around her waist and kissed her with the purpose of conveying how much he'd missed her. "Will you? Stay with me?"

She took his face between her hands with another kiss. "I have some things to say to you, too. Serious things, especially after that tarot reading. Jax, that reading also spoke to my life."

They were interrupted by the kitchen door opening and happy children noises as Kay herded them toward the bathroom. Another woman's voice came to them, and Jax stiffened, suddenly tense and alert. Lissa jumped up, and Jax walked to the kitchen.

"Mom? What the fuck are you doing here?"

Miranda Granger met his angry gaze with a steady expression. "Well, hello yourself, Jax. It's nice to see you."

Jax took a long swill from his beer. "I'm guessing you had Steve's kids today and this little get-together is more than my birthday celebration."

Lifting her chin, she said, "That's right. We need to have a family talk."

Jax nodded, thinking. He looked at his dad then Steve. "So, what's going on? I told you last time we all got together for a little family pow-wow that I was finished talking."

"Things have changed —"

Jax lost his temper. "Nothing has fucking changed." He glared at his mother. "You walked out on us for a career. You left your husband and two kids to work in a man's world. So suck it up and take it like a man. I told you the only sympathy you'll get from me is in the dictionary. Right between shit and syphilis."

"Jax, that's enough," his father scolded. "For years we've all tried to explain what happened, but you've never listened. You never once tried to understand the circumstances of our divorce —"

"What's there to understand?" He turned on his mother. "One day we were a family and the next, you'd left grad school with a brand new degree and a job in Africa. Then you'd show up just often enough to clear your conscience and rip my guts out when you left. Do you have any idea what that did to me as a kid? How long's it been this time? Five years since you've waltzed in and out?"

Steve stepped up. "Jax, in Mom's defense, I kept in touch with her all along, and she hasn't been in Africa for years. If you weren't so goddamned pigheaded, you'd have known that. We stopped trying to keep you informed because you always went into tirades when we mentioned her."

Jax drained his beer to still the anger raging inside, but it didn't work. His laugh wasn't pleasant. "You know, I don't really give a flying fu —"

"Your mother and I remarried New Year's Day."

Jax stared at them. Peripherally, he saw Lissa slinking toward the kitchen door. "Lissa, wait." He brushed past his mother and caught Lissa as she grabbed the door handle. "Don't. Don't go." He held her hand on the knob.

"This is private family talk. I'm an outsider. I don't belong here."

Jax's voice was low and beseeching. "You belong with me. I need you to stay."

She shook her head. "Maybe you should take what the cards told you as a sign. Resolve this issue with your family and move on. It's called *getting closure*. Until you come to terms with whatever family issues you

have, you'll never be able to accept what's in my past, and there can be no future for us unless you do."

The door closed behind her with a cold, impersonal click. He took a deep breath, set his shoulders, and turned. "All right, I'm listening."

* * * * *

Killing the headlights and engine, Jax rolled to a stop in front of Lissa's A-frame log house. In the absence of a yard light, he could only make out the dark shapes of outbuildings and corrals beyond. Peering into the shadows, the outline of a dead tree caught his attention. *Just like on my card.* He shivered. Gravel crunched under his boots and, as he raised his hand to knock, the door opened. Lissa stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the muted amber glow of candle light.

"I expected you sooner."

"Why?"

"I didn't think you'd really stay and talk with your family. Did you work it out?"

He shrugged. "We made a start. Do you want to know?"

"Only if it's important for you to tell me."

"It is."

"Then tell me."

He looked around. "Can we talk someplace other than your doorway?"

"Let's walk."

They were nearly to the end of the driveway before Jax finally spoke. "I badgered Doc Bohlinger into giving me your address."

"No, you didn't. I told him to give it to you, but to make you work for it."

Jax shook his head in exasperation. "You could have told me yourself."

"But it wouldn't have been as satisfying as having you humble yourself to find out where I live."

"Humble. Now there's a word."

Lissa looked at him. "Are you humbled?"

"I am now."

They started back toward the house.

"How? Something with your family?"

"Yeah. I've hated my mother since I was fifteen years old, and apparently love was the cause of my parents' divorce."

"Love caused their divorce? Isn't that somewhat dichotomous?"

Chapter Nine

"That would be an understatement." Jax was quiet for a few steps. "As I drove over here, I relived the years I've wasted in self-pity and superficial judgment. I used it as an excuse to take my anger out on all women who got too close to me. I see now that once they gave me their hearts, I had no more use for them. I also see how I threw their feelings back at them just like I was convinced my mom had done to me."

"That must have been quite a talk to have that sort of insight so quickly."

Jax kicked at a stone and watched it skip down the road ahead of them. "Believe it or not, those damn tarot cards had something to do with it. It all started to fall into place and make sense."

"So you've had your epiphany?"

He nodded. "And all I had to do was listen. I guess Mom went into a deep depression not long after Steve was born. Nothing worked to pull her out of it, so Dad finally convinced her to enroll in college to get her focused on something outside herself. She started coming out of it and things went along okay for awhile."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but skipping past the gory details, their marriage was in trouble by then and when Mom graduated, a career opportunity in Africa came along that she couldn't pass up."

"So this was all new to you tonight?"

"Some of it. Hell, I was a kid and not sensitive to anything but

myself. I knew she was unhappy, but not the extent of it. I know they tried to explain, but I wasn't listening and they eventually stopped trying. I do remember my folks having a big fight over her taking the job in Africa. I got in the middle of it and accused her of hating us. I told her she was a lousy mother for putting her needs ahead of ours."

"It happens between parents and teenagers, you know."

"I know, but I found out the real sacrifice came from my dad. About a week after that argument, he changed his mind and insisted that she leave, but he wasn't angry anymore. He was nervous, and he didn't go to the track until she left. He stayed with her every minute. Let me tell you, I was one confused kid. All I knew was she was going to another continent to work and my dad, my solid, down-to-earth dad, was a basket case. I hated her for that."

Jax didn't say it, but he did recall lying in bed at night and hearing his mother crying. He also remembered her apathy toward life. He only now realized the heavy burden his father had shouldered to shelter his sons from their mother's mental illness.

"So what was going on?"

"A couple of days after that big fight, Dad happened to come home early before Steve and I got off the bus and he found Mom unconscious. She'd tried to kill herself, but they hid that from Steve and me. I knew something terrible had happened, but not what. A couple of weeks later, she left. At the time, it seemed she was glad to be rid of us, and I never forgave her."

"Now that you know, can you forgive yourself for your misguided anger? Can you make peace with the past? "

"I'm working on it, but I've caused a lot of heartache of my own."

"You're alluding to your reputation with women, I assume. I think it's called transference when you put your anger onto others."

He kicked another rock. "Yeah, and I've spent the last twenty years of my life hating a woman my dad sent away in order to save her life." He looked at Lissa. "The irony of it sucks, doesn't it?"

She entwined her fingers with his. "Life is full of bitter irony."

He eyed her. "What does that mean?"

Their joined hands swung gently as they strolled back to the house. "It means that I have regrets in my life, too."

"Like what?"

"Like when my husband died. That's when I made that life and death decision I mentioned."

"I remember. You said you decided to live. And I'm glad you did."

They reached his pickup, and Jax put down the tailgate. Lissa sat on it with her legs dangling. She touched his cheek with her index finger, ran it over his lips, then traced over his whiskered chin and down his neck where she lingered, gently caressing his carotid artery. "You may not still feel that way when I explain some things about me."

"Try me. I've been perfecting my listening skills tonight." He took her hand and brought it to his lips and sucked her finger into his mouth. She looked into his eyes and slowly withdrew her hand. He spread her legs and stood between them as he slid his hands under the hem of her ankle length gauze dress. He smoothed his palms against her bare thighs. "Your skin is cool for as warm as it is." His face was next to hers, their lips nearly touching.

"I have an unusual metabolism. I stay cool."

"Well, let's change that and get you hot and bothered."

She put her hands over his to stop him. "Jax, I've done many things in my life and for us to go forward, I have to tell you about them."

"All right."

"And you have to accept them."

"I can't accept what I don't know about. So just tell me."

"All right. Straight out. I've worked steadily in veterinary medicine since I first volunteered in London with the Royal Army Veterinary Corps."

"I thought I detected a hint of an accent. So you were in the military—"

"That was in 1796. I spent the next hundred years or so in Europe, then I moved to Canada and did the same type of work until World War I broke out. I returned to London for the duration of the war then joined with the U.S. Veterinary Corps and came to America in 1921."

He stared at her for a second then burst out laughing. "Yeah, right, and I rode with Custer." His smile disappeared when she showed no sign of humor. "You're not joking, are you?"

"I was born in London in 1625. I married and lived an uneventful, happy life for many years. Then my only child and my parents died in the last plague that hit London in 1665. All I had left was my husband. The following year, the Great Fire finished devastating my life." She paused to let him digest her words. "I died during the fire, but a man named Sam Bosan gave me a second life."

"What do you mean you died?"

"I lived on a third story flat and the fire hit at night. The smoke woke me, and I was trapped, literally burning alive, but I managed to crawl along the floor and to the level below. A man named Sam Bosan was one of many who were trying to rescue people, and he saw me at a window. Somehow he reached me." She took a deep breath, and Jax wondered if it was to bolster herself to go on. In a few seconds, she continued.

"I can still feel the pain of my skin burning, and I begged him to help me. To get me to a doctor to save me so I could see my husband. I desperately didn't want to die. Sam said I was burned too badly. I couldn't possibly live. Then he said he had the power to save me, but I would have to trade my mortal body for one he could give me that would endure eternity. He warned me the trade-off wouldn't be easy."

"What was the trade?"

"The loneliness that accompanies the insatiable blood thirst of the undead. I am forever at the mercy of my cravings and never satisfied or able to live a human life."

Jax didn't understand for a second. "Undead. As in vampire undead?"

"Yes."

He scoffed. "You expect me to believe you're a vampire?"

"I do."

Jax cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Okay, I'll suspend belief for the moment. After this Sam guy turned you into a vampire, how did your

husband take it?"

"That's the irony. He was a sailor, and he had gone down with his ship off the coast of Ireland in a storm a week before. I didn't know that when I asked Sam to turn me."

Jax squinted and grimaced apologetically. "Well, I'm not saying I believe you, but *if* that's a true story, my family situation is a cakewalk compared to what you've gone through. To trade your mortal soul out of love only to have the person you love already be dead..." His voice trailed off as he contemplated it.

"So, you can accept it? You're okay with what I've told you?"

He rubbed his jaw. "Honestly?" He grimaced. "No, but if it's the story you need to hide your past, it's all right with me."

"The sooner you take this seriously, the sooner we'll know about our future."

"What if we just take this seriously?" He tossed his hat aside and laid her down to the vinyl bed liner. Gathering her dress, he pushed it slowly up her thighs to discover the absence of panties. "Hmm. Just the way I like it, unencumbered exploration."

Chapter Ten

Kissing her belly, he worked down to her curly blonde triangle to stroke her labia and tease his tongue along her entire entrance. When he paused to circle his tongue around her clit, she groaned and wrapped her legs around his waist as she pushed her hips into his face.

He sucked hard on her clit, flicking his tongue quickly over the swollen nub at the same time shoving two fingers inside her. She gasped and tried to sit up, reaching for him, but he kept her down with a hand on her neck and another forceful shove with his fingers. He searched for that sweet G-spot and massaged it. He played, alternately licking and sucking while stroking hard with his fingers deep inside her.

She uttered breathy, hoarse words as she writhed beneath him. "Jax. Stop. I need you inside me. I need that magnificent cock in me."

His own words were strained. "Not until I know I can make you come without it." When he wiggled his fingers and circled his thumb around her clit, she sat up and smashed her mouth to his.

With a hard hand, he pushed her to the pick-up bed again. Grabbing her ass with both hands, he took her clit into his mouth and sucked hard. She arched her back, and her moaning shudder against his face nearly put him over the edge. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her turn her head and drape the back of her hand over her mouth, but his cock strained and throbbed, diverting his attention to free it from his jeans.

He pulled her hips over the edge of the tailgate and pressed his

cock to her dripping cunt. *Just the right height for fucking. No wonder these are called testosterone trucks.* With her legs clamped securely around him, he took his cock firmly in hand and rubbed the head at her opening. In and out. A little deeper each time until they established an easy, rocking rhythm.

Her voice was low and husky. "I thought you said you liked it rough."

"I want you to feel me an inch at a time."

"How many...inches can I...count on?" she moaned the words.

"Sex is like a blizzard. You never know how long it'll last or how many inches you'll get before it's over."

Groaning at the joke, she clamped her legs tighter. "Jax, this is torment. I need more."

"Then grab a hold of the tail gate and hang on. I'm taking you for a ride. I'm betting you've never had a man like me before."

She grabbed the edge for leverage and tightened her legs around him. "Don't be so sure."

"Coming off with me?"

"Only if you shut up and give me everything you've got." Her voice was a breathy pant. "I think you're holding out."

"Be careful what you ask for. Think you can take all of me?" He shoved hard, and she caught her breath.

"Is that a dare?"

"Don't say I didn't warn you." He grasped her shoulders as he rammed clear to the base of his shaft. The guttural, gasping groan escaping her lips elicited another deep thrust into her.

"Goddamn it, give it to me like you fucking mean it."

That was all he needed. He hit her like a jack hammer trying to split her in two as her scream scorched the night air. She bucked on him, her muscles milking him dry. He shot his seed into her at the instant he saw pearly fangs descend over her bottom lip. Then he was gone in a wave of orgasmic oblivion.

Sated, out of breath, he fell onto her, and she ran her fingers through his hair as her own breathing slowed. After a few seconds, Jax

reluctantly withdrew from her and tucked his spent cock inside his jeans. Her legs dangled limply over the edge of the tailgate, and he collapsed beside her. She rolled into his arms, and he held her closely, smoothing her hair as he kissed her forehead.

“For just a second there, I imagined you had fangs.”

She held perfectly still for a moment, then turned her face to his. “I did.”

Scoffing, he asked, “Then where are they now?”

“They detract when I’m not aroused.”

Lissa lay back on the vinyl bed liner, and Jax leaned on an elbow, studying her. “I want to see them again.”

She shook her head. “I’m barely in control at the moment. I might not be able to maintain that control if I deliberately let them descend.”

He ran a finger over her lips and bent close to kiss her. “Then let’s get you worked up again. I want a better look.”

“No, Jax, give me a minute.”

The warning in her eyes only egged him on. He rolled on top of her and stretched the elastic of her peasant neckline off one shoulder to expose her breast to his mouth. He twirled his tongue around her areola then sucked the nipple until her hips pressed into his groin, inviting him to go farther. He propped on his elbows and touched his lips to hers.

She turned her head. “Don’t. I can’t kiss you right now.”

“Why the hell not? After what we just did, kissing all of a sudden bothers you?” He tried again.

She stopped him with a hard hand on his chest and their faces mere inches apart. “I won’t warn you again.”

He didn’t listen, and he didn’t know how it happened. It was a blur. One moment he was over her, holding her down, intending to kiss her, and the next, flat on his back, immobile and pinned to the dirt with Lissa squatted across his belly. He struggled against her, but she held him effortlessly. Her face was inches above his, and her eyes glowed blood red. But what really scared the shit out of him were the fangs that glistened against her lips. He knew he wasn’t imagining anything now.

Her words were low and menacing. “This is your only warning,

Granger. Don't bully me, don't threaten me, and don't ever think you can dominate me." She bent slowly, her eyes glowing, mesmerizing him. "I am a vampire. I'm over three centuries old. I'm undead, and I will have your blood."

He felt her breath on his neck an instant before the stabbing bite. He yelled, letting loose a string of obscenities, and he desperately wanted to move, but he was helpless against her strength. Her fangs sank into his neck, and she sucked deeply, swallowing with the pulsing of his artery. She took her fill then hovered over him, and he watched her fangs slowly retract as she licked his blood from her mouth.

"I can kill you as fast as I dumped your ass on the ground." Releasing her paralyzing hold, she walked into the house without a backward glance.

Jax lay on the ground, shaken. A nauseous wave of dizziness hit him when he sat up, and he took deep, rasping breaths until it passed. Once on his feet, he braced himself against the pickup fender, his hands shaking and his heart pounding so hard he could hear it in his ears. With a hand to his neck, he felt the puncture marks healing under his touch.

Exhaling sharply, he muttered, "Fuck me. She really is a vampire." He stared at the house. "Shit. *Shit.*" He stood there, confused and thinking about what this meant. He thought of jumping in his pickup and never looking back, but the minute he thought it, he knew it was impossible. He needed her. Vampire or not, there was no living without her now. Regaining confidence with each step, he opened the door and let it swing wide.

"You should have left. Why did you come in here?"

"For this." In three long steps, she was in his arms, and he took her mouth ravenously. She didn't resist. She took his tongue into her mouth and kissed him with an intensity that burned his lips. When he thought he'd die from lack of air, he pulled away. Her eyes were green again, but she wasn't smiling.

"You bit me. You really fucking bit me. I actually felt you sucking blood out of my body."

"Do you believe me now?"

He exhaled sharply. "Yeah, I believe you, but what happens to me now? Am I a vampire?"

"No, you'd have to take in my blood just before you die, and you'd also have to make the conscious choice to be turned."

He rested his forehead on hers. "Well, I'm not ready to die, but I am ready to stay here. Tonight. Or for however long it can last between us."

When she looked at him, it seemed she searched his deepest thoughts and feelings. "You know what I am now. I prey on humans for their blood...and animals in their absence. I have no choice. I will die without it, and I will continue to want your blood."

"I can deal with it."

She took his hand. "My bedroom's in the loft."

Chapter Eleven

Jax finished disking Lissa's half-mile track the day before a Memorial weekend storm settled over northeastern Colorado. It didn't take long for the track to become a deep, muddy and sloppy mess, the perfect condition for a mud-running excursion. Jax trailered four colts from the ranch and put them up in Lissa's small barn. By late Monday afternoon, the storm was reduced to light drizzle, and they saddled up and took two colts out.

Jax was pleased with the results of the gallop as they returned to the barn for the other two. The next run was different. The colt was a salty three-year-old, and Jax wasn't satisfied with his obstinate performance.

"Lissa, I'm taking this one another round by himself. He's a barn-sour little bastard. It'll do him good to go one alone."

When Lissa cut off at the gap in the track fence for the barn, he expected his colt would want to follow, and he was right. Plow-reining him around, he made the colt continue. The colt cut back twice, but Jax brought him around each time. They made the far turn and instead of setting his attention toward the barn door, the colt wheeled around, braced his legs, and started backing up. Without warning, he threw himself over backwards and crashed through the metal rail fence.

Jax couldn't kick his feet free from the gallop saddle stirrups fast enough to bail off, and the colt crushed him to the ground with his massive shoulder. A flailing aluminum stirrup sliced the brachial artery in his left arm.

The horse thrashed around in his scramble to regain his feet, and Jax felt metal stab into his side. He nearly passed out from the pain. He couldn't breathe. Bending his knee and working an elbow under him, he tried to sit up, but it was no use. He'd broken enough bones in his life to know he was in a bad way. He tasted blood and knew it was coming from his lungs. Then it hit him. He wasn't going to make it.

Lying helplessly on his back, he remembered people warning him these goddamned horses would kill him. He tried to laugh, but it turned to bloody bubbling coughing. Wheezing for air, he closed his eyes.

"Jesus, Jax! Open your eyes."

He felt her rip the goggles off his face and clamp her hand around his arm above the pulsating artery. He blinked a few times, but his eyes rolled back, and he started to fade away.

"Look at me, goddamnit!" She shook him, and he opened his eyes to her blurry image.

"Am I dead?" he mumbled.

"Just about. Jax, you're in bad shape. I can't stop the bleeding."

Weakly, he touched her face with his usable hand, but he couldn't keep it there. "It's okay. You're with me. What's better than that?"

"Living, Jax. Living. I can save you."

He wanted to touch her again, but he had no strength.

"Jax, let go of your doubts and trust me. Believe I am what I say. I don't want to lose you. There's little time left." She squeezed his hand. When he saw the love deep in her green eyes, it was no longer a decision at all.

He could barely speak. "Living...without you. Alive or dead...is no choice. Do... what you...need to."

"We'll be bound to each other forever. Forsworn and forsaking all others through eternity."

"Do it."

She ripped the rest of his shirt sleeve open over his severed artery and placed her mouth over the flowing blood, drinking deeply of his humanness. Then she took his face between her hands and held his head steady, her face dripping with his life's blood.

"You're at the end of your life, Jax. You have to put your aversions aside and let go of your judgments. I've all but drained you into me. I've taken your life into my body, and you are part of me. Now you have to take from me for the cycle to be complete and the turning to come full circle."

She pulled a pocket knife from her pants and flicked it open. His eyelids fluttered, and his head lolled limply. She shook him violently. "Do you want to live?"

Cold emptiness rose inside him, but by sheer willpower he came back to her. Whispering, he said, "Yes."

With a quick, deep and decisive slice, she laid open her carotid artery and bent over his mouth. "Drink," she commanded. "Take all you can or you'll die a mortal death." She gathered him into her arms and held him to her body, blood from her neck seeping over his lips.

Darkness passed over his eyes, and he lost contact with the living world. He was no longer part of life, he was beyond life. He knew he was dead. Then in that precious second when his mortal heart stopped beating and his conscious brain shut down, his immortal soul took its first taste of Lissa's life-giving blood spilling into his mouth.

Suddenly, he was outside himself, instinctively fighting to survive. He gripped her arms and muscled his way past the first gagging swallow and the urge to vomit. She encouraged him, and he drank her in. He couldn't get enough. A heady, warm, orgasmic rush washed over him, and he vaguely heard her groan. She shuddered and weaved against him. He couldn't take anymore, and he let go of his mortal life and went limp in her arms.

His weight sent her to the mud, and she lay there, spent and weak. Clouds scurried overhead and returning sprinkles spattered her face. Instinct forced her to her knees. She touched Jax's bloody lips and hung her head.

Come back to me, Jax. Don't leave me now. Her pragmatic mind took over, and she moved mechanically past her own tenuous hold on consciousness. She needed rest and time to regenerate, but she couldn't leave him lying here.

Standing on shaking legs, she grabbed his arms and heaved him over her shoulders in a fireman's carry. Her knees nearly buckled, but she kept her feet. *Shit, six-foot-four inches of solid muscle is great in bed, but not as dead weight. Damn, it's going to be a long way to the house.* Trudging through the mud, she made it to the house and dumped him on the couch.

Responsibility sent her back to the barn to take care of Jax's colt. With her last bit of energy, she returned to the house with no thought past a shower and sleep. She made it to the kitchen when she collapsed on the tile, out cold.

* * * * *

The only light in the room when Jax opened his eyes was from a single candle. He stared at the wavering light as he slowly became cognizant of his surroundings. Turning his head, he saw Lissa watching him. Sitting up elicited a drawn-out groan, and he leaned on the arm of the couch.

"How long was I out?"

"About twelve hours."

He looked at his bloody, mud-caked clothes and details started to come back. Inspecting his arm, he didn't find a sign of the severed artery.

"I guess this means it worked. I'm, ah, like you. I'm a..." He felt funny saying the word. "...vampire."

Lissa bent over him and gently kissed his lips. "Yes, you are, but there's still a significant difference."

Worried, he asked, "What's that?"

"I'm clean; you're not. Take a shower and I'll meet you in bed. You need a lesson in vampire sex."

* * * * *

"What do you mean, I can't go out in the sun? You do."

"I've been around longer than you have. I have some resistance. Right now, you'll fry in the sunlight."

"Goddamnit! My work is during the day." Jax slammed his coffee cup on the counter and paced angrily. "This is what happens when you don't read the fucking fine print."

Lissa faced him, her eyes hard, her jaw set. "You made the choice to turn, Jax. It will get easier, trust me."

"Shit." He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

Her voice was a flat reminder. "Your alternative was mortal death."

Drawing in a breath, he said, "I know."

"It's natural to be angry. I was."

"For how long?"

"Until I met you. Intellectually, I'd accepted my choice, but I hadn't come to terms with it emotionally. I'd never tried to commit to anyone. I just used humans as sex, sustenance, and occasional companionship. My feelings for you replaced the anger."

"It took you that long to let go of your anger and I'm this fucked up in my first week? Great. Just fucking great."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You're not facing this alone. Except for the short time I was with Sam Bosan and an occasional respite at a safe shelter, I've been mostly on my own."

He grabbed his hat and the door knob. "It's sundown. I'm hauling the colts back to the ranch. I need some space." He slammed the door so hard it flew back open and banged against the wall. Lissa let him go. She knew the turmoil he was in, but she also knew it would pass. He was in transition, and this he had to conquer alone. She couldn't help him.

Chapter Twelve

"Hello?"

"I killed her. She's fucking dead—"

Lissa's stomach turned as she gripped the phone to her ear. "Jax, who's dead? What are you talking about? Are you still at your house?"

"Yeah. It's Allison. I couldn't help myself. I need you here. Now."

Shit. He's bitten her. She checked the time. *Nearly ten.* "All right. I'm about twenty miles away." She made a white knuckle drive to the ranch and skidded to a stop in a shower of gravel.

She ran to the house and Jax yanked the kitchen door open, grabbing her hands and dragging her across the living room. She saw in a glance what had happened. A woman lay unconscious, maybe dead, on the couch and a half-empty whisky bottle and two glasses sat on the coffee table. Kneeling beside the woman, she felt for a pulse. *Way too fast. So is her breathing.* She also noticed her pallor and her skin was cool to touch. She moved her collar to inspect her neck.

Lissa turned to Jax. "She's not dead, but you certainly did a number on her."

His pupils were dilated, and his eyes wide with the look of a crazed animal. He was wired, ultra alert. He looked at Allison then at Lissa, his face a mixture of puzzlement and relief. "But she's not moving... I bit her..." His knees buckled.

"That's obvious. Tell me what you're feeling."

"Dizzy. Burning up inside. It feels like my heart's pounding out of

my chest and it's hard to breathe."

"What you're feeling is not uncommon at first. You're on a feeding high. You took too much blood from her. It happens until you learn to regulate your cravings. I warned you it only takes a few ounces at a feeding to survive."

"So it's like a sugar high from eating all the Halloween candy in one sitting." He tried to laugh.

"Something like that, yeah. Stay put, and I'll fix things up here." Lissa covered Allison with a blanket then took the whiskey bottle to the kitchen and poured out all but an inch and put it back on the coffee table. She tipped a glass over to let the contents spill on the table and left the other as it was half-full.

"What are you doing?"

Lissa got her shoulder under Jax's arm and helped him stand. "When she wakes up, I want her to think you two got drunk and she passed out. She'll feel like shit for a couple of days, but she won't remember much, if anything, of what happened. She'll chalk it up to a hangover. There's nothing more we can do for her. She'll live, but it'll be hours before she comes to."

Lissa dropped him on the bed then pulled off his boots as he fumbled with his shirt buttons. "What the hell were you thinking? I said I'd help you learn how to feed. You let your cravings rule your judgment. You can't let it own you or you'll kill people and believe me, that's not something you want on your conscience. Besides, it isn't necessary." She tugged his pants and shorts off with a sly grin. "Horny, I see."

"Unbelievably so."

"That's not unusual, either." She dispatched with the rest of his clothes and shed hers jeans and panties. Straddling him, she put her hands on his chest and looked at him with dead seriousness. "Now, listen to me. This isn't a game. You can't play at being a vampire. It's who you are now, and you have to manage both your blood and sex cravings. It takes self-discipline and practice. Without both, you endanger us. Humans can't know we exist or our existence will end."

She peeled her shirt off. "Think of this as a mercy fuck to help you

come off your feeding high. Be prepared to pass out. You're engorged with blood, and you need to sleep it off. I see your fangs descending. Start controlling that now. Just think of fucking, not feeding."

Her own fangs touched her bottom lip, and she forced them back. Bracing her hands against the headboard, she slammed her cunt onto his cock without pretense. He wouldn't have any stamina. She wasn't going to be left behind when he came, and she rode him hard.

After a shamefully brief, but orgasmically intense few minutes, Lissa collapsed on Jax's chest and knew without looking that he was out cold. She tugged the bedspread from under him and covered them. Sex without feeding was as new a concept for her as it was for him. It made her smile. At least together they'd keep one of their cravings sated.

She snuggled into him and closed her eyes. It was time to move on while he learned to regulate his blood cravings and adjust to night-living. Now that he'd actually lost control and bitten someone, he'd understand why they had to keep his family at a safe distance until he mastered himself. Yawning, she gave herself a mental note to wake him in a couple of hours. It wouldn't be wise to be here when Allison regained consciousness.

Dozing off, Lissa awoke with daylight only three hours away. She tried to rouse Jax, but he only moaned and rolled over. Rummaging through his chest of drawers, she pulled out an old T-shirt that barely covered her ass when she put it on. She checked Allison and found her pulse stronger and her breathing deep and even. Padding barefoot into the kitchen, she brewed fresh coffee and returned to the bedroom. Waving a steaming cup under his nose, she gently shook his shoulder.

"Jax, we need to go. It'll be daylight soon. Jax, wake up." It was futile. She snorted at her useless effort. *Talk about sleeping like the dead. Allison's going to be really pissed if she wakes up and finds us in bed. I would be.* She sat beside him, sipping her coffee for several minutes, debating what to do. Watching him sleep elicited long-buried memories of her mortal life. Lovingly, she smoothed a stray curl from his forehead. Right then, she forgave the Fates for making her endure the centuries in loneliness, self-pity, and anger. Waiting for Jax had been worth it.

With a sigh, she hoped another couple hours of sleep would be enough and she'd be able to get him to her place before daylight. Slipping under the bedspread, she draped her leg over his, and he rustled out of sleep to pull her into his arms but immediately drifted off again.

* * * * *

The bedroom door slammed against the wall, and Lissa sat straight up, instantly awake. Jax rose groggily on his elbows and squinted to focus his eyes. It was still dark, and the lamp in the living room gave off enough light to see the woman's hands-on-hips stance in the doorway.

"Allison...?"

"Jaxon Granger, you bastard! What did you put in my drink? And who is this bitch?" Barely taking a breath, Allison went into a blistering tirade. "I came here because I wanted to try us again, and what did you do? You got me drunk and brought in another woman. This is where we left off last time." She waved her arms histrionically. Turning on Lissa, she accused, "Who knows what you two did to me while I was passed out. Is that how you get your kicks, honey? Shit. You two are sick. You deserve each other."

Lissa began to giggle at the absurdity of the situation and Allison's dramatic performance. She broke into outright laughter when Allison strode furiously to Jax and planted a solid right to his jaw, slamming his head against the headboard with a resounding *thump*.

"What the hell was I thinking that you'd changed?" Allison whirled on her heels and stormed out of the room, cursing and calling them both names.

Wincing, Jax rubbed one hand on the back of his head and the other along his jaw as he muttered a delayed, "Ouch."

Gravel splattered the house then tires screeched on the asphalt, but Jax and Lissa continued to stare at each other until the sound of her racing motor finally dissipated in the distance.

Still chuckling, Lissa scolded, "You deserved that for what you did to her."

He gave her a hangdog grin. "Yeah, I know."

"And it wouldn't hurt you to apologize. At least send her some flowers."

Rubbing his jaw as he worked it open and closed, he said, "I've got to get away from here for awhile, don't I?"

She nodded. "We could go on the road with your transport service or we could work the night-running tracks. I can certainly continue my vet work, and you can assist, if you want. You know there's always other night work on a track. Gateman. Ponying to the post. The backside of the racetrack is the perfect feeding ground. I've done it before. The supply of humans and horses for symbiotic existence is practically inexhaustible. If we need to, there are vampire sanctuaries where we can disappear while you adjust."

He didn't respond for a few seconds. "How long before we can come back?"

She heard his sadness. "As soon as you gain self-control. You don't want to put your family in danger. Jax, taking the life of the undead was a trade-off. Nothing comes without a price."

Resignedly, he exhaled and gazed out the window toward Steve's house. "When should we leave?"

"Soon, but don't think of it as goodbye forever. That will come later, and there's no need to rush it. Think of it as an extended vacation. Tell your family we're going to travel and see the world. Say you're having a mid-life crisis at thirty-six."

He grunted in agreement. "That's for damn sure." He was quiet for a few seconds. "Have you ever killed anyone?" He turned to look at her.

She met his gaze straight on. "When a vampire is in fledgling state, it's not uncommon for the urge to feed and the thirst for blood to be all consuming. You know that first-hand now." Remembering her experiences still dredged up conflicting emotions. "Even when you can justify the necessity for your continued existence, it's still more guilt than you want to carry."

Lissa took the slow smile coming over his face and the returning twinkle in his eyes as a sign he was coming to grips with his situation.

"All right. Let's make it a helluva going away party. If I have to leave town, then I want my own parade." He pushed her to the mattress and wadded the T-shirt around her neck to tease her nipples with his tongue. "How long's it been since you heard the words *I love you*?"

A frown settled between her brows as she tried to calculate and not think of what he was doing with his mouth. "Roughly three hundred and forty years. Why?"

He gave her a devilish grin. "Because I love you, Melissa Price, and I won't wait another three centuries to say those words again. I'm going to tell you every chance I get. We'll tackle life together." He kissed one breast. "Today." He kissed the other. "Tomorrow." Then he placed a light kiss on her lips. "And forever."

Crying wasn't in her nature, but her eyes misted, and he kissed away a lone tear. He rolled beside her and cradled her against him.

"I love you, Jaxon Granger." Hearing the words from him then uttering them herself lifted the lonely weight of the years from her heart. She turned her face to his. "For the first time, I don't dread tomorrow."

He placed a kiss in her hair. Pointing to the Oracle card on his mirror, he said, "Think of the words on it. We've closed the doors of our pasts and new doors await our discovery. *Together*."

She nodded against his chest, contentedly at peace. "You have no idea what that word means to me."

Jax touched her chin, and she looked into his devilishly sparkling blue eyes. "Frankly, my dear, I can't think about it right now. I'll go crazy. Let's think about it tomorrow, because, after all, together is the only way."

The End

Author Bio

A.L. Debran is a native Coloradoan who grew up on a ranch in northeastern Colorado. The many memorable hours she spent reading Louis L'Amour novels and listening to Marty Robbins' gunfighter ballads instilled in her a deep love for the Old West, and the romantic myth of the American cowboy. A.L. meticulously researches the history in her stories and she personally visits the settings she writes about whenever possible. A.L. and her husband share their home with a menagerie of cats and a mini-Australian Shepherd named Mike. They have three grown children and two granddaughters. A.L. welcomes emails from fans: al-debran@al-debran.com Visit her website at: www.al-debran.com