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Sable Grey

THE VAMPIRE ORACLE

Wisdom

In The Cards



The Vampire Oracle: Wisdom
by Sable Grey

Cobblestone Press

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Wisdom

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Dedication

Dedicated to my husband.

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"Knowledge is a process of piling up facts; wisdom lies in their simplification."

—*Martin Fischer.*

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Chapter One

Steam curled up from the bathwater, and Layce Courson breathed the warm moisture into her damaged lungs. This was the only alone time she had during the day. Most of her hours were spent shadowed by her newly hired nurse or by her mother who insisted on visiting once a week just to weep and hug her for a solid hour. She'd come to enjoy being alone. No sympathetic eyes. And the heat of the water seemed to help with the pain. It was her favorite part of the day. Well, her second favorite. She really enjoyed her visits to that delicious Dr. Graham right before he started sticking her with his needles and running his tests.

She sighed, closing her eyes. She knew he was trying to help. But she saw no hope. She remembered the first time she heard his deep baritone voice. Diffuse Cutaneous Systemic Sclerosis, a form of Systemic Scleroderma. He might as well have been telling her she had bad breath in Japanese. But three years later, she knew what those words meant. They meant she was dying.

She swallowed past the lump that rose in her throat and took another breath of warm air. She would not cry anymore. She was done feeling sorry for herself. She was done with others feeling sorry for her too. What was, was. The end. Opening her eyes, she reached for the stack of envelopes the nurse had left on the edge of the tub.

Junk. Junk. Coupons. Another credit card application. And then a plain white envelope, postmarked El Dorado Springs,

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Colorado. She didn't know anyone in Colorado. Carefully she opened the envelope, slipped the thick card from within and set the envelope aside.

Some kind of tarot card, just one. The Wisdom card. Her gaze swept back to the vibrant colors, and she ran a finger over the image depicted on the front. Wisdom. Oddly, she felt comforted by the card. Perhaps that's what the sender had meant to do. She leaned forward and reached for the envelope it had been mailed in but succeeded in dropping both envelope and card into the water.

Instantly, the deep red color of the card began to seep into the water, winding in strands and clouds through her soapy escape. She tried to dip the card up, to save it from ruin, but as she held it up, the water that dripped off of it continued to color her bathwater until it looked as if she were sitting in a bath of blood. Only a faint image of what had been there remained.

Still she would keep it, she decided as she rose from the bath and stepped out onto the towel. Glancing across the room at the mirrored wall, though thankful the ink hadn't stained her skin, she still frowned. She didn't even look like herself. Too thin, and the skin of her hands and feet were hardened and tough. Her frail body was covered with open lesions. She was pale, matching the card she still held in her hand, lost of its color and life.

This was what it looked like when someone was dying. When she was dying. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't remotely attractive. Sometimes she forgot, like when she was in Dr. Graham's office. He didn't look at her with sympathy. He

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treated her just as he had the first day she'd walked into his office, before he even knew she was sick.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her wet body back against the tiled wall. Sliding her hand down to her clit, she ignored the pain in her fingers and thought of Dr. Graham. Dr. Carter Graham. As she sank a finger inside herself, she moaned his name.

She thought of his face, of the sound of his voice. Heat spread through her as she rocked her hand against her clit and her finger moved in a steady rhythm. She brought to her memory the feel of his capable hands against her skin, and rolled her head against the wall, imagining that it was his fingers that explored her cunt. Her hips jerked forward as her stomach clenched. She traced his defined lips in her mind, wondered how they would feel on her pussy. In her head, she heard him whisper her name in his deep voice. Her breath caught as tension flared and heat raced down her thighs.

She moaned again, her breath coming fast. Desperately she sought a quick release to the ache inside her. As she came, she said his name aloud.

* * * *

Carter twisted his cap in his hands as he paced the floor outside the bedroom. She called out in her sleep, doubled over with pain. He could do nothing to help her, and the physician had seemed to take forever. At long last, her howls of pain had ceased. Now he waited for the physician to allow him in to see her.

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When the door opened and the physician stepped out, Carter moved forward to hear his diagnosis. He waited while he pulled the door closed behind him and then faced Carter.

"It's the same that you suffer from. The same symptoms," the doctor told him. That took a moment to register. Carter had seen this same physician several times himself in the past month.

"She got it from me?" he repeated.

"Yes." The physician nodded.

Oh God. He'd made her sick. It was his fault.

"Can I see her?"

The doctor shook his head, his eyes sorrowful. "She's dead."

"Dead?" It didn't even sound like a real word on his lips. It sounded like something foreign. Something unholy. A lie. It had to be.

"She passed just a few minutes ago."

Carter felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. "No." He shook his head. "You let me see her!" He started to step forward into the room the doctor had just come from, but the physician restrained him, gripping Carter's shoulder.

"I'm sorry. There was nothing to be done."

No. He wouldn't accept that. He couldn't.

Carter's legs grew numb, and he didn't even feel the hardness of the floor when he dropped to his knees. The scream pulled from inside his chest, pushing past the shock that collected in his throat. He hit at the smooth surface of the floor until his knuckles cracked. He'd never felt so much

pain in his whole life. It ripped through his chest, suffocating him.

She was dead. She couldn't be. It was his fault. No. No. No.

The shrill ring of the phone pulled Carter from sleep. Sweat drenched his body, and he kicked the knotted sheets from around his legs, grateful to be free from his nightmare. The dream was always the same. He'd had it every night since it had happened, reliving the agony every time he closed his eyes. The phone rang again, and groaning, he glanced at the clock then ran a hand over his face. 5p.m. He reached for the phone, but his hand froze as his pager suddenly sounded from across the room, and his mind instantly went to Layce Courson.

She was his most advanced case. He'd been treating her for three years. While she always wore a smile, it never reached her eyes anymore. They both knew she didn't have much time left. Still, she didn't give up hope completely and continued to allow him to run tests. She never missed an appointment.

He grasped the receiver, and dread filled his stomach as he brought the phone to his ear. How many of these calls had he suffered? How many more must he live through until he found peace, until he found the cure?

He punched the numbers. "This is Graham." He waited for the news then sat up straight in bed.

"She's what?"

* * * *

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Layce sat on the edge of the exam table in nothing but a paper gown, watching Dr. Graham looking at the results of her late night test. He really was sexy as hell. Tall, broad shoulders, long legs, physically fit. She'd love to see him shirtless, sweat rolling over the muscles of his torso.

She'd thought about running her hands through his thick brown hair on more than one occasion. His features were defined and fit together perfectly. That mouth, she thought as her gaze dropped past his straight nose to his full lips, was very kissable. She imagined kissing him for hours. And she could get drunk looking into his whiskey-colored eyes.

As if summoned by her thoughts, those thick, dark lashes lifted. "I want to run the tests again."

"A third time?" She hated that she sounded like she was whining. She'd been there for hours now. She wanted to go home and enjoy her new life.

He shook his head. "I cannot find an explanation." Long fingers delved into his hair and swept back as he walked closer. "It makes no logical sense."

"I feel great." She looked down at her hands. They seemed foreign to her. There was no trace of the tough skin she'd grown accustomed to, and no pain in her fingers. No pain anywhere, as a matter of fact. That's what had awakened her from her nap. No pain.

"You look great. Your tests are all clear. And there's no trace of disease in your body." He shook his head again, and she almost laughed at the dumbfounded look on his face. She'd gone through much the same when she'd awakened from her nap. At first she'd thought she'd finally died. No

pain. She could move easily. But then her nurse had come into the room and dropped the tray of food she'd been bringing when she'd found Layce dancing around the room.

"Maybe it's a miracle." She shrugged. Did he really think she looked great? She'd taken great care with her makeup, despite the nurse's prompting to hurry.

"I don't believe in miracles. I want to run another test."

But two sets of tests later and the results were the same. Layce sat, fully clothed now, on the soft leather furniture of his office, watching the doctor pace back and forth behind his desk, staring down at the latest results.

"Anything out of the ordinary?" He looked up. "What did you eat for dinner?"

"I didn't." She winced when his amber gaze bore into her. "I know, I know. But after my bath I was tired. So I took a nap."

"You aren't telling me something. Did you meet anyone today?" He set the report on his desk and moved around to sit next to her. Spicy aftershave drifted around her, mixed with the musky scent of male. Funny, she'd never noticed his smell before. Now it intoxicated her. She breathed in deeply as she shook her head. God, he smelled good. Closing her eyes, she breathed in again.

It had been too long. Three years since the disease made it impossible for her to socialize without suffering through those sympathetic smiles. But she felt better now, and the man next to her smelled delicious.

He'd been the subject of many of her fantasies. She'd imagined his capable hands caressing her, those full lips

smothering her body with attention. Her clit tingled now as she remembered her most recent dream of his hard body moving atop hers.

"Are you okay?"

Her eyes opened, and she felt the heat rush to her cheeks. "I'm fine." She'd been sitting there smelling him like a bitch in heat. *Get a hold of yourself*, her mind reprimanded.

"That's the part that I don't understand." He leaned back in the chair, stretching his legs forward, a hand to his forehead. "How could there be this kind of recovery. The medicines you are taking are the same for most of my patients. None of them have experienced this kind of turnaround."

"I'm voting a miracle." Layce's gaze dropped to those long legs, moved up to crotch of his kaki slacks. "A big one." She clamped her mouth close and forced herself to look at his face. It didn't help stifle the heat in her body, though. She thought about straddling him in his office, riding him. She squeezed her knees together tightly, trying to stop the pulsating heat in her clit.

"I want to monitor you closely."

She could think of a number of things she wanted him to do closely; monitoring wasn't one of them. "Thinking this is the calm before the storm? Fine, but I don't care if it is. It feels good not to be in pain anymore." She rose from the chair. "I'm going to celebrate with a twelve pack of cola." And a man, she added silently.

"The caffeine isn't good for you." He also stood, giving her his stern look of reprimand.

"Correction. It wasn't good for me yesterday. Tonight, I feel like a million bucks." Layce smoothed down her skirt. "And I'm going to gorge myself on everything I couldn't have before. And the best part?"

He did smile this time as he crossed his arms and arched a perfect brow. "Yes?"

God, he was sexy. "No pills."

* * * *

Carter watched Layce disappear behind the door of his office. She was excited about the change in her health. He couldn't blame her, but he was afraid to let himself share her happiness. All the results came back clear. She was completely healthy. There were only two explanations for the turnaround. Either there *was* a cure, and at long last he would be able to help those that he cared for. Or.... He frowned. It was the 'or' that bothered him.

Reaching for his jacket, he headed from his office and down the hall. Ahead of him, Layce made her way toward the garage elevators, her hips catching every step, so that her ass drew his attention. His gaze dropped to her shapely legs then rose to the thin waist of her petite frame. She'd been full of life, her blue eyes glittering with happiness. It had been a long time since he'd seen her like that.

He quickened his pace and caught up with her as she entered the elevator and turned. Stepping inside, he watched her punch a button.

She said nothing, so he opted to stand beside her in silence. She was sexually aware of him. He'd always noticed,

but now it was different, stronger. The tension in the air was so thick he could almost taste it. He imagined it hadn't been easy for her to meet men before. Depression and withdrawal from social situations were common with those who suffered from such a debilitating disease. But she wasn't suffering anymore. And she'd actually moaned when she'd sat beside him in his office with her eyes closed. What had she been thinking?

His hand hit the button, and the elevator stopped. When he faced her, her eyes widened slightly and confusion swept over her expression.

"I need you to be honest with me, Layce. I need to know if something happened this week that you might not think you can talk to me about." He chose his words carefully just in case he was wrong, his gaze dropping to her lips when they parted slightly.

"I've already told you, Doctor...."

He took a step forward, a hand lifting to her shoulder. "You can trust me."

"You think I wouldn't tell you if I knew how this happened?" She trembled beneath his hand. It was obvious she had a physical reaction to him. He let his hand fall away from her. He'd hoped to use her obvious attraction to his benefit, but he didn't want her to get the wrong idea. She didn't deserve to be used after all she'd already been through.

"Maybe if you think I won't understand. If you think I won't believe you." He leaned closer. "But there is nothing you can tell me that I won't understand."

"Like what? You wouldn't accept a miracle...." Her breasts rose and fell with her breath. Her voice sounded huskier. Surprisingly, her arousal affected him.

"I will accept anything you tell me," he promised, leaning closer still.

She chewed at her lip. "I don't know what you want me to say. I've eaten nothing different. You have my schedule and diet. No new medicines. I've been coming to you for three years and I've done nothing different that entire time. You know my body better than I do. Maybe it was last week's tests?"

He studied her face. "I need some kind of answer to this. It's important to me. I could save many if there is a cure."

"I admire your devotion, Doctor. I always have. And appreciate it. If there was anything I could offer to help, I would." Her voice softened. "I swear it to you."

Carter straightened and pushed the button, allowing the elevator to continue its downward path. A thought found him. It was absurd. She would never go for it.

"Would you allow me to monitor your recovery over the weekend?"

"You mean in a lab?" She wrinkled her small nose.

"No. I don't mean you to feel punished for feeling better. Privately. In my home." He winced. "I realize it is unorthodox and perhaps an inappropriate request. But the truth is..." He took a deep breath.

"Yes?"

"The truth is I lost someone very dear to me years ago from this same disease. I *need* to find the cure." Raw pain

filled his chest, but his honesty might be the thing that convinced Layce to help him find peace.

"I'm sorry. I'd not guessed that was why you were so devoted." Layce smoothed her dress as the elevator door opened. They stepped into the dimly lit parking garage, and she turned to face him.

"Just until Sunday. If I've not discovered the cause by then, I will accept your miracle faithfully." Carter waited while she considered what he was asking, praying she didn't think him a psycho. It's not like they were strangers, he reasoned silently. They'd seen one another at least twice a week for the past two and a half years, when her disease had started to worsen.

"I guess it would be ridiculous to think you would be dangerous. What good would it do for you to spend the last three years trying to make me better only to turn around and hack me to death once I'm healthy again." She sighed. "All right. But this is the last test I will be taking."

"Agreed." Carter nodded, relief flooding his chest. "Thank you, Layce."

"Don't thank me yet. You may be disappointed by Sunday," she warned. "And don't think I'm stupid. You don't get to pick me up. I'm driving my own car."

He pulled out one of his cards and jotted down his address. "That would be stupid." He handed her the card. "Friday evening. Around six. I'll have dinner waiting ... and no burgers and soft drinks. If you are better, you should focus on taking advantage of your second chance now and remain healthy."

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"Fat chance. Double meat with cheese, preferably dripping with grease." She grinned, dimples creasing the corners of her mouth. "I'll think about healthy next week."

He watched her turn and head toward her car.

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"Man has his will, but woman has her way."

—*Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.*

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Chapter Two

Carter sipped his wine and watched Layce finish off the last of her broiled chicken. It was amazing how much healthier she looked, and her appetite had definitely returned. Even some kind of cure couldn't have this kind of turnaround this quickly. And that meant only one thing.

Layce wiped her mouth with the corner of her napkin and lifted her wine glass. "It was delicious."

"Better than soda and burgers I hope." He smiled.

"Only if you have something sinful for dessert."

"I'm afraid there is no dessert." He stood. "I have prepared the spare room for your stay. I appreciate you joining me for dinner." He set his wine aside and reached for her empty plate.

She stared at him. "That's it?"

"I could drive to the store if you must have dessert. Ice cream perhaps?"

She laughed and tossed her napkin to the table. "You know. I thought that maybe ... oh hell, I don't know what I thought. Cute doctor invites me to his house for the weekend. Nice dinner. Wine. Celebrating my recovery. And I've not had sex in three years."

"Sex." Carter winced. Damn. Of course she would want some kind of intimate exchange.

"What? I'm not your type? That doesn't bother me." She laughed as she stood.

"Layce..." He set the plates back on the table. "I imagine there isn't a man alive who would say you were not his type. My situation is complicated."

"You don't wear a ring. I don't see a wife. Are you married?" She stepped around the table toward him. Every part of him wanted to grab her, but instead he matched hers with a step backwards.

"No."

"Are you gay?" Another step.

"No."

"My disease isn't contagious. Have you something I could catch?" Closer.

Carter's heel hit the baseboard. "No, I've no diseases."

"Then I can't think of one reason why you wouldn't take advantage of this situation." She halted right in front of him. "Enlighten me."

"I'm not in a situation to offer any kind of relationship right now." His gaze dropped to the small pink tongue that slid out along her bottom lip. She had the look of a predator, hungry for a man.

"I don't want a relationship, Doctor. I want a fuck." Her blue gaze lifted, and their eyes met. Yes, she did. Every strand of common sense screamed no. What had he expected, though, when he'd invited her here?

His hands betrayed him and reached out for her, his fingers curling at her hips and pulling her the last few inches that separated them. "And you make it incredibly difficult not to give you what you want. I'm your doctor, Layce."

"I don't need a doctor anymore." Her hand lifted to his chest and worked the buttons of his shirt.

The moment her fingers touched his skin, he didn't give a shit if she needed a doctor or not. She could be on her deathbed for all he cared. He'd wanted her like this more times than he could count. Now he had her.

His fingers tightened, and a moment later he whirled her around and pinned her against the wall. Her eyes widened with surprise but only momentarily before clouding with raw, hot desire. When he leaned forward, she snaked her arms around his neck and tilted her face upward. Her lashes lowered, and she waited for his kiss.

He'd wanted to kiss her gently, but the moment his lips touched her eager mouth and her arms tightened, he kissed her hard instead. Deeply. He thrust his tongue between her soft, pliant lips. Half a step and he pinned her between himself and the wall of his dining room, his cock hard and aching against her hip. He ground against her.

Slow down, Carter, he told himself, but still he jerked her dress over her head. She was just as rushed as her own hands pushed his shirt over his shoulders. In moments they were both naked and locked again in a kiss that set his insides afire.

"The bedroom," he murmured against her mouth.

"Here."

He leaned away from her. "You've had limited ability to move as you used to, Layce...."

Her fingers delved and fisted in his hair. "I'm fine. Fuck me, Dr. Graham." Her gaze glittered as it darted to the table.

His cock jerked against her. Have it her way. He grasped her wrist and turned, pulling her forward to the table. The dishes crashed and scattered in pieces when he grasped the table cloth and jerked it to the floor.

Grabbing Layce, he hauled her onto the smooth surface and crawled atop her. "Last chance," he offered.

"Get inside me," Layce whispered as she ran her hands over his arms.

Carter settled between her thighs and nudged his cock against her cunt. He eased forward and slid into her. She was tight and clung to him as he pushed deeper, stretching her. She moaned and lifted her hips, her fingers gripping his shoulders.

"Hurry," she encouraged, but he shook his head. She made it difficult, but he was not going to rush this part.

"Patience, Layce. I've wanted you for three long years." He pulled back then rocked forward again. "I'm going to savor every moment I'm inside of you."

She stared up at him as if surprised. "You've wanted me?" She followed her words with a groan as he pushed deeper.

"More than you can know."

"But I was sick. My body was..." Tears formed in her eyes.

"You are not the disease, Layce." He rocked into her, allowing her to get accustomed to him. "When I would look at you, I saw a woman. A brave, beautiful woman. Nothing can taint that." If she'd been without for the last three years, the last thing he wanted to do was cause her discomfort.

"If I were still ill..."

"I wouldn't be on top of you right now. I wouldn't want to cause you more pain than you already suffered. But I would still play it in my mind as I've done for years." He frowned as he stilled. "If it were not for that fact alone, I would have buried myself inside of you the day you walked into my office."

"I wish I had known." She licked her lips. "Don't stop."

Those words drove into him, and he thrust his hips forward. She arched, taking him with a groan, pulling at his shoulders for more. He reached between them and plucked at her clit as he continued to rock in and out of her, enjoying every pull from her body. He leaned forward when her hands slid up from his arms to curl in his hair, and he closed his eyes as he deeply inhaled her scent.

She smelled good. She felt good. His every sense was acute and aware of her, drinking her in. When she said his name, he groaned and opened his eyes to gaze down at her flushed cheeks and glistening lips. Her gaze met his and held him moments before she squeezed her muscles around his cock.

Driving into her, he lowered to one elbow so he could caress her breast with his free hand. She arched into his fingers. The sound of their bodies coming together and the soft moans she made with each stroke tightened his balls and flushed his skin with heat. Tension coiled and threatened, but he steeled himself. She deserved her own pleasure.

He withdrew despite her protests and positioned himself lower so he could stroke the light blonde hair that sheltered her pussy. Leaning forward, he flicked his tongue against her,

smiling when she sucked in her breath. He traced a lazy circle then closed his lips over her clit to suck gently.

He'd had enough years to learn a woman's response. Tonight, Layce would forget she'd ever suffered pain. She would only know this pleasure. He could give her this when he couldn't ease her suffering before.

Carefully he pushed two fingers inside her and sucked again. As he moved his fingers in and out, he matched the rhythm with his tongue against her. He felt her body begin to tense, readying for orgasm, and he slowed, drawing out the moment. In. And then out. He licked at her until she hummed softly, letting him know she was close. When he was certain she was on the edge of pleasure, he quickened again and sucked at her. She came hard and fast, lifting her hips, her body shaking with each spasm of pleasure.

As she came down, Carter repositioned himself between her thighs and pushed into her still sensitive sex. This time he did not take it slow. He rocked into her hard, pulling her knees up against her. He could tell when her breath hitched that tension was building again. His own body demanded satisfaction, heat spearing through his abdomen as his balls tightened once more. He drove deep into her again and again, groaning as his body readied.

"More," she moaned, bucking upward to meet his thrusts. Her breath quickened, her fingers tightening on his arms. When she cried out, his name vibrating from her lips, he lost it, pumping wildly into her until his body jerked. Gritting his teeth, he threw back his head as he released, filling her. He

heard his name again, and he bent forward, stopping moments before he bared his teeth to bite her neck.

He stilled.

It was the first time a woman had ever made him lose himself so much that he could have changed her. Slowly he lowered his forehead to her shoulder and took several breaths, attempting to steady his pounding heart.

"That's the best dessert I ever had."

Laughter rumbled up from his throat as her fingers threaded through his hair. "I meant to be a little more gentle with you. You make it difficult for me to stick to my guns." He laughed again and leaned up, resting his weight on his arms so he could gaze down at her. She looked alluring, her lids heavy and that little smile of satisfaction in the corners of her lips.

"We didn't use protection."

"No, but you are safe from me. I've no diseases and you won't get pregnant." He leaned down and kissed her nose.

"But are you safe from me?" She arched a brow when he leaned away. "I might be carrying something deadly."

"I'm your doctor, Layce. As you said, I know your body better than anybody." He withdrew and eased off of the table. "I also know that you were very tight and will most likely be a little sore. How about we take a shower? The hot water will help."

"We?" She sat up and scooted to the edge of the table, dangling her legs over the edge.

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"If you don't mind sharing." He reached forward and lifted her, then set her feet to the floor, careful not to set her on any broken glass.

"I don't mind at all."

* * * *

As steam filled the bathroom, Layce watched Carter collect towels. He was beautiful to look at, lean muscles, toned. He had no fat, no softness, and his cock was as impressive as the rest of him. She was grateful he'd not been small. It would have ruined it all after three years of fantasies. But he'd lived up to her expectations with a few inches to spare.

He smiled when she stepped into the shower behind him. He was right, the hot water felt great against her sensitive skin. His hands felt even better when he ran the soap over his palms then moved them over her shoulders and arms. She felt like a goddess as he lathered her body, paying close attention to her breasts. Her nipples hardened when he ran the bar of soap over them.

"You are going to get yourself in trouble like that," she warned and saw the quick grin that curled his full lips before he set the soap aside. "We're supposed to be making sure I'm not sore, remember?"

"I remember," he murmured as he returned to the task of lathering her body. When his fingers slipped down against her pussy, she didn't care if she couldn't walk for a week. His hot skin rubbed against her, slid against her clit, and caused tension to knot in her abdomen. Leaning back against the cool tiles, she stared at him as he leaned closer. His eyes

glittered from beneath his dark lashes while his fingers continued their soapy massage against her.

Water ran over his shoulders, and his hair dripped water down his chest. Steam drifted around them, and when he kissed her, his lips wet and tongue demanding, she slid her arms around him. It felt good to have a man to hold onto again. She'd missed the intimacy, and her body craved more of what he offered.

"Turn around," he murmured against her lips. A dark thrill raced through her as she turned to face the tile. Gentle but firm hands guided her legs apart then swept up her back and sent hot shills racing across her arms.

He lifted her hands so they rested on the smooth tiles, then leaned close, his cock hard against her ass. "Don't move." He leaned away, and a moment later his fingers slipped beneath her against her pussy. She moaned and pushed her hips back, but his hands instantly fell away.

"Keep your hands on the tile and step back," he told her. She did what he asked, smiling when he guided her back another step and then another until she was bent forward. His hand returned to her pussy, stroking and caressing.

He leaned over her to whisper in her ear, the heat of his body causing her to shiver. "Don't move. Don't make a sound. Not until I tell you."

"You just want me to stand here?"

"Shh. If you move or make a sound before I tell you, I'll stop. You won't want me to stop," he promised. Dark heat bloomed as he plucked at her clit. She'd never had a man want to actually play like this. It was exciting and new.

His fingers slipped against her, into her, teasing until she burned for more. His free hand caressed her ass in slow circles. When his palm rose and then slapped down gently, Layce moaned as her body reacted by flushing heat from her face to her feet.

"Shh," he murmured, this time allowing a palm to clap softly against her pussy. Her body jerked, and her knees bent slightly.

"Keep still." He leaned forward again, this time brushing her ear with his lips. "Doctor's orders." He straightened, and his hands left her momentarily. She waited then sucked in her breath as he pulled the showerhead from its bracket and sprayed the warm water right onto her clit. The sensation was electrifying but short lived as he moved and rained water down her back, over her ass, down her legs, and back to her pussy. When he turned the showerhead so the smooth metal back pressed against her, she closed her eyes, catching her lower lip between her teeth to keep from moaning.

And then the water returned, raining onto her until her pussy heated and her legs felt weak. Tension built, her muscles constricted, readying for the explosion of sensation, but he denied her the pleasure. When he moved the showerhead away, her throat closed around a whimper.

Again his palm swept down against her pussy, spearing heat and need through her sex. Again. Once more, and Layce felt like hitting him when he offered no more. Instead, one hand slid around her to caress her breasts. When his fingers closed around her nipple and pinched lightly, she groaned.

Carter's thick cock nudged against her cunt. She held her breath as he pinched again and then eased into her. Her first instinct was to lean back into him, but she remained still, her hands pressing onto the tile. He groaned as he slid all the way into her, filling her completely. His free hand circled and brought that water back to her clit while he continued to pinch at her nipples. Slowly his cock pulled back then eased in again.

Layce felt her body start to tremble. She couldn't control it. It was too much. She balled her fingers to keep from moving, from crying out for more. It only made the sensations all the more unbearable.

When he finally spoke, his hips moving lazily against her ass, his voice was deeper. "Do you want to move?"

"Yes." She nodded and groaned when he slid deep into her. The showerhead dropped from his hand, swung back and hit the wall.

"You want to come?" he purred.

"Yes."

He withdrew then thrust into her, his palm clapping against her pussy. Her body clenched with the bloom of pleasure, and he groaned.

"Then move."

She pushed back against him, and his fingers circled her clit. His body slapped against her as he thrust into her, his free hand sliding up between her breasts. His lips parted on her shoulder and his tongue touched her skin as he drove deep into her. So deep that lights danced at the edge of her vision.

"Come, Layce. Give," he murmured against her shoulder, his heavy breath cascading across the moisture on her skin. "Mine." That last word pushed her over the edge, and she lifted her voice as pleasure racked her body. She bucked against him, and when his teeth bit down into her shoulder, his arm tightened around her as her knees gave out beneath her. Pleasure wound around her nipples, pulled from within her sex so fiercely that she felt she would faint from the force. She felt him come too, and that low growl against her sent a new wave of chills over her skin. Still his hips pumped against her, and she was vaguely aware of the pull of his lips on her shoulder as those lights danced closer.

"Christ, what am I doing?" He jerked from within her but did not release her when she straightened and slumped back against him, not trusting her own strength to keep her from falling.

"Are you okay?" His lips brushed her cheek. She just hummed but forced her eyes open when he turned her to face him. Slowly, the haze around her cleared and she focused on those amber eyes above her.

"I lost it ... I'm so sorry, Layce," he whispered.

"You should lose it more often." She slid her hands up his chest and lifted her lips to his. "That was ... amazing." At first he didn't respond, but when she slid her tongue across his lips, he kissed her back.

"I bit you." He spoke against her lips. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

Layce leaned back, her legs less shaky. She lifted her hand to her shoulder, surprised to find he'd broken the skin.

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"You were pretty wild." She could see the guilt in his expression. "I felt pretty wild myself." She leaned back against the tile and ran her hands over her still sensitive breasts. His gaze dropped, and she smiled when his eyes glittered and his nose flared slightly. His desire for her made her feel more like a woman than she'd felt in years, even before the disease.

"You should shower ... alone if we expect you to ever leave this bathroom." He reached behind him and slid the glass door open. He stepped backward but hesitated.

"What?" she prompted.

"You weaken me, Layce." The glass door slid closed.

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"If a thing loves, it is infinite."

—*William Blake.*

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Chapter Three

Carter sat on his bed, naked, staring at the floor. He'd bitten her, drank from her, though thankfully not enough that did damage. Still, it scared him.

When she emerged from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her, he lifted his gaze. Her hair hung in dark, wet strands around her shoulders. The towel dipped slightly between her breasts where she'd tucked the corner, and a few droplets of water still clung to her thighs. His cock stirred.

"Waiting for me?" She flashed a dimpled smile.

"Yes."

She let the towel loosen and then fall away before stepping toward him. Those perfect breasts drew his attention. A handful each, tipped with small pink nipples. Down her ivory stomach and below the sweep of her hips, his gaze dropped to the tuft of blonde hair at the apex of her thighs.

"I have to talk to you."

She halted in front of him then lowered to her knees, her attention on his betraying cock. "You don't *look* like you want to talk." His gaze drew up to the small bite mark just inside her shoulder. Even if she were like him, that wound would not heal so quickly. It would take awhile—the bite of passion.

His gaze darted to her mouth when a small pink tongue slid along the full of her bottom lip. "How about we talk later?"

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to the crown of his cock. Her tongue extended and circled, and a moment

later her mouth parted and slid him into her moist warmth, tightening around him. Sweet Jesus. Fire knotted in his stomach when she ran her tongue against the underside of his cock.

Down again she moved, and he tilted his hips so she could take more of him. He groaned when she pushed him to the back of her throat, her fingers running up his thighs. He'd always had an appetite when it came to sex, but he might have finally met his match. Layce Courson seemed as insatiable as he. And that only made his suspicions that she'd indeed been changed all the more strong.

Her mouth moved over him silkily. In. Out. Deep. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes as that fire licked at his senses and his balls tightened. His stomach clenched, and he could almost smell the blood pulsing beneath her skin. Her coppery taste had made him want to make her his eternally. Gritting his back teeth together, he came. He felt her swallow and envied her that freedom to take from him.

"You will make me so I don't want you to ever leave." He looked down at her when she released him and rocked back on her heels, a satisfied smile curled in her swollen, glistening lips. "Why did you come here, Layce?"

Her smile slanted. "Because you asked me to."

"You could have said no."

She heaved a breath and stood, but he caught her wrist before she could walk away. "Why?"

"Because you were the only person who did not abandon me or treat me like I was only the disease when things got rough." She gazed down at him. "You never looked at me

with God damned sympathy, and when I wore short skirts, I saw you noticing despite how unattractive I might have been. It made me feel ... like I wasn't dead yet."

He lifted her wrist and kissed the tender underside. A mistake when he felt her pulse quicken beneath the touch of his lips. He closed his eyes but stilled the need within.

"Plus, you are kind of cute. Three years, no sex, and you aren't exactly a stranger to me." She shrugged when he looked up at her. "So here I am."

"Healthier than I've ever seen you."

"Very healthy." She nodded, sliding her thighs over his so that she straddled his lap. He released her wrist when she moved to slip her hands over his shoulders.

Her eyes glittered. "You bit me."

He winced. "I did."

"Maybe I should bite you back?"

He shuddered. "Not a good idea."

She arched an eyebrow. "Oh? You think to spank and bite me but not get any in return?"

"Bite me and I'll tie your little ass to this bed and never let you leave." He leaned back on his arms, sucking in his breath when she lightly dragged her nails over his chest.

"Is that a threat, Doctor?"

"It's a fucking promise."

A soft giggle tumbled from her lips. "Local doctor kidnaps patient after recovery to use her as his sex toy?"

"Exactly." He laughed. "I have a feeling you wouldn't be nearly as helpless as you made out to be."

"Before I got real sick, I enjoyed sex but not like this," she admitted. "I had a few boyfriends, but they'd never fucked me like you did in the shower. Even when I fantasized about you...."

"You fantasized about me?"

Her lashes dropped, and her smile turned coy. "Maybe."

"What kind of fantasies?"

"You are nothing like I imagined."

"What did you imagine?" He saw the pink staining her cheeks. How could she possibly be embarrassed after she'd just had his cock in her mouth?

"It's like I said. Everyone else abandoned me."

"So you chose me because there was nobody else?" He laughed. "Gee thanks."

"It made me forget about the pain a little when I thought of you. I would imagine you making a house call," she admitted softly.

"Feigning illness so you could use me?" He shifted and lifted a finger to her nipple. "That is a terrible abuse of the doctor/patient relationship. What would I do when I got to your house?"

Her tongue darted along her lips. She shifted slightly so that her pussy rested against his cock, and Carter circled that small pink peak with his index finger. "You would go down on me."

"Did you touch yourself when you fantasized about me?"

Her breathing deepened. "Yes. Sometimes I would close my eyes and see you there, watching me."

His cock jerked against her. "What was I doing when I was watching you?"

"Touching yourself and talking dirty to me," she answered.

He grasped her waist and rolled, pinning her beneath him, gazing down at her expression of surprise. "You make my pain go away too, Layce. You make me forget...." He lowered his forehead to her shoulder. She wouldn't understand his pain.

Pushing from atop her, he retreated to the chair next to the window. "Touch yourself now, Layce. Let me watch you."

She rose up on her elbows, staring at him, then laughed. "Trying to make my dreams come true."

"No, indulging in my own." He gave her a nod, dropping his hand to his cock. "Touch yourself."

She stared at him for several moments before shifting and spreading her legs. Carter's gaze dropped to the pink folds of her pussy as she slid her fingers against her clit. He could smell her salty scent from where he sat and fought the urge to leap forward and bury himself inside her.

His gaze lifted to meet hers as he slid his palm up and down his cock. "Is this how you wanted me, Layce?"

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and nodded. Her attention dropped to his lap, and her finger sank. Her cheeks flushed as he tilted his hips forward. So responsive, easy to read.

"I'm not like those boyfriends you had before, Layce. I've more experience. I've learned patience and allowing a woman to enjoy sex. It's not just about getting off. It's about enjoying because I bring pleasure, indulgence, savoring the

woman I'm with." Carter stretched his legs out then pulled himself and the chair closer to the bed. "It's about taking advantage of one another and the sharing an intimate experience. About watching you let go."

Her finger moved in and out of her, her gaze now locked on his face. Her lips parted, and her breasts rose with each quick breath. He tightened his fingers around his cock.

"It's about you knowing that I desire you. That I've always desired you, Layce. I wanted you to know, as wrong as it was, that I desired you ... that I did, despite our situation, want to fuck the shit out of you."

A whimper rose from her throat, and she tilted her head back as her body quivered with pleasure she brought to herself. Carter released his cock when her hand fell away from her pussy, and he crawled onto the bed atop her. She opened her eyes and gazed up at him.

"And now that's just what I'm going to do." He pressed his cock against her soft folds then rocked into her. She drew her knees up to his waist and lifted her hips as he thrust again.

She felt good. He couldn't get enough of her. The muscles of her body closed around him, and he leaned forward to capture her mouth as he moved in and out of her. When her tongue rolled against his, welcoming his kiss, he slipped a hand beneath her ass and lifted her to meet his thrusts. Her arms slipped around his neck, holding him as he pumped into her wildly.

He wouldn't last long. Not with her moans and cries pushing him close to release so quickly. He felt her body stiffen with her own orgasm, and gave up his efforts to wait.

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Hot pleasure raked through him, but this time he refrained from biting, though the desire to do so caused him to shake.

Once spent, she did not release him but held him in her embrace. "Thank you for this, Carter," she whispered, and he closed his eyes as he nuzzled her neck. Shifting and easing down beside her, he rolled her against him so they could just lay there and hold one another.

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"If suffering brings wisdom, I would wish to be less wise."

—*William Butler Yeats.*

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Chapter Four

Carter glanced at the clock as Layce stirred awake beside him. Noon. She smiled as she sat up and looked down at him. He smiled back, tucking his arm beneath his head, his gaze dropping to her breasts. She was beautiful.

She ran her fingers lightly across his chest and then lower. He groaned as her fingers drifted lower and his cock jerked toward her in response. She wrapped her fingers around him and squeezed lightly before she leaned down and kissed the tip. Another groan slipped from him, and she parted her lips.

He watched as the head of his cock disappeared between her beautiful lips. When her mouth slid down onto him, he sucked in his breath. Carefully he pushed her hair back from her face so he could watch his cock slide in and out of her mouth. Her lips tightened as she sucked him, and his balls tightened.

She shifted her weight, and one hand slid up his stomach and across his chest, her fingernails scratching against his skin. Hot sensation burned him from her fingertips then veined through his entire body. Every drag of her lips knotted a forbidden, torturous ache in his stomach.

He knotted his fingers in her hair and closed his eyes as his breath quickened. When she hummed against him, the vibrations traveling the length of his cock, he lifted his hips to meet her lips. Her fingers slipped beneath his balls and massaged, and he gritted his teeth against the urge to change her.

Carter's chest pumped with every ragged breath, and suddenly she released him from her mouth, sending hot fire and urgency clawing up from his groin. He opened his eyes and looked down at her swollen, glistening lips, allowing his fingers to slide from her hair.

"How do you want me?" she asked.

With his teeth in her. He sat up and grasped her waist, moving as he jerked her roughly to her knees. Crouching behind her, he positioned himself, sliding his pulsing cock against the folds of her pussy. He thrust, his fingers hauling her hips against him so he buried himself deeply. Sliding one arm around her waist, he bent forward and held her to him while he slipped his other hand up and into her hair, his fingers knotting so he could bring her up against him.

"You make me want to rip into you."

"Do it."

The growl came from deep inside him. He released her and took a hold of her hips again. Withdrawing, he knew he would not be gentle. He couldn't. She pushed him to lose himself, to abandon reason.

As he began pumping into her, he felt his teeth push from his gums with desire to make her his but fought the urge to bite into her. He could feel her own desire with every grip of her pussy, every wave of heat that radiated from her body. She rocked back into him.

More. Her thoughts found him, and his fingers tightened, pressing into the swells of her hips. He raged uncontrollably with her, giving her what her mind screamed she wanted. When she came, it was with a lifted voice that called his

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name. Her body shook and she bucked beneath the force of her orgasm, but he held her to him, pumping wildly as he sought his own release.

He came hard and threw his head back as he shouted, wanting to bury his teeth into her and take from her. Instead, he ground his back teeth together and let his body ride the tremendous explosion of sensation until it subsided. Then he released her hips and fell forward.

Tears from restraint stung his eyes as he pulled from within her and rested his cheek against the small of her back. He took several deep breaths before moving away from her and allowing her to face him.

"I can't seem to get enough of you."

Her lips curled with a little smile as she pushed her hair from her face and settled beside him. "Me too." He closed his eyes as her palm pressed against his chest and moved in small circles over his skin. Every muscle in his body relaxed as he lay there, feeling happier and more content than he could remember ever feeling.

* * * *

Careful not to wake him, Layce eased out of bed and pulled on his shirt. As she worked the buttons, her gaze drifted to the huge leather bound book on the table next to the bed. Curious, she picked it up, moved to the chair next to the window, and pushed open the drapes slightly so she could see. Curling up in the chair, she opened the book.

1806—London

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A cold wind blows beneath the clouds today as I watch my sweet Meg go into the earth. I am empty inside. My wife weeps and I can do nothing to comfort her, for all of my strength is reserved to keep me from lying down next to that small wooden box.

I have but one purpose now. This disease that plagues my body, the same that took my Meg from me, must be stopped. So that no other suffer the evil that rips my chest empty.

Sam Bosan. I will go to him this very night and ask for his eternal gift. He does not know that I have long suspected his secret. Tonight he will know that I've learned the truth. Tonight he will grant me that which will give me a life that I can use to find the peace that the devil has taken from me.

Goodbye, Meg, for I shall never see you again. What I do tonight, if I am left with a soul at all, will damn me and keep me from you. But it will be so that others may live.

Sam did not want to grant me my request but in the end gave me what I asked for. It is done. My body has changed. I no longer am burdened with pain or open wounds, and while my wife and brother think it a blessing, I know it is not. My burden is not physical pain now. My burden is guilt. The guilt of someone who has taken a life. Sam told me it was necessary, and I knew well before the change what must be done. But I had not considered the consequence, the price that must be paid to become what I've become.

Layce looked up at Carter. He was writing a book. She had not guessed him someone who would entertain creative hobbies. She turned the page and continued to read.

1811

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I received message from my brother today that my wife, Charlotte, has married another. She and her husband are to have their third child any day. I think of Charlotte sometimes. My life has become one of much loneliness. There have been women, but none have remained for any length of time. I've not enough passion to distribute to both work and a marriage. I pray, if God shall listen to the prayers of demons, that she finds peace. I shall have none for myself.

I have spent the last five years at The Royal College of Physicians. I've become focused in my education but distant from those that would wish me to remain close to them. Charlotte remained with me for the first three years but gave up that I would return to her and the life we had before. It was when I sold our small shop to afford my education that she packed her belongings and moved from our home. Eventually I sold the house also. I need for little and am content to continue my days in the small apartment I've acquired close to the college. I have learned to remain inside the building during the hours of the day and only return to my small abode once the sun has set.

1828—France

For years I've been living in France and have found I must move around every couple of years to avoid having my secret detected by those I work with.

1847—London

After nine years in France, I have returned to London. I have met a man by the name of Blundell, a fellow physician who has shown an interest in my research. My return has been bittersweet. I visited the graves of Meg and my brother

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and watched, unseen, my wife and her family. She has five children. My chest ached as I watched her with them. That should have been our life together.

1908—America

I have traveled to America upon the request of a Frenchman I wrote to. His name is Alexis Carrel and is a surgeon who believes to have found a way to prevent the clotting of blood. When I wrote to him, I did not expect such a speedy response.

Upon arrival I did confess my sacrifice so that I could devote myself to this work. At first he did not believe me. I was forced to prove that I was not a lunatic. I saw the horror in his face. It was quickly followed by sympathy. And eventually understanding and acceptance. He has vowed to help me find a way around my sin so that I might survive without the taking of lives from others—as I have done for the last hundred years. And in return, I shall allow him to use me as he needs to perfect the methods of medical procedure. He is an intelligent man and sees that my curse could also be a useful subject for testing and experimental surgery.

I do this for Meg. All of my days are devoted to her. And I continue my nights, reliving the nightmare of her loss. She is my sole source of inspiration. She is my determination.

How I miss her smile, her open arms, her soft voice calling for me. I keep her in my mind, in my blackened heart. She carries me through the nights, pushes me when my will weakens so I do not wish to feed. And in the day, when the sun could surely set me free of this hellish existence, she

haunts my sleep so that I wake with the moon and am filled with determination again.

Layce swallowed past the lump in her throat. So much emotion and sacrifice. She glanced again at Carter. He wrote with such emotion. It did not surprise her that the character would be someone interested in medicine. But it did surprise her that the character and story would be so deeply moving.

She turned several pages.

1912—America

Alexis has won the Nobel Prize, and I can think of no one more deserving. We have worked diligently and have made much progress.

My dreams continue, reminding me why I have traveled this journey. The success is not mine but that of my daughter. It is her hand that holds the scalpel. I celebrated for her, not for myself.

Alexis continues providing me with the blood that I must have to survive, to continue the work he and I have dedicated ourselves in doing. I owe him much for relieving me the burden of having to kill to exist. It is a simple solution. We take blood, two vials from our patients. One that we use in our work. One for me to digest while it is still warm from the body.

Layce frowned. Carter always took blood, and never once. Always twice.

1918—France

I have but once changed another, and I shall never do so again. A wounded soldier, Francois LaBrett, father to three. He wept when he realized we could do nothing to save him.

He spoke to me of his children, of his little girl. I was weakened by his story.

I told him that I could change him. He was horrified and told me to get away from him. But the following day, upon the edge of death, he begged me to do as I'd said I could.

I know now that I should have let him leave this world. He will live my pain someday. He will watch his children die.

Today I confessed what I had done to Alexis. I shall leave tomorrow and go back to America. His words are the truth. I am no God and had no right to do what I did. I do not believe any longer that there is even a God there at all. I've seen too much. There is no God. There is no miracle. There is only life and death and my own miserable existence.

It has been a hundred and seven years since Meg was taken from me. I am no closer today to finding a cure to the disease that struck her than I was the day I watched her buried. I shall continue because I cannot bear that I have failed her.

"What are you doing?" Carter's voice caused Layce to look up and find him sitting up in bed watching her. She sniffed and wiped at her eyes.

"This is good," Layce whispered. "I didn't know you were a writer. I hope you don't mind that I read it."

Carter swung his legs over the edge. "That's very personal."

Layce winced. "I thought it was a journal at first. I'm nosy. I admit it. But, Carter, this is ... are you going to publish it?"

"No."

"Why not? It's really good." Layce watched him rise and reach for his pants. She couldn't read his expression. Was he angry?

"It's very personal."

"I'm sorry." She closed the book and set it aside, noticing how dark it was in the room. Glancing out the window, she found the sun had long passed over and was starting to set.

"I'm hungry. I'll make us something to eat." He headed from the bedroom, so she got up and followed, her gaze moving over the muscles of his back. She sat on one of the barstools and watched him move about in the kitchen.

"Look, I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to step on your toes. I think it's cool that you are a writer." She wished he would turn around and look at her. "Carter?" She jumped when he slammed the pot he'd retrieved down on a burner on the stove.

"How much did you read?"

She had stepped on his toes. "Just up to when the guy is going back to America. 1918. I'm sorry. You have every right to be angry. I had *no* right to read anything you'd written without your permission."

"I'm not angry at you." He turned and placed his hands on the counter, leaning forward. "I'm not angry at you, Layce. Frustrated. Tired. But not angry." He took a deep breath.

"Maybe you need a vacation? I know a great spot in Mexico that has a beautiful beach...."

"I don't take vacations."

"Ever?"

"Ever." He shook his head. "I can't. I have too much work to do."

Layce stared at him. No vacations. But his work was so stressful. She didn't know how he could do it and not need a break.

"It's not healthy for you...."

"Would you have wanted me to just up and disappear when you were sick?" He met her gaze. "My work is important. I don't do what I do so that the deaths of people mean nothing."

"How can you help anyone if you aren't well yourself?"

He snorted. "I'm healthy. So are you now. That's what puzzles me. You claim you don't know why but I know better. I *know*, Layce. You've been changed. There is no other explanation."

"Changed?"

"Just like me. That was no burger and soda you craved that night you left the hospital. I can help you though if you will be honest with me."

What in hell was he talking about? "I *have* been honest with you."

"Dammit, woman, I know better!" He raised his voice. "You were bitten. Someone changed you."

"Bitten?" Layce shook her head. "You are sounding like a crazy man."

"Then I'll say it for you. Vampire. There it is." He took a breath and continued in a lowered voice. "I know. It's all right. I just need to hear you say it."

Layce stared at him. She didn't mean to laugh. It just blurted out. He was being absurd. He stared at her as if waiting, and she realized he was being serious. Was he mental?

Realization hit her, and she snapped her fingers. "That's it. I'd not understood that part in the story. The guy in your book. He's a vampire." She stopped, frowning. "The two vials of blood..."

"The same that I've taken from you and from other patients." He nodded.

"Oh gross." She thought of the bite on her neck. "Please, tell me you aren't one of those freaks that..."

"I don't pretend to be something I'm not. I'm not one to get caught up in cults." He frowned as he stared at her. "Then you've not been changed? Don't lie to me."

"You are telling me you are a vampire?" She laughed again, but now her stomach was knotting. She eased off of the stool, thankful the counter remained between them. She hadn't thought him a mental case. In the three years she'd known him, he'd seemed normal.

"Then I was wrong." He straightened.

She stared as tears formed in his eyes. "I don't know what the hell you are talking about, but I think it's time for me to take my leave." Just great. The best sex in her life, and it was with a lunatic.

He blinked. "Layce, wait."

"It was a mistake for me to come here. I thought ... well, I knew better I guess but hoped you weren't some psycho ... I'll just get my things...."

"The book you read..." He didn't move toward her, so she remained where she was. "It is a journal. It's my journal. My personal journal. It's not fiction."

"Now I know you're off your rocker." Layce was ready to bolt for the door if he made a move around the counter.

He laughed. "If only that were the problem. Mental illness would be a lot less complicated."

"If that were your journal it would make you over two hundred years old."

"Over two hundred and thirty actually." He held up his hands. "I can see you don't believe me. No one ever does at first. But I can prove to you that I'm telling the truth."

Layce tensed as he stepped back from the counter. She watched him open the blinds so that the light from the setting sun poured through in slatted rays.

"I suppose you'll burst into flames now?" Layce crossed her arms.

"Let's not hope I need to go to such extremes." He lifted his hand, hesitated, and then with obvious reluctance allowed his fingers to break through the rays. Layce held her breath. Then released it. Nothing happened. At first.

Layce gasped and took a step back as smoke began curling out from his fingers.

"Fuck all," Layce whispered, not believing what she just saw. "What does that mean?" She took a step forward.

"It means I'm a vampire," he answered. "That journal is an account of my life." He withdrew his hand and faced her, then held up his fingers. In moments, before she could gasp, he slid a knife across his knuckles, leaving a nasty gash. Layce

stared at the marks and then began to shake when the wounds starting healing right before her eyes.

"Most wounds heal a little more quickly. Sunlight is lethal for younger vampires. It causes wounds that take a little longer to heal. But as you pointed out, I'm over two hundred years old. I've not been afraid of bursting into flames for some time."

Layce opened her mouth then closed it again. She couldn't form words. She could barely think. Her heart pounded, and fear gripped her as every tale of monsters bombarded her.

"Go to the bedroom. Take all the time you need. It's a mind fuck I know." He turned back to the stove, and Layce bolted for the bedroom, closing and locking the door behind her. She stared at the door, her whole body trembling as she backed across the room and against the wall.

"Holy shit," she whispered. Her gaze darted down to the journal. Holy shit. She grabbed the book and flipped to the last entry.

August, 2007

I don't want to hope. When my phone woke me from my nightmares, I knew it was about Layce Courson. I expected the worst. Layce Courson is well. There is no trace of Scleraderma. No lesions on her body. Nothing. I must get to the bottom of this. I believe she has been changed, that she is now a vampire like me. If that is true, I feel for her. She shall suffer far greater damage than she ever knew with her disease.

I saw her today, full of life. Vibrant. She was intoxicating. I have grown selfish. These years I've longed for her, a woman

like her that could chase away some of the loneliness I've lived so long with. It's been in vain—more suffering I put on myself. But now. If she is a vampire—if she is like me—if she would have me, if this is more than just physical attraction between us....

It is selfish for me to want for her when I could be wrong. She could be the link to a cure for this disease, to make these years not to have been for nothing, to make Meg's death mean something at long last.

A cure. After so many years. I dare not hope. It seems impossible with how quickly she has recovered when only yesterday I knew her days were limited. Even then I behaved selfishly, scheduling appointments that were for only my own benefit ... to see her as much as I could before she left this world. And now, the impossible has happened.

Layce slapped the book closed. "Holy shit," she repeated. It was true. It was all true. She looked at the door as a lump formed in her throat. It was him who buried his daughter. Meg had been *his* daughter. He'd chosen a life that would never end so he could find a cure to the disease he'd suffered from and his daughter died from.

She sat down in the chair, her heart swelling. So much death. So much illness. So much sacrifice. Two hundred years' worth. Alone. She lifted a hand to her mouth, attempting to muffle her sobs. She'd told herself when she was sick, even after she knew she would die, that she would do any tests her doctor asked of her so that she might somehow help someone else. Could she do that lifetime after lifetime?

The Vampire Oracle: Wisdom
by Sable Grey

She shook her head, answering her own question. She didn't think she had that much love in her. It was love that drove Carter, she knew that. The love of a father for his daughter. It's all he had, she realized.

Bringing the book to her chest, she bowed her head and cried.

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"Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

—*Reinhold Niebuhr.*

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Chapter Five

"What has happened to me is a miracle."

Carter looked up to find Layce standing in the doorway of his bedroom. She'd remained locked away from him for nearly twelve hours, and now he could see her eyes were red and puffy from crying. He winced. The last thing he'd wanted to do was cause her pain.

She took a step into the room, but he didn't rise from his sofa. "You may not believe, but I do. I think everything happens for a reason. It has to or what else is the point?" She shook her head as she clasped her hands in front of her. "I've not been changed into a ... vampire. I've not done anything different than I've always done. I am not your cure."

Carter frowned but inclined his head. Perhaps she was right. Maybe he'd hoped so much that he was overlooking the power of the human will. She may have willed herself better. Or perhaps it was a miracle as she suggested.

"I'd wanted there to be a cure," he admitted.

She stepped toward him then eased down beside him on the sofa. "I know." She reached for his hand and wrapped her fingers around his. "I do understand your pain."

"I appreciate that, Layce, but you do not and cannot."

"You do not suffer the loss of a child anymore, Carter. You suffer from fear of failure and loneliness. And yes, I do know that pain very well." She squeezed his hand. "People die. It's a part of living. We mourn. We hurt. And then we live. You've

held on to something as a way to punish yourself. You blame yourself for your daughter's death."

"It was hereditary. She *did* die because of me." Carter pulled his hand from Layce's. "She was only eight."

"She died loved. That is something pretty special."

Carter laughed coldly. "It still doesn't change anything. Death is death. Believe you me, I've seen enough death...."

"Yes you did, but you *chose* the life you live. You made that choice based on love and while you've experienced death, look at all the good that has come from your choices. Love does make a difference. Your love for your daughter has made a difference in many people's lives, mine included."

He didn't want to hear reasoning. He didn't want her understanding. It complicated things and made the suffering all the worse. She would pump him full of hope, and then she would leave this world and he would be alone again.

"I'm a vampire, Layce. I live. Everyone else dies. Whoever said it is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all obviously didn't bury his daughter from a disease that he gave her and then lived with that guilt." Standing, Carter made his way to the island and leaned on the countertop. "I appreciate your kindness, but you don't know how it feels."

"I know how it feels to love knowing I'm going to die," she argued. "I know how it feels to think you are going to die and to hope that my doctor remembers me when I'm gone. It would have sucked for me to die and have no one mourn my leaving."

"Dying alone can't be as bad as living alone."

Her hands touched his back, slid along his shoulders.
"You've been lonely a long time."

He laughed. "A really long time."

"You don't have to be alone anymore," she whispered before kissing his shoulder. "I will stay with you."

Turning, Carter touched her face. "Knowing what I am?"

"What you are and what you've sacrificed makes me care for you all the more."

He ran his finger along her jaw line. "I would rather you walk out the door now and never see me again—to lose you after two days than to lose you after fifty years."

"You don't have to lose me, Carter." Her lower lip caught between her teeth for a few moments. "You could change me. I could stay with you. I could help you find the cure you search for."

His heart swelled. But she didn't know what she was offering. He leaned forward and tenderly kissed her lips.

"I am selfish, but I am not that selfish. I couldn't do it to you. You don't know. No children. No walks on sunny beaches. No escape when hunger makes you want to feed." His throat closed slightly. "Living like a monster, slipping around in the dark, trying to steal blood so you don't kill innocent people to quench your thirst. No, Layce. No."

She leaned her head forward against his chest. "I've thought of all that. There is an upside too, though."

"An upside?" He stared down at the top of her head.

"I can have as many cheeseburgers as I want." She looked up, grinning, but he didn't laugh. "This happened for a reason. I was going to die. Now I'm alive, and it's brought me

into your home. Even if I didn't believe in fate, you have to admit, this would make a very good argument."

Carter did smile then. "Yes it would."

"Change me, Carter. Let me stay with you. Let me love you."

"You will watch your family die. Everyone else you ever knew would die."

"But we would have each other," she argued.

"And what if you decided after a hundred years you didn't love me anymore?" He arched an eyebrow.

"Then I'd be a hot hundred-year-old woman who finds a twenty-year-old boy toy." She ran her hand up his chest when he laughed. "We are good together, and I read more of your journal. I know you love me."

"And that's why I can't." He closed his eyes. "You don't know what it would be like. I would have to bite you, to drain you almost to the point of death and then have you drink from me. You wouldn't be able to see the sun. Not for a very long time." He wanted to. He wanted to keep her with him, to make her his, to share his life with her.

"When I was in your room, I logged onto your computer and did some research, and I also made a phone call. Long distance."

Carter opened his eyes. "Really? Who did you call?" He stared at her curiously as she tucked her hair behind her ear.

"A colonel by the name of Frances Brett. It's why I was in there so long. It wasn't easy. Genealogy sites, historical military records, but I'm good at researching things. And I found him. He lives in Houston."

Carter stepped back away from her, staring at her face. It couldn't be the same man he'd changed those many years ago, Francois LaBrett. Why had she done such a thing? He'd never tried to find the man after that morning so many, many years ago. He was afraid to know the suffering he'd caused.

"I found his phone number and I called him. I told him who I was and who you were. I asked a lot of questions." She crossed her arms. "Do you want to know what he told me?"

"You are terrifying me right now. Don't I have enough to suffer without this too?" Carter turned his back. He couldn't look at her. Why had she done this to him? To punish him?

"He said that ninety years ago, you gave him a gift. He was able to go home to his family, a second chance to love them fiercely. His wife stayed with him after he'd told her what had happened—he buried her ten years ago and a son just last year. His living children also know his secret as does his new wife. They accept him and his love. He said love is worth living for."

The tightness in his chest eased. He'd expected anger, judgement, disgust. He'd feared the suffering he'd left LaBrett with. Sinking to his knees, he bowed his head, unable to stop the tears of relief that fell across his face.

"Happiness can be found, Carter. You need not suffer alone. The life Colonel Brett described to me is far better than the one I was living before I got sick." She knelt beside him and hugged him.

He turned his head into the warmth of her embrace. She could not know the torment her meddling had eased. All these years he'd been afraid, afraid of what he'd done, afraid

of the heartache he'd been sure he'd caused in his moment of weakness. But LaBrett had made the most of his new life. He'd embraced it.

"Did he ask about me?"

"Yes." She stroked his back. "He wants to meet with you and thank you himself. I told him I would give you his number but that I did not know how you would react to my contacting him. He said he has the time and will wait as long as you need."

Carter lifted his face and pressed his lips to hers. "Thank you, Layce. Thank you for that."

"It is your choice. So, if you will not change me, at least let me love you for the rest of my life," she whispered.

Carter gazed into her eyes, feeling more love than he'd ever known. Slowly, despite the pain he knew he would feel later, he inclined his head, and she rewarded him with a brilliant smile.

"Starting now." She leaned forward and kissed him, her lips moving softly over his. He circled his arms around her and brought her flat against him. He tried to kiss her gently, but hunger won over and soon his kiss deepened. His tongue danced against hers, her moan filling his mouth, and her response only fueled his need.

His pulse pounded as he jerked at her clothes. Could he have really let her walk out the door when she burned desire into his veins so hot that the sun's torment cooled in comparison? Naked body against naked body, Carter leaned down and licked at her nipple, his hand finding her cunt moist

and warm against his fingers. He pressed his palm to her clit, enjoying the feel of her soft folds against his fingers.

"I want you," she whispered. "Please, Carter."

He groaned as the heat she'd driven into him coiled in his chest. He wanted her too. More than she could ever know. Standing, he pulled her to her feet then led her to a chair where he sat. She instantly stepped forward and settled her knees on the cushion on each side of his hips. Slowly she lowered herself until her pussy kissed the head of his cock, and then she pushed down, sheathing him inside her.

Carter rested his hands on the swell of her hips as she began working him in and out of her warm body. He lifted his hips to meet her slow strokes. He wanted to fuck her crazily like a lunatic and bury his teeth into her. Instead, he allowed her the lead, savoring every lazy stroke she granted him.

"Make me yours, Carter," she whispered, her large eyes pleading with him to do what he fought against. *His*. He wanted her to be his. Forever. He desired it more than anything else he'd ever wanted for. He leaned forward, sliding his arms around her as she continued moving up and down on his cock, riding him slowly, sweetly.

When she quickened her rhythm and squeezed her muscles around him, his balls tightened and his heart felt as if it would pound right out of his chest. He thrust upward, wanting more of her. And more. It wasn't enough.

She jerked her head, flipping her hair back over her shoulder, then leaned down, her lips brushing his ear. "I want you to."

Carter's breath grew ragged as she exposed her neck to him. He could have bitten her anywhere. She didn't know better. But the fact that she'd offered herself caused an explosion of hunger to rip through him.

Happiness can be found, Carter. Her earlier words found him through hot passion. You need not suffer alone.

He groaned and threw his head back as her body slapped against his, pain ripping through him as his teeth pushed from his gums, elongating beyond his control.

You don't have to lose me. He didn't want to lose her. Love is worth living for.

He tightened his arms around her as her cries of pleasure lifted and held her against him while he thrust fervently into her. He leaned forward, the scent of her blood calling to him. *Make me yours.* The two points of his canines brushed across her skin. He bit down.

She arched, her breath sucking in as her body jerked with her shock, but Carter didn't release her as her skin broke beneath his mouth. He closed his lips and drew that sweet nectar into his mouth as he peaked and pleasure exploded. When he swallowed, his body reacted violently, thrusting into her despite the release he found. His senses became acute, so that he felt consumed by her.

Her skin was hot against him, her breath raggedly caressing his shoulder. Her fingers curled behind him into his hair as cries of ecstasy rose from her lips. He refrained from drinking quickly, suckling and sipping so that the pleasure of her birth would be intensified. Her breasts heaved against him, her nipples hard and pressing into him as her fists

tightened in his hair. She would feel the need soon, but he didn't rush. He drew from her, his lips caressing her skin, his tongue lapping at her essence.

It was sweet torture that held him to her, and he sensed the life leaving her body. And then he felt her teeth graze his own skin, her instincts now leading her through the birthing ritual, and his cock jerked inside her. When she broke skin, he arched upward into her body, deeply, as the bond between them sealed with her hungry kiss.

Pleasure wound from his groin, through his abdomen, and into his chest, twisting its way to her lips. He groaned as her lips tightened and she sucked harder. Releasing her from his own kiss, he threw back his head and shouted at the intense pleasure that wrapped around him. His body moved on its own, his hips surging against her of their own will, his cock driving deep again and again.

Pinpricks of light danced around him. He should stop her, tell her it was enough. Instead, he held her to him for a few more moments. Then he pushed her gently so that her lips left him and she gazed down at him. Her pupils dilated, a sheen of sweat dotting her brow, cheeks flushed, and her breasts rising and falling with each ragged breath, Layce was more beautiful than he'd ever seen her.

Growling, he lifted her and took her from the chair down to the floor, never removing himself from her body. On her back, she continued to stare up at him as he lifted her knees and plunged wildly into her until his body shook. He shouted as he came into her and then fell forward, his hands on each

side of her. He dragged breath into his lungs as he hovered above her.

"It's done?"

He closed his eyes and attempted to regain control. "God help us, it is done. You must rest. When you wake, you'll be ... like me."

"That was the most amazing thing I've ever felt." Her words made him open his eyes and gaze down at her. Tears had formed in her eyes and rolled from the corners.

"Me too." He leaned down and kissed her nose.

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him down to her. She'd never felt so good. Her whole body seemed suddenly alive, sensing everything around her. She was aware of the wind outside the house, of everything moving and still. And of Carter. His smell. The feel of him against and inside her. The planes of his face seemed new, her vision sharper. She still tasted him on her lips, felt his presence around her, lingering in the furniture and on the air of the room.

"I love you," she whispered, the words seeming inadequate to the overwhelming emotion coursing through her. There were no words to describe the intense feelings that she could voice through sobs.

His lips moved to catch each of her tears, the sweet tenderness of his touch causing her to cry harder. Gently, he pulled from within her and sat up, bringing her to his chest so he cradled her against him. She liked having him circled around her. She felt safe, like she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

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"And I love you, Layce."

Those words wrapped around her heart and squeezed. She was his. She closed her eyes as sleep beckoned her. When she woke, she would be vampire. His vampire.

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Author Bio

Sable Grey resides in the deep south of the United States with her wonderful husband, very spoiled dogs, and three crazy cats. She spends her time researching her genealogy, designing cover art, watching movies, and reading.

With favorite authors like Stephen King, Piers Anthony, and Iris Johansen, it's no mystery where the inspiration to write tales of love, adventure, and mystery come from. An avid reader and storyteller at a young age, Sable began writing small stories as a child for her mother. However, it wasn't until she was well into her twenties that she realized that her calling was sharing her stories with a larger audience than just family members and friends.

Now, Sable is dedicated to her craft and to bringing her readers quality fiction with unforgettable characters. For her, writing a story means writing a story meant to touch the mind, body, heart, and soul.

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