

Red Sage Presents

Liane Gentry Skye

Wicked
Temptation

Three
Kinds
of
Wicked



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Wicked Temptation

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by Liane Gentry Skye

To My Reader:

Since the dawn of time, humanity's fascination with the number three has resonated through our religions, our myths, and our art. But the love stories we tell typically depend on a duet of lovers. When the time came to write *Wicked Temptation*, I had no idea how I'd spin a happy ending for my three fated lovers. I only knew this story wouldn't leave me alone until I tried. When the answer finally visited me through the magic of a trinity, the final version of *Wicked Temptation* was born. I hope you enjoy Trey, Sage and Russ's magical love story as much as I did in creating it.

Wicked Temptation: Chapter 1

“There are things known and things unknown and in between are the doors.” —Jim Morrison

Time Strider's Arena

Realm of Immortals

One. Last. Mission.

That was all that stood between Trey and the end of his term as a time strider. Gods knew he didn't need any distractions, not if he expected to right mankind's destiny and find his way back to Ethereum with his job done and his soul intact.

But the goddess Diadra didn't give a damn about that. Judging by the look of her, she just wanted to get laid, by him and right now, thank you very much. As if guessing his suspicions, the vixen shimmied, urging her outer robe down over silky undergarments and decadent curves. Trey's gaze trailed helplessly in the wake of the robe until it pooled at her feet in a gleaming crush of amethyst.

“Take me, Trey. Now.”

He choked back a primal roar. It wasn't every day the goddess of carnal desires demanded the likes of him, a mere demigod, join with her. But no matter how much his cock yearned to sample her wet heat, he wasn't about to risk the successful close of the human's timeline. He needed only to complete this last mission, and then, for once, he would be able to walk among the gods, their respected equal in every sense of the word despite his half-human pedigree.

Or perhaps because of it.

Striders must remain celibate. That prime directive had been drilled into his mind since damn near the dawn of time. With sexual gratification out of the question, he kept his carnal yearnings in check by focusing on his duty to his mortal charges.

In spite of humanity's flaws, he longed to be near them and study them. He envied the humans the depth of their passions and the fearless natures that drove them to sacrifice everything in the name of love. And from watching them over the eons, he'd learned enough to know that what he saw burning in Diadra's gaze right now had nothing to do with love and everything to do with treachery.

The question was, why?

“Striders are sworn to celibacy, Diadra,” he began, his words parsed with care to avoid triggering her volatile temper. “If I break my vows, my ability to harness creation magic will be compromised. Without that magic, I couldn't redirect time. You know that.”

Tears pooled in the goddess's eyes as her brows slumped to an angle that almost passed for heartbreak. But Trey knew better than to fall for her dramatics. Her sexual obsessions were the stuff of legend. So were the lengths she'd been known to resort to when it came to snaring her consorts.

Now the temptress had set her sight on him, and her out-of-the-blue desperation to ignite a firestorm in his loins didn't make sense. What could she possibly gain by bedding him, beyond raising the ire of her mother, the high goddess Heroset?

He, however, risked damnation, an eternity to wander the Void of B'hoth with the lost souls, should he lay a

finger on Diadra's ethereal ass. "You could have any god in creation. Why consort with me?"

The goddess wound a stray ringlet about her finger as she raked a gaze over his body. One corner of her mouth quirked and she shrugged. "You told me no. Nobody's ever done that before."

"So if I say yes, you'll go away?"

Rising onto her tiptoes, she threaded her arms around his neck. "Wrong timeline, lover. In this one, reverse psychology went out with the twentieth century."

So much for that. Now all that stood between his cock and Diadra's mound was a whisper of fabric. Predictably, it left nothing to the imagination.

As if his imagination needed further encouragement at the moment.

Trey squeezed his lids shut, praying the higher gods might help him reclaim some measure of self-restraint. Who knew what seductive ruse she would unleash on him next? And judging by the way his erection notched higher every time she wriggled her wares, his will and his libido were no longer on speaking terms. Keeping his eyes closed was his last remaining defense.

Little vixen knew it, too. Undaunted, she chuckled as she stepped near enough to nuzzle the tender flesh beneath his ear. "If you don't open your eyes, I'll rip off my underwear and cry rape."

Out of options for putting an end to this insanity, Trey grudgingly did as she bid him. Diadra's amber eyes sizzled with erotic intent while her fingers toyed with the knot that fastened her undergarment at one shoulder. Chin tilted upward, she measured his reaction as she ground her mons against his groin. The fabric binding her breasts slipped a good inch, drawing his attention to a bronzed swell of breast, the dusky half-moon display of nipple.

"Don't you want me, Trey?" She turned her lower lip out with a succulent pout. So kissable.

Trey's breath snagged on his denial and proved his prayers for restraint weren't cutting it. Perhaps he should have petitioned the gods for a raging ice storm to cool his ardor. Instead of the curt refusal he'd intended, a moan of surrender threatened the back of his throat.

When a familiar alert vibrated in the cup of his palm, he nearly dropped to his knees in thanks for the distraction. Unhooking Diadra's arms from his neck, he focused on the spiral implant at the core of his hand. The vermilion sparks roaming its coils confirmed that the minions of chaos had entered the Ether of Possibilities.

Damn minions, always moving backward in time to revise human destiny.

If Trey didn't know better, he would swear they were privy to the quagmire Diadra had created for him. Thanks to her relentless pursuit of him, he was as distracted as any creature with a cock could possibly get.

Talk about bad timing. Soon the last couple in his keep would face a minion's attempts to separate them. The Creator's path taught humanity how to love unconditionally—the sole requirement to achieve immortality—and the minions wanted to divert the predestined couples from that goal.

In a moment, a gateway would open and Trey would have to enter the Ether of Possibilities to thwart the minion's crime. Without Trey's help, the humans were doomed. Hard-on be damned, he would not fail them.

Should the Earth miss its destiny and spin into the minions' realm, the resulting horrors would cost these human couples more than immortality. Minions believed the Creator had forged the preordained couples'

spirits from the eternal flame of creation. By devouring those special souls, they hoped to harness enough creation magic to revise the universal order to suit their own dark needs.

But Trey couldn't very well navigate the Ether with a horny goddess in tow, now, could he? Struggling to clear the lust that clouded his senses, he searched for a plan to shake Diadra without risking accusations of ravishment—and the resulting ire of Heroset.

Placating her seemed to be his only hope.

Feigning charm he did not feel, he captured the goddess's hands within the shelter of his own. Raising them to his lips, he dropped a chaste kiss onto the back of each. "Beautiful as you are, goddess, we both know a strider's duty always trumps desire."

The triumphant tilt of Diadra's mouth proved he'd scored a stay of seduction, so Trey turned to the ephemeral beginnings of the dimensional gateway that would carry him into the Ether of Possibilities.

Static electricity buzzed a painful warning over his hand as he passed it through the shifting vapors. The gateway hadn't stabilized. If he entered it now, he risked blasting his soul to bits the second he shifted to the astral form that let him travel unscathed between realms.

Unfortunately, Diadra's ardor hadn't quite stabilized, either. While the volatile gateway to his front razed his flesh with points of fire, she carried on to his rear, doing what she did best—driving him mad with desire. She grazed a fingertip ever so slowly from the nape of his neck to the small of his back. A film of sweat broke out beneath her touch. The juxtaposition of sensations, pain stacked on pleasure, was dizzying.

"You don't have to go, Trey," she said in a tangled whisper.

"But I do," he murmured. "The mortals would be lost if I ignored my calling."

Her nimble fingers unfastened the scant loin flap that rode his hips. "Why risk your soul for the humans when I have the power to grant you the rights of a full god today?"

The garment slipped to the ground, leaving him nude. "Respect does not come with rank that is not rightfully earned."

Diadra's sigh warmed the curl of his ear as her fingertip teased the crevice of his ass. "You love the mortals too much. You risk too much on their behalf."

His muscles clenched against the tingling threat of his erection. "I love them because I am one of them. To deny that would be foolish."

"Only half," Diadra whispered. Her curves pressed flush against him. "The rest of you is true Ethereal. Like me. Forget mankind, Trey. Rewrite your own destiny instead and earn your godship today."

Trey's refusal slammed against his gritted teeth.

"You're lonely." Her voice was a provocative whisper as it warmed his skin. "Anyone can see it. Let my love elevate you to the glory and respect you deserve. Be my concubine."

Diadra stepped backward. Air fanned up between them and cooled the firestorm brewing in his groin. But it didn't last. Fabric fell with a whisper, and then the burning points of her nipples bore into his back.

She was every bit as naked as he was.

"That's enough, Diadra!" he ground out. But even as he spoke, he knew his protest was a meager effort. It did

nothing to stop her fist from caging his cock as she urged him to face her.

“I will bring you pleasures beyond what you’ve ever imagined.”

It took but one glance at her to convince him she spoke the truth. Her eyes simmered with the golden promise of pleasure.

He was fucked and she knew it.

She stood before him in statuesque, nude perfection. Her hands snaked a trail from her hips to her shoulders and then came to rest beneath the tawny mantle of her hair. As her gaze bore deeper into his, a half-smile lifted the lips said to have driven seraphs to their knees with the urge to kiss them.

Her tongue darted out, an invitation.

Gods, to steal but one kiss from those lips. Would that be so wrong? His erection rose higher, urging him to do just that.

She hefted her hair behind her shoulders. Her antics only called his attention to her breasts, so high and round. Gods, they’d fit perfectly in the cups of his palms.

Little bitch knew the discomfort she caused him, too. Those caramel-tipped orbs bounced with her soft laughter.

His breath hitched as he clenched his fists against the urge to touch and possess.

Granted, he was sworn to chastity, but damn it all, he was still half human and still susceptible to the needs of the flesh. The vows required of him as a strider had done nothing to render him dead between the legs.

And Diadra damn well knew it.

“There’s no shame in satisfying the needs of your human half,” she purred. “Demigods with more human blood than you have succumbed to my charms.”

“And their pleasures came at the price of their souls.” He backed nearer to the gateway, silently praying it was ready to receive him.

Diadra’s brows melded as she reclaimed the space he’d put between them. Her eyelids drooped as she assessed the evidence of his arousal. “Unworthy candidates, all of them. But you? You’re all hard-on and no place to spend it but the palm of your hand.”

Suddenly the thought of spending a few eternities wandering in the Void of B’hoth seemed a small penance to pay for the pleasures she offered. His gaze turned traitor as her hand traveled the curve of her belly to dally at the dark junction of her thighs.

She widened her stance and extended a finger to explore the mysteries hidden there. A kitten cry mewled in her throat as her hips bucked forward, infusing the air with the almond scent of her musk.

They stood so close that her nipples laved his flesh with fire. With a roll of her pelvis, she moved in for the kill. The damp silk of her pubic curls lapped the base of his cock. “I offer you rights of godship to serve as my concubine.”

Every muscle in his body seized. He dared not attempt a response. He knew if he so much as breathed, his will would break. He was, after all, half human, damned by his gene pool to be fallible when it came to the sins of the flesh.

And Diadra worked her knowledge of that for all it was worth. Her calculating gaze hardened to the metallic sheen of brass. Cupping his cheeks between her palms, she guided his face down to hers. Unable to stop himself, his head dipped. His hair closed around them, an ebony curtain blotting the light as he seized her kiss.

Creator, have mercy.

If the sight of her body hadn't been enough to orchestrate his undoing, then the taste of her kiss surely would be. Her breath was tinged with the same irresistible essence that had risen from her pussy when she parted her legs. Gods, how it beckoned to him to deepen the kiss, to take control, to give her to the high, hard one she was all but begging for.

But as his tongue parted her lips, he tasted something else, something dark and sickly sweet. It overwhelmed her natural essence with the cloying stench of decay.

He'd smelled that toxic stench before.

Minions.

Rattled, he broke the kiss and pulled back. As he dragged a forearm across his lips, Diadra growled a protest. Before he could spit out the toxin he'd taken from her kiss, the floor pitched beneath his feet. Bracing his hands on her shoulders, he forced his swimming head to remain erect as he searched her face for any hint of malice.

He couldn't focus. Blackness swarmed the edges of his vision and advanced on waves of nausea. His stomach heaved and he staggered back another step in a futile effort to distance himself from her rot.

"What have you done to me?" It felt as if a thousand years passed between the moment those words sprang to mind and the moment they scraped, dry and meaningless, past his lips.

Darkness blotted the arches and columns that framed the Strider's Arena. The frantic thud of his own heart pounded in his ears, overpowering any explanation Diadra might have offered. The little remaining light framed her face, triumphant and wickedly lovely.

"You're mine now, Trey."

Somewhere beneath the din that roared in his ears, he thought he heard brittle laughter. But then the darkness eclipsed the hypnotic spell her beauty had woven around his senses.

Sorry, babe. Not this time.

Not if he had anything to say about it. He would rather fry in the Ether than succumb to her treachery. Though unconsciousness threatened, he held on to his senses long enough to tilt out of her grasp. As he plunged toward the ether, he was dimly aware of Diadra's nails razing his shoulders in a desperate effort to prevent his escape.

For the first time in a millennium, Diadra feared she might cry. At this rate, Trey would never break his vows. Now he was in the ether, and his strider's vow was as intact as when she'd first embarked on her little seduction. And if she didn't do something fast, the human timeline might actually be completed as ordained. Trey's precious mortals would gain their blasted immortality. If that happened, the universal order would be set in stone, leaving her to serve as a high-class whore, desired by all but loved by none, for eternity.

Somehow, she doubted Malifor, the minion who'd sold her on this plan, would be thrilled to hear that that because of her, he would never get the souls he required to gain control of the creation magic. And then he

would never make good on his promise to make her High Goddess when he revised destiny to suit his own ends.

And this wasn't a handshake deal. She'd fucked the foul-breathed serpent for nothing.

As if mocking her, a back draft exploded from the gateway, slamming her bare-ass-first onto the floor of the strider's staging arena. It hurt, damn it. But in truth, her backside didn't sting nearly as much as her pride.

She was the goddess of carnal desires. She was supposed to be irresistible. Even though Trey had taken Malifor's poison from her lips without much fight, he'd somehow managed to hold his moral high ground long enough to escape.

For some perverted reason that made her want him more than ever.

Who'd have known that two simple letters, n-o, could form an aphrodisiac far more potent than the one the minion gave her to use on Trey? Since the moment Trey had first refused her, everything about him had conspired to drive her mad with longing. Those curt brush-offs had been delivered without even a ripple of his raven hair. His eyes were black, unfathomable pools. Bastard had somehow managed to turn the tables on her, reducing her to a puddle of want.

And he hadn't even used magic to do it.

As much as she loathed Trey's cocksure attitude, grinding her mound against his chiseled body had been the sweetest thing she'd ever known, the answer to all her erotic dreams. Those flexing muscles had churned gracefully and fluidly beneath her touch. He was her carnal deity cast from bronze. It had taken every ounce of her willpower to refrain from wrapping her legs around his hips to ride that epic cock to from now to eternity.

And then *he'd* kissed *her*. And even as he broke away, she was already relishing victory. She'd imagined the moment he would be forced by Heroset to atone for his transgression. Of course, she would intercede on his behalf. In order to save his soul from paying penance in the Void of B'hoth, he would be left with no choice but come to her willingly. He would eat his manna from her feet if she so desired.

Diadra heaved a sigh. Maybe in a perfect Ethereum, that was how things would happen. But as things were, Ethereum was getting worse by the moment.

She scrambled to her knees to track Trey's shimmering ether trail. She was of half a mind to dive in after his ass. But without a strider's mark to guide her, such a chase would be risky.

A strider's missions didn't come in chronological order. Every new version of the human timeline had its own order, and Trey was headed for an unknown time and place. She could stumble across a million threads before she found him. Eons could pass before she found her way back—and to what? She would be tried for treason if she failed to make Trey break his vows.

When she looked at it that way, losing herself in the Ether of Possibilities wasn't all that dismal a fate. If she could just keep Trey in sight, she might yet find a way to orchestrate his fall. Then he would be helpless to intercede for his precious mortals. With her victory, Malifor would make good on his promise to revise the universal order to her liking.

She would look amazing upon her mother's throne, with her concubine Trey eager to serve her every whim. Chained to her bed, if need be.

She sucked in a steadying breath and shifted into her astral form. As her flesh dissolved into a shower of stars, the gateway began to disintegrate. Bracing herself for the worst, she leapt through the gate just as it winked into oblivion.

Some things were just too damn important to leave to chance.

Wicked Temptation: Chapter 2

Earth

Northeastern United States

Time Line 3332

August, 1969

Sage Sawyer peered across the van at the man she'd loved since she was sixteen years old. Honestly, there ought to be a law against anyone with a Y-chromosome possessing such raw beauty. Everything about Russell McKenna made her fingers burn with the need to touch him.

As her hand stretched across the vinyl seat to connect with his, his bright gaze slanted her way and triggered a rush of heat in her belly. If he didn't take her soon, she might just spontaneously combust. And judging by their location, all the ingredients for a tryst were falling neatly into place. A winding dirt road, a tree-shrouded lake, and the sexiest man in the world. Perfect.

Would she finally lose her virginity to him? Though his thumb brushed circles of promise into the cup of her palm, she hardly dared hope it. Until now, none of the sugar she'd been pouring on him since his return from Viet Nam had paid off. He'd scarcely noticed that while he'd been gone, she'd grown into a fully liberated woman. And it was high time he got serious about putting that worthless war behind him and getting into her pants—preferably before they got to Woodstock.

The van rattled to a halt, and Sage grinned so hard she thought her cheeks might split. Perhaps she wouldn't be the token virgin at the concert of the century after all. Russ was humming *Come on Baby, Light My Fire*. Maybe an afternoon love-in was exactly what he had in mind.

The idea of doing it for the first time beneath pine trees and a cloudy sky whipped her pulse to a gallop. Russ set the parking brake and yanked the keys from the ignition. He shouldered open the van door and peeled off his tank top. A groan of anticipation caught in her throat.

Hot damn.

As she examined his rippling torso, her body temperature shot up about a thousand degrees. "Tease," she rasped.

Russ motioned for her to scoot over and follow him out the driver's side. "Come on. This will be fun."

Eagerly, Sage peeled her thighs from the sticky vinyl and scrambled toward Russ. As she swung her legs through the open door, his enormous hands settled at her waist and tugged her closer. With her arms looped around his wide shoulders, her breasts flattened deliciously against his sculpted pecs. As he swung her down from the van, her impatient nipples pearlled.

No way was he getting away from her this time.

When her bare feet sank into loamy earth, his grip loosened. She feigned a stumble, sealing her body tighter to his. She basked in the way his muscular embrace hardened to a protective cage. Proof positive. No matter what had happened to him in Nam, he still cared about her. And if she were to judge by the moist heat gathering between her legs, she was more than ready for this.

"Easy there, sunshine," he murmured, steadying her.

She lingered with her cheek pressed into the curve of his neck. The way his stubble rasped her forehead nearly undid her. He smelled just as she remembered, a combination of sunshine, shaving cream and virile man.

Her hands travelled the ridges of his belly until firm flesh yielded to fabric. Hooking her fingers in his belt loops, she tossed her long bangs from her eyes and tilted her head back to gauge his reaction. Though she could already feel the hard burn of his length against her belly, his brow was furrowed with concentration, his expression clouded and distant.

In spite of his arousal, she was losing him.

“So, how much further to Woodstock?” She was grasping for a way to draw his attention back to her.

He shrugged. Stepping away, he turned to dig through the tangled bed linens in the back of the van. Instead of producing the picnic blanket she’d hoped for, he pulled out his guitar case.

She doubted it was packed full of condoms.

Her hopes crashed into the pit of her belly. It was obvious that this beautiful place had inspired him to pull over to write a song, not to bed her. Barring an air raid, he wouldn’t budge until the tune that was banging around in his head was finished. There was no point in protesting. He probably wouldn’t even hear her over the music in his head.

So much for making it to Woodstock as his lover.

Unaware as ever, Russ settled on the nearest patch of dry ground to tune his guitar. Frustrated, Sage picked through several mud puddles, putting a safer distance between the object of her desire and the temptation to beg.

She gulped down humiliated sobs and wandered toward a mossy boulder that jutted out into the water. Hiking her skirt up, she climbed atop the stone’s sun-warmed surface. While her gaze travelled over the cool green water, she spun the POW bracelet she’d worn for the last five and a half years around her wrist.

She wouldn’t begrudge Russ his music. Not after she’d witnessed the violent flashbacks that had set him to screaming as he rained punches in the air. After last night’s episode passed and he’d rebuilt his stoic façade, he said dreaming up songs had been all that stood between him and insanity in Nam.

Not memories of *her*, but of his *music*. She had spent years waiting for word of him. And while knowing where she ranked in his heart tore her own in two, she wouldn’t indulge in anger. Not when she considered the alternative. He might not have come home at all.

Sage’s fingertip travelled the timeworn letters on her bracelet. *SGT Russell McKenna*. Amazing how putting three little letters before a man’s name could change him, wound him, or even cost him his life. Did those letters wield enough power to reach around the world and haunt a man forever?

Russ’s song reached her on a torrid breeze. Damn war had changed his music, too. His tone was sonorous, his lyrics dark. As he struck a series of mournful notes on his guitar, she watched him. What had become of the shaggy-haired teen she’d begged to make her a woman the night before he left for a war nobody else believed in?

Truth was, she might never know.

“Sure is hot.” She batted a mosquito from her arm.

Russ nodded, but his fingers didn’t miss a note. The melody was beautiful but tortured, like him. It was as if

his body had come home, but his spirit was still locked up over there in a bamboo cage. And she had no idea how to help him reconnect with the free-spirited boy she'd fallen so hard for.

Or if she should even keep on trying.

She lay back on the stone with her arms spread-eagled. Sometimes when she forced herself to lie very still, just like this, and focused beyond the world's din, she could almost feel the weight of her body falling away. And when that happened, she felt almost complete.

"Touch me," she whispered as she pressed her palms up toward the sky. Warm tingles coated the tender flesh of her palms, as if someone—something?—was indeed touching her.

No. *Caressing* her.

Her breath hitched. She felt certain if she opened her eyes, she would find herself staring into the face of an angel with eyes as dark and unknowable as whatever it was that drove Russ to create such heartbreaking music.

"Please, touch me."

She wasn't sure if she was pleading with Russ or with her dream angel. All she knew was that the out-of-this-world sensations zinging over her flesh weren't imaginary. Tingling warmth spread up her arms and over her shoulders, until tendrils of whisper-soft pleasure orbited her breasts. Her nipples elongated to aching points. Her hips tilted up of their own accord. God, how she *wanted*—

A crow screeched overhead just then, breaking the spell.

But the yearning in her womb remained. Panting as though she'd just run a race, she parted her lids, half-expecting to see an angel in the sky. More frustrated than ever, she huffed and sat up, crisscrossing her legs beneath her.

Damn crow.

She needed to focus on something real like the strains of Russ's song. This new melody was his darkest yet. She hadn't listened for long before tears prickled the corners of her eyes.

But how could she help him conquer his pain when he insisted on pushing her away?

Perhaps the music at Woodstock would enlighten him to the truth his heart had forgotten—killing people in the name of peace just didn't make sense.

"Touch me."

Those dulcet tones reached into the void like a healing elixir. Trey's heart seized before it stuttered into a haphazard rhythm. He couldn't see. He couldn't move. But the Void wouldn't claim him just yet.

But what was the source of his redemption? A voice powerful enough to turn him away from the brink could only belong to two sorts of beings—a seraph or his heart mate.

Would his heart mate call him back? It bordered on the impossible. He'd navigated numerous timelines through countless versions of his soul path. No matter how the die of destiny fell, they'd always left him to tread his path alone. It was this utter certainty of his soul's singularity that had made him so successful as a strider.

Unlike his predecessors, all of them full-blood gods who had failed to right the destinies of the preordained couples, Trey came to his task free of any heart bonds the minions might leverage against him. He'd never been tempted to break his vows because he believed no physical union under the sun could lead him to his *one*. He would never know true love for himself, so he'd contented himself with protecting it for his human cousins.

After all, what good was earning Eternity only to spend it alone?

And perhaps it was wrong of him, but he took pride in his success. He, a demigod, had beaten the expectations of his failed predecessors. He'd bested his tainted bloodline to become a near legend.

One last successful mission and the Creator could seal the timeline from further tampering. The humans would be safe. Although Trey would face eternity alone, his feats would gain him a score of casual lovers.

"Please, touch me." The voice was feminine and yearning.

Though he'd leapfrogged through human history a thousand times, he'd never heard a more tempting sound. Unbidden, his hand stretched out in search of the source. As he connected with a moment in human time, magic flared in the flats of his hands. Pleasure pulsed through him and beat back death's shadows. He would live, if only to see the bearer of that voice squirming beneath him as she begged for his touch once more.

"Sage darlin', twist those love beads any harder, and you'll give the word choker a new meaning."

Sage shielded her eyes to squint at Russ beyond the glare of the setting sun. "I was just this close," she said, measuring off a quarter-inch between the pads of her thumb and index finger, "to discovering the meaning of life."

The sunset filtered through the trees and polished Russ's close cropped hair to a fiery corona. He was an avenging angel washed in gold. Fierce. Proud.

Slinging his guitar strap over wide shoulders, he closed the distance between them with a stride too graceful to be wasted on a man. The merest hint of a smile dimpled his cheeks. "Let me guess. The coffee in the thermos was spiked."

Sage giggled. "Well, we did get it in Ocean City."

A scrap of laughter rumbled in his throat. The way his tanned cheeks pleated when he smiled still had the power to make her heart go gooey. But that cockeyed grin had been on a mighty tight budget lately. God knew she'd missed it.

Jim Morrison sure was right about one thing. Love wasn't strong enough to save anyone from fate. Or war, for that matter. Russ hadn't said much about his time as a POW or how he'd come by the fierce, red scars that laced his back. But she felt pretty sure she ought not to be the one who brought it up first.

Who knew whether she might trigger one of those god-awful flashbacks of his? "So what else is there to do out here in the middle of bum-fucked Egypt besides hang myself with my love beads?"

Chuckling, Russ propped his guitar against the boulder. Settling a lean hip on the stone's edge, he made a grand gesture toward the lake. "First thing you said this morning was how much you wanted a bath."

"Are you serious?"

His chin dipped. "Your wish is my command."

“Swear to God?” Arching a brow with bawdy expectation, she lifted herself to a sitting position to await his answer.

If he caught her innuendo, she couldn’t tell it by his expression. His gaze disconnected from hers and drifted back to his guitar. Unable to resist forcing him live up to his words, Sage scrambled to her knees atop the stone. With what she hoped was a seductive pose, she worked her peasant blouse off one shoulder, and then the other.

As the sultry breeze set her nipples to tingling, Russ’s strangled groan convinced her that for once, she’d won out over his music. Emboldened, she stood up and let her top fall over her hips.

“Christ,” he rasped, “you’re beautiful.”

Kicking her top to the ground, she dropped to her knees atop the stone. Their eyes were level. Forcing down her galloping heart, she pinned her stare to his. “You said my wish was your command. So here it is. I wish you’d make me a woman. Now.”

His breath hitched audibly as his gaze painted her torso. He raised a hand as if to cup her breast, but just as quickly fisted it again. His eyes dimmed, summer’s blue fading to winter’s gray. He took a step back, his motions abrupt, as if she’d just threatened to eat him alive. The last vestiges of his desire faded, leaving his face ravaged with a mixture of sadness and longing.

He scooped her blouse up from the ground and held it out to her. His jaw hardened to steel and he angled toward the water as if to protect her modesty. “Get dressed.”

Feeling more naked than she ever had in her life, Sage snatched the blouse and yanked it over her head. As it settled about her hips, she drew herself into a tight ball. Her fists pressed against her eyes to check the moisture pooling there.

“Why don’t you love me anymore?”

Russ groaned, a tight, wounded sound. A slow second passed before she felt his large hands settle over hers. Their fingers laced and she raised her chin to search his face for answers.

“Baby,” he whispered, “is that what you think?”

She nodded and then blinked hard, but not fast enough to check her tears.

“Well, you thought wrong.”

“Bullshit.” Immediately, regret sliced through her. “Oh, God, baby, I’m sorry.”

“You never have to apologize. Not to me.” Russ hooked a finger beneath her chin. His mouth had tightened to a fierce slash, but his touch was whisper gentle as he swept tears away with the pads of his thumbs, and then leaned in to kiss the dome of her forehead. “And I do love you....”

His voice trailed off. Instead of finishing with hurtful words that would attach conditions to that love, he only shuddered out a world-weary sigh. He scooted closer to her and they sat there for the longest moment with his chin resting on the crown of her head. The silence between them was almost as intense as Sage’s longing for the invisible monster that separated them to show itself.

Maybe then, she could defeat it.

She wanted her old Russ back, the one he’d been before the war.

The one she still loved.

“Here.” She pulled her love beads off and worked them over his head. “You need to get with the Free Generation, because that soldier boy haircut ain’t gonna fly at Woodstock.”

“You deserve better than me.” Though the corners of his mouth tipped to a tight smile, his voice was husky with emotion. He lifted Sage to straddle his lap and wound her tight in his arms. She could feel his pulse beating a frantic rhythm beneath her cheek.

His thumb brushed the outer curve of her breast. She rocked against him until her nether lips splayed across his fly. The pressure of a button against her clit was exquisite. Moisture slicked her folds until the tang of her desire hung thick in the air.

His grip on her tightened. God, he still wanted her. She could tell. So what was holding him back? Just then, he shifted. Broad hands skimmed her body until they settled at her waist and urged her up onto her knees. His fists rucked the fabric of her skirt higher until his palms splayed across her ass. She wiggled, relishing the feel of his flesh on hers. The throaty groan that resulted delighted her.

“You aren’t wearing any panties.”

“Thought you’d never notice,” she rasped. Breathless. Tingling.

“You don’t play fair.” His finger grazed the crevice of her butt.

“Love is war, baby.” Standing atop the stone, she tugged on Russ’s hand, urging him to do the same. Her fingers trembled as she worked the buttons of his fly until the head of his cock was free. She slicked her thumb over its thickening tip.

The ferocity of his shudder caused her pussy to clench. Dizzy with her newfound erotic power, she swirled her fingertips over his rigid flesh. With her head tipped back to gauge his reaction, she explored the heavy vein that mapped his length. His cock all but ignited in her palm.

God, he was dangerously huge. And she wanted to take every inch of him high inside her. Her pulse pounded a maddening cadence in her folds.

Maybe the dream angel that had stoked this erotic fire in her wasn’t real. But Russ was, had always been. And she had to have him. Now

“Sweet Jesus, Russ, if you can’t love me, then please just fuck—”

Before she could finish, Russ’s mouth had already claimed hers.

One last kiss.

Russ would allow himself this much, then swear to God, he would come up for air. Take a deep breath and then send Sage off to chase her flower-child ideals.

Liar.

No matter how he spun it, standing here with his pants hitched around his knees while Sage explored his cock was going to complicate the hell out of breaking up with her.

All this moment proved was that the chemistry that had always burned between them was more volatile than

ever. No matter how many times it was tested, matter and antimatter would always self-destruct in their quest to share space. An afternoon of mind-blowing sex wasn't going to change anything. The last years had driven them down different paths, and he couldn't go on pretending his time as a POW hadn't changed him into someone else. No matter how enticing Sage looked when she begged him to fuck her.

Russ raised his head from her mouth and inhaled deeply. Her face was painted with desire as she stared up at him. Her pupils were drawn wide, as though she meant to pour her soul into him.

"Please, Russ. Just this once."

"Baby, we can't."

His protest was half-assed and he knew it. And Sage was having none of it. He could tell it by the golden glints firing in her copper eyes. Those had always spelled mischief with a capital *M*. Why would today be any different?

Her attention returned to her grip on his cock. She slanted a glance at him through thick lashes. One ruddy brow arched with challenge as her free hand snuggled his sack, testing its weight.

"Sage," he tried to say, but her fingers curled tighter around his nuts and his words were swallowed by his sharp intake of air. In spite of her inexperience, her instincts were dead on. His balls drew tight. The forward pitch of his hips made sport of his noble intentions. Her hand settled into an irresistible rhythm, riding his length up, then down. God, she navigated his body as if they'd been lovers since the dawn of time.

His turncoat hips joined in to dance counterpoint. Tugging her face closer, his fingers threaded through the fiery curls at her nape. He tilted her head back and held her mouth fast beneath his lips while the years of caged need for her roared in his veins. That was how it had been since he came home, his conscience urging him to do one thing while his dick conspired to do another.

Not that she was complaining. Her bare leg lassoed his hips. Russet pubic curls brushed his thighs with cream. The scent of her fluids rose between them, strawberries spiked with sweet apple wine. Everything about her conspired to drown him in a whirlpool of sensation. Whatever protest he'd intended died on a groan. His hand grew a mind of its own and shoved her skirt higher.

His trembling fingertip drew a beeline toward her entrance.

"Yes, Russ, touch me. There...."

God in heaven, her sweet little pussy was wet and wicked. His fingertip dipped inside and gathered a dollop of moisture. Slipping back through her folds, he twirled that butter around her pearl.

Her breathy gasp was the perfect thrill. He tweaked and teased that taut nubbin until her hips frenzied. With two fingers he plumbed her depth. In, out, until her pelvis rolled in fluid circles.

Squeezing his eyes closed, he sucked in a steadying breath, grasping for some shred of self control. As soon as she came, then he would stop this. He must stop it. And perhaps if he never opened his eyes, he might just pull it off.

Sage cried out just then, and the fear he'd hurt her forced him to part his lids. Dear God, she looked so beautiful there beneath him, her face flushed with passion, her hair dappled gold with sunshine.

His cock was so hard he thought it might explode.

"Fuck me, Russ." Her gaze, molten gold in a copper chalice, burned into his. The way her hair clung to her

cheeks in damp tendrils took his breath away. He wasn't the only one who had changed. The defiant tomboy he'd left behind six years ago was forever transformed. Now she was every inch the wanton flower child. Wild. Desperate. And his for the taking.

"Are you sure, sweetheart?"

"Yes, do it."

Her hand gripped his wrist, and her hips pitched forward to greet his fingertips at her opening. He stroked her inner channel with firmer thrusts. Fingers scissoring, he stretched her taut tissues, easing the way for his entry.

"Hurry." Her voice was constricted, a breathy whisper. Her small frame shuddered with need.

His balls coiled tighter, but he gritted against the urge to spend. No way was he going over the edge. Not yet. Not unless he brought her with him. His fingers curled in search of her hidden sweet spot he'd learned about from his buddies in Nam.

"Russ," she cried. Sage's inner muscles clenched so hard they nearly snapped his fingers in two. The slick proof of her pleasure coated his palm. And the fire in his cock burned that much hotter.

Damn it, he wanted her like this, writhing with pleasure and begging him for release when he finally drove into her. And he wanted an unhindered view of her pussy spreading wide to take him when it happened.

The goddamn clothes had to go.

Russ set her away from him. Before she could protest, he'd already shoved her skirt toward the ground. With her wrists clasped in one hand, he guided her arms over her head while his free hand worked her blouse up. Pulling it free of her arms, his unshaved cheek rasped over each new inch of naked flesh, drawing delighted groans from her. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, a miracle embodied in creamy flesh flecked with ginger.

His tongue played dot to dot down the arching column of her neck. Her delighted coos urged him on. As she keened and moaned, his lips paid homage to the rise of her chest and the swells of her breasts.

The swollen peak of her nipple was his sweet reward. He turned his head to seize it. As his tongue tormented her flesh, she kicked the skirt away. He suckled and nipped until she sagged against him, limp and panting, her deadweight tilting them toward the lake.

His grip on her tightened, but the sudden shift caught him off guard. He countered too late. The law of gravity took over and they plunged into the lake. As they surfaced again, gleaming droplets sparkled like emeralds on the spikes of her lashes, the sweep of her brows. He gathered them up with kisses.

Though the lake's chill was bracing, it did nothing to staunch the heat that seared his groin. While his feet gripped the loamy lake bottom, Sage floated on her back on the water's surface, his shameless siren. Her hair garnished the water with sweeping vermillion as her come-hither gaze sought his. The corners of her mouth quirked and her pale thighs parted, inviting him to pleasure the swollen petals of her sex. As he positioned himself between her thighs, she wove her legs tightly around his hips.

"Mine," she whispered.

Yes, God forgive him, he was hers. Had always been hers. What had happened in Nam retreated in the face of his need. As he curled his body over hers, the last bit of distance between them melted away.

"Hold on tight, baby," he murmured. Weaving his arms behind her waist, he lifted her up from the waist-deep

water. As her upper body molded to his, she bracketed his head with her palms and forced his mouth down to hers.

She was feral, aggressive, a huntress taking down her prey. And it was sexy as ever-loving hell. Her lush mouth worked fiercely beneath his, her tongue thrusting against the cage of his teeth. Her hand closed around his cock and nudged his throbbing tip along her opening.

His hands found her breasts again. Her nipples packed so much heat they could sear holes in his palms. His hips thrust against her tight tissue as their tongues dueled for dominance until his heart hammered in his ears from lack of air.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” He forced himself to back away a little.

Sage took the role of aggressor, and he didn’t dare object. Her hands settled on his ass, nudging him forward. Though she was trembling and gasping as she worked her tightness around him, she didn’t hesitate for a second. Instead, her fingers threaded behind his neck, her eyes locked to his.

God, she looked so young. Save for the curves that had ripened her frame in his absence, her face was as wide open and youthfully innocent as it had been the day he’d first left for Nam.

Although he knew he was hanging on the edge of a flashback, he didn’t care. Because this time, there was no blood, no killing, and no cradling the young man who’d loved him through hell as the last spark of hope drained from the both of them.

There was only Sage, loving him, needing him, and begging him to love her, too.

And he did. The weight of the years fell away. In his mind, it was the night before he was to leave. He was eighteen years old and the whole world was his for the conquering. The girl he would marry someday was naked in his arms, etched in sunlight as she begged him to make her a woman before he left.

Goddamn it, this time, he wouldn’t refuse her.

He pushed into her narrow channel. The tight resistance broke and she cried out as his cock bumped against the entrance to her womb. Before he could pull out or apologize for hurting her, her hands had palmed his hips, demanding he stay put.

She took a slow, shuddering breath and then sheathed him again. Slowly. Fully.

Together, they began to rock. As his orgasm built, he pulled her tighter against him. Settling his palm along her jaw, he slanted her head beneath his. His mouth dropped over hers and he succumbed to the decadent sensations spiraling through him.

Holding her close, he drank her in like she was the last woman on earth.

Hell, for him, maybe she was.

“Please, Russ, Russ.”

Over and again, his name tangled in her throat. Her pleasure began to peak again and his thrusts grew more deliberate. His sweet Sage was fearless, matching him stroke for burning stroke. He might die before he ever got to make love to her again, and that nearly tore his heart in two. This moment might just have to last him the rest of his life.

“Please don’t forget me, baby,” he murmured into the sun-warmed corona of her hair. Her body stiffened in his arms. Slick warmth rushed over his cock as her sex clamped hard around him. Her head was thrown back and

she was trembling from head to toe. Dear God, the way her hips rolled, driving him deeper, made him wild with lust.

He plunged into her clutching heat, harder, faster, until his breath scraped his lips in coarse gasps. As his orgasm climbed higher, his chest heaved with the effort to keep up.

Sage was panting, too, her lips swollen and pink from his kisses. When she tipped her chin higher, he reveled in her features. They were tight with ecstasy as her eyes searched his. "I want to watch you come," she said. Her words were broken by breathy moans.

The sound of it undid him. While his pleasure rode him in waves, her fingers feathered over the angle of his jaw. With their gazes locked, his orgasm took off, tearing through him with a ferocity that made his knees go slack. But Sage held on tighter, her burning stare never leaving his. For one so petite, she was surprisingly strong, her grip on him as sure and steady as her unfaltering presence in his life. Even if he'd never made it home from Nam, he could say for certain that no matter what, he still had someone in this world who had loved him in every way a man could be loved.

He wanted to tell her that yes, he loved her, too, and would always love her, but pleasure kept the words knotted in his throat. So instead, he stroked her hair and rained soft kisses over her forehead, and then her nose. His actions would have to be enough to reveal the contents of his heart.

As the afterglow of his climax faded, Sage pressed another kiss on his lips, and then murmured something about going back to the van to tidy up. As she drifted away, the elegantly carved angles of her face blurred. For a long, strange second, he felt as if he were falling, hard and fast. When he sloshed out of the water behind her to recover his jeans, the trees framing the landscape shimmered and flexed as the surrounding landscape took on a dull, red haze.

Please. God. Not now.

But there was no stopping it. By the time he'd zipped his fly, the heat was frying his brains and the goddamn jungle flies were biting hard. Far overhead, he could hear the laborious drone of an approaching plane.

Another shudder rode him, but this time it was dread. Was that only heat lightening he heard, or was it the distant crackle of ground fire?

He shook himself, hard. This was no time to wig out. Not if he wanted to live.

Focus, asshole.

He squeezed his eyes closed and listened closer. The signature groan of the plane's engine identified it as an A6 bomber headed their way. That could only mean overwhelming enemy forces had forced the Lieutenant to call an airstrike on their position.

Within moments, that plane would drop a load of Napalm right on top of them. Fucking shit didn't choose sides, either. It simply scorched the oxygen out of the air and seared the hide off anything in its path. Given a choice of ways to die, he would have preferred a tour of duty in Hellfire.

He signaled his men to make for the river that lay a dozen meters from their position. For once, they took his order without questions. As the backside of his platoon hauled ass into the water, Russ hung back, taking count of his men.

He was short by one. Not that the bomber gave a damn. The jet's engine only screamed louder as it bore down on its approach line. At best, Russ had a couple of minutes left to take cover. Turning away from the river, he saw his missing radio man, PFC Buckley, cowering by tree line.

“Buckley! Front and center!”

The terrified private remained frozen firmly in place. If Russ didn't get to the kid in time to haul him back to the river, they were both as good as dead. No fucking way did he intend to send the kid home to his mother in a body bag.

Wicked Temptation: Chapter 3

Wow. What a difference a day could make. Aftershocks of pleasure rumbled through Sage's flesh, proof of her newfound womanhood. Still, she was half tempted to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't tripping. Because if anybody had predicted that sunset would find her thoroughly ravished by the man she'd been crushing on half her life, she would have sworn up and down they were smoking weed. But she would have also taken the time to change the sheets on the mattress in the back of Russ's van.

The sun was sinking fast, and judging by the miles they'd travelled earlier without seeing so much as a clapboard shack, that put them smack dab in the middle of nowhere. But at least they had a place to crash. They'd picked up some wine, peanut butter and bread in Ocean City, so searching for a hotel would be a waste of good loving time. Anyhow, she wasn't quite ready to be done with this place. Not until she'd cemented it firmly into her memory.

They still had a couple of days to get to Woodstock. Once they got there, she knew the years of penned wildness in her would break free and urge her to experience everything at once. While diving headfirst into the Free Generation was something she'd looked forward to for years, she first wanted to steal a scrap of time to bask in Russ's love. Perhaps dawn would find them tangled in one another's arms as they rolled on the shore, making love beneath the first wink of daylight.

It all sounded good in theory. But in reality, a cozy little love-in was the furthest thing from Russ's mind. Instead of following her back to the van, he was still lollygagging down by the lake. The longer he dawdled, the more her pride protested. Really, shouldn't a guy who'd just popped her cherry be panting after a second helping by now?

Rifling through his duffle bag in search of some fresh linens, she ordered the hurt that knotted her throat to retreat. For all her talk of free love, she was doing a fine job of playing the scorned lover. Jesus H. It wasn't like she owned him just because they'd had sex.

Love, man. It's a gift, not an obligation.

Whenever she'd given in to second thoughts about sticking with Russ until he could put the past behind him, that quote had come back to put her on the right track. She'd first heard Jim Morrison say it back when he and the Doors had been nobodies. At the time, Russ had been a POW. She'd been alone in her bed on a dog day's night that had begun much like this one, relentlessly hot and sticky.

No matter how much she had tossed and turned that night, she couldn't get comfortable in her own skin. In a fit of frustration, she ripped off her gown and lay naked on top of the sheets, praying an ocean breeze would wash through her window to ease her skin. Desperate to escape her misery, she pressed her transistor radio to her ear, index finger spinning the dial in a search for something not so bebop.

Not an easy task.

Folks in Jacksonville Beach were too busy mourning their fallen sons to give a damn that the Free Generation—her generation—was embracing ideals everyone could benefit from. Like world peace. Harmony. Love without strings.

Though she'd long since burned her bra, her parents were so determined to turn their backs on change they refused to see it happening right before their eyes. For the first time ever, young people were making their voices heard. She wanted to be a part of it and belong to something larger than herself. But no matter how bright the fire in her belly, she couldn't leave before she knew what had happened to Russ.

“Please,” she prayed, though she wasn’t sure who or what she prayed to. She only knew this endless waiting for news of him was driving her insane. Just as the sour taste of resentment began to rise in the back of her throat, the radio’s static subsided and Jim said it.

“Love, man. It’s a gift. Not an obligation.”

Jim’s words came through as pure and clear as the moonlight that polished her room in shades of silver. It was as if he’d reached right down to the roots of her soul, connecting with her on a level so deep that it felt as if an angel had spoken to her. And Jim was right. Russ had never once asked her to wait for him.

She’d done it because she’d chosen to.

Now, years later, Jim’s philosophy continued to color her life. Love *was* a gift. A gift she’d just shared with Russ. But a lot of good her ideals á la Morrison were doing her now. Here she was crying her eyes out like a jilted bride, and that defied the very essence of free love. *Hypocrite*.

Christ, it wasn’t like she wanted Russ to up and marry her because she’d all but forced him to take her virginity. Yes, she loved him, but there was way too much to experience both with and without him before she tied herself down like that.

Sage pressed her fists against her eyes, determined to regain control. She just wanted him to loosen up and let her love him the way he needed to be loved.

That was a lie.

She wanted her love to fix him. Damn it, she wanted her old Russ back, the one she’d lit a thousand candles for, the rootless musician her parents had warned her against.

Her Russ, the bad-ass bard with lawless mane.

But more than that, she needed him to seek her out and show he meant to meet her halfway. They’d just made love. Just for this one night, couldn’t he at least pretend to put the past where it belonged?

But so far, he hadn’t. And that was why she was really crying.

Suck it up, Sage.

No more clinging virgin. She batted her tears with the back of her hand. Russ just needed some breathing room. That was all. She’d come on to him hard and fast. And he wasn’t used to the kind of world where it was okay for a girl to flat-out beg a guy to fuck her.

But soon enough, he would mellow. He always did. Then he would stick his head through the van door, and that wicked blue gaze of his would be dark with lust. And she ought to count herself damn lucky that she’d scored the time to tidy up first. The van was a mess.

Her resolve fresh, she smoothed the sheets over the ramshackle mattress. As she stretched to tuck in the corners, the raw ache of her lost virginity pulsed between her legs. Didn’t matter that it hurt some. She liked knowing Russ had forgotten his troubles long enough to go a little wild on her. But if she expected to exorcise the ghosts of his past for good, she was going to have to dig in and fight harder for his attention.

Time to get on with Operation Love-Russ-Back-To-Life.

She drove her fist into one of the limp pillows and whipped up a week’s worth of road dust instead of the crisp scent of evergreen she longed for. The gold specks whirled in the waning light. Magical, like fairy dust. But once it settled, the bedding looked as uninviting as ever. Maybe she was trying too hard. Guess she would just

have to rely on her birthday suit and a blow job to get Russ's attention.

Now that sounded like a plan. Smiling, she raked her fingers through her damp curls and twisted them into a loose braid. Her heartbeat kicked up a notch as she wrapped herself in a towel and scooted to the edge of the mattress to peer out the van's back doors. Though a pathetic part of her still hoped she would catch Russ beating feet back to her side, all grins and a hard-on, he was still down by the lake. His head arched back as he stared up at the sky.

Fine time to take up bird watching.

"Russ?" she called out. "Get up here before the mosquitoes eat you alive." But if he heard, he didn't bother to answer. Sage sucked in a deep breath, refusing to heed the grumblings of her freshly slapped pride.

She glanced at the tree line to see what he found so all-fire fascinating up there. Wide crimson bands slashed the darkening horizon, the last glorious gasp of daylight. It really was a beautiful thing to behold.

But not half as beautiful as Russ. His broad-shouldered frame cut a striking silhouette against the blazing sky. His posture was taut, his muscles bunched, a cougar ready for the pounce. The sight of him caused her to cream herself all over again.

"Russ!" she called again, louder.

Honestly, she would have better luck getting one of those pine trees over by the lake to answer her. And seeing him there, so tense and deathly still, caused panicked tears to sting her eyes. It was as if they existed in different worlds, a million miles stretching out between them.

Sage swung her legs over the edge of the mattress and scooted through the open van door. Her heart began a slow slide into her gut. Once again, here she was, chasing his affection. Making love with him hadn't done a damn thing to crack the armor he'd built around his heart. And the way he was ignoring her made her feel like she'd just doinked a stranger.

The bite of a truth too painful, too dangerous to acknowledge, pierced her heart. Maybe he was acting like a stranger because he was one. The Russ she'd fallen in love with would already be here, kissing her fears away as he loved the daylights out of her.

"Russell! Damn it, look at me!" The effort she spent pushing those words out was wasted. They'd come out barely audible, thick with a world of hurt. But oddly, this time, he actually heard her. She could tell it by the way his posture slowly shifted her way. The slide of his shoulders as he angled them in her direction sent anxious tingles notching up her spine.

Please, let him come for me.

His movements were slow, unnaturally so, as if time sludged forward in stop-motion frames. His tawny head swept purposefully in her direction. Finally, he faced her. Although the flaming backlight kept his features shadowed, she didn't need to see his face to feel the raw intensity in his eyes.

An answering rush of heat gathered in her womb. Maybe he'd taken his Texas time to come around, but this was definitely more like it. She smiled as he started in her direction.

His stride was measured and feline. Jesus, he looked dangerous as hell, as though he meant to eat her up alive. And God help her, she liked him that way.

Anticipation of the delights to come warmed her pussy. Judging by the way he chewed up the ground between them, he meant to take her rough and hard, just the way she'd always fantasized.

Years of pent up tension seeped away with a slow hissing between her teeth. As Russ moved into the shadow of the van, the feeble remains of light polished the angles of his face. He stood so close that she could feel the heat blasting from his skin. Her nipples pearled with the need for his touch.

His eyes churned like a stormy sea at midnight. "Wanting me sure looks good on you, Russ McKenna."

Though he didn't answer, this time she really didn't give a hang. He'd come for her and that was all that mattered. She threaded her arms around his neck, eager to drag him in the van and jump his bones all over again. But as her palms settled at the back of his neck to guide his head down to hers, he stiffened. Instead of greeting her with a smile or a kiss, his mouth thinned until it was bracketed by harsh lines.

Confused, she moved one hand so that her fingertips feathered over the angle of his jaw. She hadn't imagined the tension there. He could have been carved from stone. Her heart stumbled as her spirits took a nosedive. She'd obviously misjudged his intentions.

"Are you mad at me?"

Judging by the way his arms snapped, steel bands gripping her waist, he sure as hell was. But she didn't dare ask him to loosen his hold. Not when she considered that moments ago, she'd begun to fear they'd never find their way back together. If he came to her seeking a little grudge sex because she'd pushed him to take her? Fine. She could play that game. Actually, she wanted to play it.

His muscles leaped against her skin and warmed parts still tender from his lovemaking. Stickiness seared her thighs, and passion stoked fresh sparks in her core. Though his grip at her waist was unyielding, her hands remained free to travel the slope between his shoulders and waist.

The towel that covered her nakedness slipped. She didn't try to stop it. Her breasts slid against his sweat-slickened chest. Her nipples hardened to points. She wanted to feel the heavy weight of his glistening body sinking over hers. Now.

Hooking her fingers in his waistband, she cocked her head back to search his face as she tugged him toward the van. "What say we hunker down for an encore performance?"

But instead of following her lead, Russ held fast to his place, posture erect. Unyielding, like a warrior dug in for the fight. A deep scowl sliced his forehead as his head tipped once more toward the sky.

His eyes darted back to the tree line. He raked in a sharp gasp and held it.

"God damn it, Russ! Look at me."

Seconds ground out until the coarse rasp of his breath rent the silence. When his eyes finally connected with hers again, his irises had hardened to granite.

Tears rose to her eyes. This time, she didn't try to staunch them. Russ was looking at her like she was some kind of stranger. She was losing him all over again.

"Don't you hear that?" he asked. The scowl that sliced his brow was canyon deep.

"Hear what?"

"That." He jerked his head toward the horizon. His face blanched. "Isn't that an AK6?"

"A what?"

Disbelief sliced his forehead with wrinkles. "Are you fucking with me?"

This time, Sage didn't edit her irritation. "Can I help it that I don't hear anything? That I have no idea what a fucking whatever is?"

"It's a goddamn bomber." His words were clipped, harsh. Not the soothing tones meant to placate a lover. Rather the harsh bark of a drill sergeant tongue-lashing an errant soldier.

He lunged forward and his expression was swallowed by shadows. Sage's heart coiled into an aching knot. She and Russ weren't just in different worlds. They inhabited different times altogether.

He was a man reliving a war he had no business fighting in the first place. And the fact that his flashback was happening here in the middle of fucking nowhere terrified her. Before she could act on the urge to run and hide herself in the van until it blew over, his palms settled hard on her shoulders. The heels of his hands were rough and bruising as he shoved her toward the lake.

"Take cover, Private. Now!"

The last crescent of the sun was devoured by towering evergreens. Darkness tarred the horizon. Nothing but the gaping maw of darkening water stretched out behind her, unknowable. Deep.

"Russ, you're scaring me."

He loomed closer. "Get your ass in the water. Now."

"Russell, please."

"That's a fucking order, Private." His face was a mask of desperate fury. He widened his stance, knees relaxed with the artless grace of a man who'd done this a million times. His hands were blades held before him. A ninja crouched for the fight, he clearly meant to kick her ass.

She doubted he was bluffing. Sage backed a few steps toward the lake, placating him while she searched for escape routes around him. Somewhere in the darkness behind him was the van.

Sanctuary.

She sprang to the left. But Russ was lightning. He plowed his weight low into her and knocked her off balance. Hefting her over his shoulder, his elbow curled behind her knees so that she hung behind him like an overgrown potato sack. He jogged toward the lake.

"God damn it, Russell McKenna, put me down!" She helplessly pummeled the rock-hard cords of muscle that carved his back.

He dumped her into the inky water and forced her head beneath the surface. Her scream was swallowed by black water. Damn silt shifted beneath her feet, refusing her a foothold. No matter how hard she tried to pry Russell's fingers from her shoulders, his grip was steel.

That was when she knew for certain that the war had claimed the man she once loved.

As much as she wanted it to be true, her lovemaking hadn't been enough to heal him. And if the dangerous warrior Russell had turned into didn't let her up for air soon, her foolish faith in the healing power of love might just get her killed.

The sound of lapping water penetrated Trey's delirium. An earth sound, it goaded him to fight the mind-

numbing effects of Diadra's drug. He still had a predestined couple to protect. But damn it all, he didn't want to think about that now. Not until he had his fill of *her*, the woman with the seraph's voice.

Touch me.

His strider's mark jolted him with adrenaline. The prickling pain razed the nape of his neck and the length of his spine. Somewhere in the human realm, something was wrong. Something required his attention. Irritated, he pulled away from the magical space where he'd basked in fantasies of his silver-tongued seraph.

Doing so nearly tore his heart in two.

His reluctant fingers uncurled from the cramped ball he'd held them in for who-knew-how-long. Before he could think better of it, he stretched out his hand. His heart was full to bursting with the longing to connect with her again.

All he won for his foolish gesture was a handful of air as bleak and cold as the emptiness that gutted him. But at least his misery proved he wasn't dead. Gods, no, he *hurt* too much for that.

His chest heaved for air, but the movements involved in breathing only gave rise to more bone-grinding agony. Served him right, too. He'd been so bent on escaping Diadra that he'd failed to shift to the astral form meant to ease his passage through the gateway. But by some miracle, he'd avoided obliterating his soul when his body slammed into the unstable ether.

Perhaps he really did have a seraph watching over him.

Right. Him. A demigod.

Bracing for the worst, he hazarded a shallow breath. Beyond the pain, the parched scent of ozone clung to his tongue in answer to his most immediate question—where am I? That chalky tang confirmed he'd never left the ether. He could only assume he'd spent the last hours or eons floating through the shades of time while his strider's mark steered him toward the threatened mortals. As long as he remained here, his mark would insure the *when* of his situation would make itself known.

He would never truly be lost.

But gods, he felt lost, more so than ever before. As he left his seraph behind, sorrow clutched his heart. That ethereal voice had felt more real to him than anything he'd ever encountered. Silly as it might seem, it was if those dulcet tones had reached to the root of his soul and, for the first time, stirred something inside him to life.

His heart.

But damn it, he was a strider, and stronger than this. He had to a job to do, an obligation sworn to before the Creator himself. He wouldn't risk wasting more time to indulge these strange, new sensations. Nothing short of his successful mission would restore the humans to their rightful path.

He swept in another breath. But instead of sating his need for air, his efforts made way for another sensation, one far more dangerous than pain.

Thanks to what Diadra had done, every nerve ending ignited in erotic flames. With each breath, his flesh blazed with the yearning to touch and be touched. But not by Diadra. Rather by *her*, his nameless seraph.

Another shock of adrenaline jolted him. Grudgingly, he parted his lids. It was beyond dark and his eyes were grit. He couldn't guess how much time he'd lost. But judging by the faint vibrations rumbling in his strider's mark, his destination approached.

As if to confirm it, the ether's static buzz gave way to softer sounds from the human realm. He heard the familiar water sounds that had stirred him from his stupor. Only now, that lazy lapping had frenzied to an agitated chop. Nature reacted in kind with the irritated hooting of owls and the startled refrain of nightingales. As the noise drew closer, a rush of Earthly smells also found him.

Because of his weakened willpower, his human half responded with vigor. Pleasure painted his flesh with ribbons of warmth. Before he could think better of it, he inhaled deeply. His mouth bowed as he savored the forbidden aroma.

No matter how many times the minions walked backward in time to rearrange destiny, they could never change the pheromones of the couples whose fates he guarded. He dared another whiff and a hard shiver rattled him. His cock responded to the subtle notes of feminine musk, the top-note of evergreen, the after-note of damp earth. The Creator had forged those scents to help the predestined recognize each other, and even desire each other.

Never during Trey's time as a strider had those decadent pheromones had such a palpable impact on him. His hands fisted against the lust that speared his cock. He was in trouble. But judging by the raucous vibrations in his strider's mark, so were the mortals. He must keep his focus there, on them. With his jaw set to stone in denial of his need, he searched for a means of redemption, some innocuous image that might distract him.

No matter how benign the visions he spun, his traitorous cock turned them into something sexual. Snowcapped mountains became the swells of ivory breasts. Verdant valleys conjured thoughts of shadowy crevices, a paradise shielded by feminine thighs.

All he wanted was to close his eyes and fantasize that it was *her* musk he inhaled while he quenched the fire in his groin. The weight of his seed gathered in his balls, impatient. No matter how he tried to avoid it, his mind painted montages of fiery hair, creamy flesh, and pink folds. He could almost taste her nipples, rosebuds blooming beneath his tongue.

Gods, to hear that honeyed voice gone thick with passion as she cried out his name!

His desperate fingers gripped his shaft. His thumb caressed his aching tip to gather the fluid beaded there. Clutching himself harder, he spread the forbidden stickiness down his length, then up, over and again, until his cock jerked with the urge to spend.

His pleasure was eclipsed by the inferno that seared the cup of his palm. He cried out, cursing the agony that fired from his strider's mark. Damn it, now he knew firsthand why so many former striders dubbed their marks Ethereum's answer to a chastity belt.

Bolts of agony leapt up his arm, ferocious in their message. The minions were on the move, and the threat they posed to the humans was imminent.

"Please, help me." The pleading sound of feminine sobs tore him from the precipice of his climax.

His heart stumbled. Though her words were strangled with fear, he would still have known that voice anywhere. It didn't belong to a seraph at all, but rather to a mortal woman. That it was her voice that had called him back from the brink could only mean one thing. This mortal was also his heart mate.

Impossible, but true.

Somehow, he doubted her predestined lover would be of a mind to share.

Those piercing cries grew closer, the urgency behind them more panicked. While he prayed this was but a lingering hallucination, the fire in his mark denied it. The ether swirled and parted before him in wicked

confirmation. He captured fleeting glimpses of soft curves and satin flesh, a young woman struggling to remain afloat in a tree-shrouded lake.

Though her world was pitch-dark, his mark adjusted his biochemistry to heighten his vision. He saw her as clearly now as if her surroundings were drenched in sunlight. Even the sun would pale in comparison to her burnished beauty. Her eyes, like her hair, threw sparks of copper and gold, an autumn sunset.

Gods help him, she was nude. But the terror that stormed her face denied him any pleasure in that. Gods, he would trade anything, even his soul, to end her agony. But until the gateway stabilized to allow his passage, he could only fall to his knees in the eroding ether and pray he would get to her in time. And if he did manage to save her, how in the Creator's name would he find the strength to hand her over to another man?

He had no choice. If he failed, she was doomed. Her human lover was doomed. And the world whose destiny the Creator meant for her to mold was doomed.

Why, Creator, would you ask this of me?

Wicked Temptation: Chapter 4

Told you so, darlin'.

Sage knew if Russ was in his right mind, that was what he would say to her now. And in the event he really did mean to drown her, it couldn't hurt to call in some divine intervention.

But who did she think she was fooling?

Beyond some sketchy notion of a higher power, she'd never pondered the existence of a hereafter, not in the fire and brimstone kind of way. But right now, she not only hoped there was a God, she *prayed* there was. Her ears rang with the memory of something Russ had said when he first returned home. "I never once met an atheist in a foxhole."

The need for air was making her daft.

She squirmed and tugged until she wrenched herself from his death grip. Taking care to stay submerged, she tore through the water as fast as her arms would move her.

Though it felt like no time at all had passed, she knew if she didn't surface soon, her lungs would implode. She needed to breathe. Now. Limbs quaking, she broke for the surface. It took but a glance at her surroundings to dash her hopes for cutting an escape route around Russ and back to the van.

Darkness had devoured the remnants of the sunset. The enchanted glen that set such a stunning stage for romance earlier was now a somber expanse of nothingness. Without reference points to tell her where the water ended and land began, time and distance lost all meaning. She was left to rely on the soft sounds that littered the night to guide her toward the shore.

Squeezing her eyes closed, she honed in on the rhythmic dip of Russell's arms slicing the water as he swam. The timing of his strokes was measured and even, a merman in his element as he carved up the distance between them. The sound drew closer until she could hear the coarse rasp of his breath. Fingers of dread gripped her as the reality of the situation settled over her. She had nowhere to hide.

Please, help me.

If God intended to heed her prayer, her surroundings offered up no proof. But then what did she expect? For a knight in shining armor to charge from the darkness, rescue her from the man she'd taken as her lover, but whose twisted alter ego was hell bent on kicking her ass?

The outlandish image sent hysterical laughter coursing through her chest. But it couldn't push beyond the fear that clogged her throat. Tears stung her eyes, begging for release, but crying wasn't an option. The noise of her sniffles would only lead Russ right to her.

If he was still flashing back once he got hold of her, then she could kiss her butt goodbye. Worse, this place was so godforsaken that her body could rot for a thousand years, food for the fishes, until somebody—or something—dragged her bones up from their watery grave.

For the love of God! Stop it!

Her legs kicked harder, driving her away from the direction she'd last heard Russ. She wouldn't give up. Not yet. She was young, strong. If she could hang onto her wits, wait him out, he would snap out of it.

Damn it all, he had to.

“God damn it, Private, I gave you an order.” As if mocking her last shred of hope, his voice tore through the darkness, a sharp slap in the face. His flashback showed no signs of letting up. If anything, it was getting worse. And judging by the exhaustion that dragged at her limbs, unless he got a grip on himself pronto, she stood no chance of getting out of here alive.

Her arms were so heavy with exhaustion that they dropped to her sides, useless weights dragging her down. Legs scissoring to pick up the slack, she struggled to keep her nose above water. Her teeth chattered so hard she thought they might crack.

Please... somebody....

But who? Save for a lone crow, she hadn't seen a sign of life all day.

Too bad the angel her imagination had concocted hadn't stuck around, because she was seriously past due for a miracle. Had he been real? No, of course not. She was grasping at straws.

Since when did touching an angel make a girl cream herself with desire?

It didn't.

She was on her own. And if such a thing were possible, it was getting colder out. So cold she couldn't tell if her legs were still kicking. The lake slapped her face, evidence they weren't.

Gasping, she raked in a nose full of water. The effort she spent to cough it out only exhausted her more. The closest thing to a bright side was that the situation couldn't get worse. Things could only go uphill from here.

But then she heard the unmistakable click of a rifle picking up a round from its magazine.

Shit!

No hunter in his right mind would be out stalking game now. Being shot as a trespasser didn't make sense, either. This place was desolate. She hadn't seen so much as a fence since Russ first turned down the dirt road that brought them here.

The person behind the rifle could only be Russ. She already knew he kept one under the driver's seat. They'd fought over his insistence on stashing it there a dozen times. Weary of scouring the water to find her, he'd probably decided to try another method of destruction—spraying the lake with bullets. If she ever got out of this mess, swear to God, she would learn to stand her ground when it came to abiding by her principals.

Assuming she lived long enough to do it.

Her heart longed to deny it, but she knew Russ had every intention of sinking a bullet into his inner demons. Into *her*.

God, I don't want to die out here.

Her chin dipped beneath the surface a third time. A dagger of light split the sky. The intensity of it gathered into a cascading column of blue as it rushed toward Earth. Its burning core splashed down in the lake and gilded the water's surface with a shivering light. The wake that followed sent concentric rings of brightness skittering toward her, whitecaps lit in silver and blue. Those luminous swells buoyed her up for a momentary stay of execution.

She could use the illumination to map a route back to the van—to safety! But it winked out as if it had never existed, the stolen promise of redemption. With the return of darkness, the sounds that had offered clues to

Russ's whereabouts also ceased. All she could hear was the trembling pine trees that framed the lake. She had no way of knowing where he had gotten off to. For all she knew, he was reaching out right now, preparing to strangle the life out of her.

If you're out there, then please, give me a sign.

Before the plea could scrape past her lips, an explosive crack rang out. In the span of a gasp, something whizzed by her head with such ferocity that the wind from it sliced the curls at her left temple.

A bullet! And too damn close for comfort.

Fuck wasting energy on the hope that there was a deity out there who gave a damn. She was on her own. Out of choices, too. The only shelter was the water. Sucking in a deep breath as she prepared to submerge, the fear of drowning made her hesitate.

She wasn't ready to die. But it was either hide out below or give in to an immediate—and far more painful—death.

Gunfire flared a brutal warning. If she wanted to live, it was now or never. She choked back a scream as she forced her body to relax. Raking in what she hoped wouldn't be her last breath, the crisp fragrances of evergreen bloomed on her tongue.

She clung to the memory of it as the water closed over her head.

With her eyes shut in denial of the darkness, she tried to imagine she was simply out for a swim on a summer's afternoon. If it came down to choosing a way to die, she would rather slip away on a happy fantasy than go knowing Russ had found his way home only to kill her.

Though it only took seconds for her feet to touch bottom, her lungs were already on fire with the need for air. But she didn't dare surface, not yet. For the moment, her best chance for safety remained with the fish in the infinite darkness.

Panic gripped her anew. Desperate to know some scrap of earthly light could find her here, she opened her eyes. Head tipping toward the surface, she caught the insipid glow of a crescent moon. Though the water scattered its feeble light to near nothingness, the knowledge she could see anything up there held her connected to a world—a life—she wasn't ready to let go of.

She just needed to hold out a little longer. Give Russ a bit more time to get a hold of himself. And when he did, something in her would know it. After all, wasn't she the one who'd insisted for years that he'd never died in Nam, in spite of those who tried so hard to convince her otherwise? If that didn't prove them connected, she didn't know what did. No matter how vile the demons that drove him, he would get a grip. Then she would surface.

Until then, she would push beyond this gnawing ache in her chest and focus on burning as little energy as possible. She turned her attention to the runaway thud of her heart, the sing of her blood as it rushed in her ears, audible proof of life. Above, she heard the muffled discharge of another bullet, the noise of it so distant and dull that it barely concerned her.

Another minute groaned by—or was it more? Either way she felt some better now. The fire in her lungs had faded to a faint prickle. Out of nowhere, peace fell over her like the softest blanket. It cocooned her heart in warmth. The heat gathered there, and then rushed through her veins until every inch of her tingled with the same erotic energy that had teased her when she raised her hands to connect with her angel.

The force of it—of him!—vibrated around her, through her. She wasn't alone down here, after all. Maybe she

hadn't been since the moment she'd first asked him to touch her.

When warm hands gripped her from behind, she didn't start. As he gathered her close to him, her bottom settled into the curve of his body as neatly as if he existed for no other reason than to hold her. He drew her tighter against his massive body.

She basked in the radiant heat that rose from his skin. But his skin wasn't the only thing on him that packed heat. The burning ridge of his erection pressed against the junction of her butt cheeks. The length of it was fit for a god. Shivers of desire curled through her as broad fingertips grazed her flesh to map the length of her neck, the valley between her breasts. While she sensed his examination was more a medicinal effort than sexual, his fingers fanned the rising sparks in her womb.

She needed to save herself. Shock jerked her body whip tight—she might already be dead! He might be the angel of death come to spirit her soul away. Her head slammed the wall of his chest as she thrashed. His grip was unyielding, his arms steel bands.

“Shush now,” he crooned. “You’ve nothing to fear from me.”

How he managed to speak underwater, she had no idea. How she could hear him, another mystery. The timbre of his voice soothed. It was rich and deep, a symphony composed in bass notes. As it resonated through her, wicked thoughts heated her blood.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart.”

He sure as hell did. Her tension flew out on a sigh. A million questions flooded her mind—how, why. But she was too stunned by the knowledge she was breathing underwater to utter them aloud.

She had to be tripping. But she couldn't be. Although she'd teased Russ earlier about the coffee being spiked, she'd only had LSD once, and even then, not by choice. As soon as she came down, she'd vowed never to take it again.

Overwhelmed, she turned in his embrace. She found respite in the curve of his neck.

Cradling her with the care one would a wounded child, he folded her close. His body was her sanctuary.

“Hold on tight, sweetheart.”

Awed by the thrumming power that emanated from him, she curled her arms around his neck and held on tight as he pushed off the lakebed. Together, they shot toward the surface.

That they emerged into a world transformed didn't surprise Sage. Though the air was as chilled as ever, the mist rising over the lake pushed back the somber shadows. Moonbeams slanted through the low hanging gloom to dapple its billows with light.

Here, magic not only seemed possible. It seemed likely.

Extending a hand, her rescuer swept aside the tangled curls that clung to her cheekbone and tucked them behind her ear. With a finger hitched beneath her chin, he raised it up so her gaze met his.

She'd never looked into the face of an angel before. She wondered if she just might die from it. Moonlight kissed his face with quicksilver. His eyes were dark, a storm at midnight. The lashes were blacker still, and only added to the intensity of his aspect.

Given another place and time, she might have fancied him a pirate or a rake. Both.

His stare was so probing she feared it could plumb her dry of secrets. The way her flesh sang beneath that dark perusal stole her breath anew. A soul could lose itself in eyes like those.

She had the sensation the billowing fog was lifting them up. And why would that surprise her? He was, after all, an angel. As the water peeled away from her body, and he found his footing—on what, she had no idea—she remembered she was naked.

But then so was he.

He settled her onto her feet before him. Her reckless gaze traced every chiseled ridge and hollow of his body. Her angel was all man, aroused and magnificent. Her eyes consumed his length. He cleared his throat, and a blush flared across her cheeks.

Chastened, she wanted to say she hadn't meant to stare, but that wasn't true, was it? Lying to an angel could only bring her bad karma, so she held her tongue and turned her eyes to something more innocent, a restless lock of hair that spilled across his forehead. Wet and gleaming black, it mapped the high bridge of his nose and blazed a path to his lower lip.

Before she could stop herself, she raised a hand to brush the errant lock away. Her fingers slid down those wet raven tresses to rest on his shoulder. Christ, it was broad enough to bear the weight of the world. Carved muscles played beneath her fingers. His flesh was dark and utterly unflawed, a statue forged from bronze.

It occurred to her that she ought to ask him his name. So she did. His responsive smile could melt glaciers. It softened the angles of a face that under different circumstances might have appeared dangerous.

"I am called Trey."

Under the self-conscious weight of her tongue, her attention returned to the mesmerizing terrain of his mouth. So kissable.

Her hands itched with the urge to draw his head down to hers and seize a kiss, but lusting after an angel probably wasn't the best idea. Somehow she doubted Trey had dragged her up from the lake bottom only to score some Earth-girl nookie.

Beneath the veil of her lashes, she slanted a look at him to gauge whether he guessed the illicit turn of her thoughts.

Payback time.

The edges of his mouth tipped with the barest hint of a smile. His eyelids dropping, he inspected every inch of her with the same curious thoroughness she'd used to appraise him. The moment melted into forever. God help her, she liked it that way.

When he at last met her eyes, his lids were hooded. Lashes like that ought not to be wasted on a man. But they did little to hide the appreciation that flared in those bottomless depths. That pleased her far more than it should have, but it didn't last. Shame curled through her as the trauma that had brought him here stormed through her mind.

Russ!

He was still out there somewhere, brandishing a rifle while he battled a waking nightmare. What would happen if he snapped out of it only to find her missing? If he thought he'd harmed her, his soldier's honor might drive him to turn that goddamn rifle on himself.

The image that lanced her mind was harrowing, blood-soaked.

As if Trey knew the horrors that plagued her, concern softened his expression to velvet. That suggestion of gentleness looked sorely out of place given the abrupt angles of his features.

He rested a hand on her cheek in stalwart comfort. She knew he meant his touch only to reassure. But that did nothing to stop the fireworks that popped beneath her skin everywhere his flesh met hers.

Such a wicked temptation, this angel who'd rescued her. But if he noticed her nipples were all but standing up to whistle Dixie, he didn't let on. She ought to be glad for it. Perhaps she owed him her life, but her misplaced crush on him had to stop.

He was an angel. Untouchable.

But Russ, like her, was human and fallible. They shared a history. No matter what he'd done tonight, she could never turn her back on him. Even if he'd completely lost touch with the young man she'd fallen for, she would never feel right in another man's arms until she knew her first love would be okay.

She placed a hand over Trey's. Could he sense the tightness in her smile? She lifted the weight of his hand from her shoulder, and as his flesh separated from hers, the tingling magic she'd felt there faded.

Something dangerously close to regret pierced her heart.

"Thank you for saving me. But I'm not the only one who needs help. Russ—my lover—has a gun."

"The man with the gun is your *lover*?"

She nodded once. "It's complicated."

"The affairs of mortals usually are."

Irritation jabbed her. "We're only human. I know it must sound crazy to somebody like you, but Russ does love me. It's just that he's not himself right now. He needs help."

"You mean *my* help."

When she nodded, his expression looked anything but eager. It pissed her off.

"Isn't that what angels do? Help people?"

"I'm no angel."

"Like hell you aren't. Help him!"

An array of emotions played on his face as his words trailed off. Pain, sorrow. When he caught her studying him, he turned to face the mist that surrounded them.

When he finally looked her way again, any hint of softness had retreated behind the brittle onyx. This shift in him hurt her more than it should have. But if they were going to part ways now, then perhaps it was better she remember him like this, fierce and intimidating.

Unapproachable.

"Goodbye, Trey." Her throat clamped down behind the words in a painful knot. She didn't want him to see the tears pooling in her eyes, so she turned to go.

“Sage.” The splendor of his voice was reduced to a rasping whisper.

The sound of her name stirred a rising déjà vu. A shiver rode her spine from the roots of her soul. She knew if she turned back, she would fly apart and do things with him that no woman ought to dream of doing with an angel. So she pretended not to hear.

Her ruse did nothing to stop the hurt that stabbed her heart. God, she didn’t want to leave him, not on this note, but Russ needed help. Her foot was lead as she pushed it forward only to have it come down again, not on the firm ground as she’d expected, but rather into thin air. As her body pitched forward, his arm lassoed her from behind.

Spinning her around to face him, he wound her tight in his arms. He held her so close she had to tip her head back to see his jaw.

“That’s twice you’ve saved me. *Angel*,” she croaked.

His gaze was inscrutable midnight. He cupped her chin. His fingers coated her in liquid sunshine as they feathered over her jaw. Something dissolved inside her.

Lashes dropping, she tilted her head beneath his, inviting his kiss. He did not hesitate. When their lips met, a strange sensation stirred in her womb like a scattering of shooting stars. His tongue teased the seam of her lips. Her mouth parted of its own accord.

God, she’d been born to kiss this man... this angel. Her knees softened beneath her. Raw power surged in her core.

Another gunshot rent the night.

Trey’s hand was lightening as it flew up to shield the back of her head. She watched slack-jawed as he lowered it again to drop something into the cup of her palm. The world spun and turned over. Darkness danced at the edges of her vision. Dizzy, she sagged into his ready embrace. Her hold on reality spun away, but the bullet Russ had meant to kill her with remained clenched in her fist, tangible proof of a miracle.

Diadra waited as long as she dared before she stole through the gateway after Trey. Taking care to remain concealed in the remnants of his ether trail, she shifted back to her physical form. The shock of completing her change beneath a couple dozen feet of cold water dragged a string of expletives to her lips. Sinking her bottom teeth into her lower lip, she bit back the words—indulging them would only reveal her presence to Trey.

But why in the Creator’s name had the strider chosen such a miserable location to cross into the human realm? Any fool could see it was dark enough on dry land to cloak evidence of his entry. And it wasn’t like the humans knew enough about striders to know proof of one when they saw it.

Talk about overkill!

But then she didn’t lust after Trey for his intellect, now, did she? His maddening penchant for caution made him so difficult to seduce. His moral code was black and white. For him, sampling her charms meant breaking his vows. The act of spending weakened his creation magic, and in turn, the mortals. She knew enough about Trey to know he would never risk that of his own accord. So when the minion Malifor had urged her to whittle into Trey’s will with the help of a hypnotic aphrodisiac, it made perfect sense. Face it, any substance powerful enough to get a minion laid had to be damn near infallible.

Or so she’d thought.

The second she popped her head above water, she knew she'd thought wrong. The strider's cock had sprouted a will of its own. There he was, buck naked and fully aroused, with that magnificent body of his draped around an equally nude human woman. That pretty much made clear who the object of the Trey's lust was. And it sure as B'hoth wasn't her.

Skewers of rage tore through her, a gathering of malevolent intent. Eyes screwed closed, she focused on her hatred until it manifested in her hand in the form of an energy orb. Nobody took what the goddess of carnal desires wanted and lived to tell about it—and certainly no human!

She drew her arm back to launch the deadly orb into the man-stealing slut's heart.

All she needed was one clear shot. But the swirling fog made it darn near impossible to aim. When Trey shifted the woman in his arms and moved deeper into the fog, Diadra feared she might completely lose sight of him. But the mist miraculously parted. The little slut's head dropped back to reveal the vital patch of skin above her heart.

Perfection. Diadra took aim just as the moonlight pierced the gloom to wash Trey's face in light. The expression rendered there was nothing short of beatific. His tenderness took her breath away.

Hurt curled through her. Gods knew she would trade her soul to see him look at her with such naked adoration.

But no aphrodisiac in the universe could ever win her that. If she didn't know better, she would believe Trey was falling in love. With a *human*. Diadra let the orb die back while the implications settled over her. In the past, minions had compelled other humans to serve as the article of destruction in the preordained relationships. Every time, Trey had correctly guessed the minion's intent as well as the humans' reaction to it.

Now, the effects of the aphrodisiac, compounded by his affection for the human, made him the perfect weapon of his beloved's destruction. If Trey's heart led him into the woman's bed, Diadra stood a damn good chance of insuring his little hussy's soul ended up food for the minions.

In turn, Malifor would most certainly make good on his promise to make her the High Goddess.

Retreating beneath the water's surface, she indulged a rare smile.

Sure, all but shoving Trey into bed with a human—and such a pretty one at that—gnawed at her pride. But she would just have to deal with that. The end result was more than worth it.

The sexy strider was as good as hers.

Wicked Temptation: Chapter 5

Don't show humans proof of magic. Keep a tight leash on your cock. Never turn back time. Trey knew the restrictions on a time strider's interactions with mortals as well as he knew his own name.

He hadn't been in the human realm for an hour yet, and already he was down two for three. While the resulting rift in his magic was all but imperceptible, he knew the slow drain on his resources would only get worse. The entire purpose of the rules was to insure he had enough magic to pull off his mission and make his escape back to Ethereum.

Lucky for him, he still had plenty of magic left to get himself there.

Sure, he would have a world of B'hoth to pay when Heroset and her tight-ass cronies pitched a bitch over the broken rules. But no one could deny the fact he'd accomplished what no strider before him ever had—the minion's threat to Sage and Russ had been removed. The bullet he'd dropped into her hand proved it.

Now Sage's relationship with her destined lover could pan out as the Creator intended. With Trey's return to Ethereum, the human timeline would be closed to further tampering. The minions would be defeated and humanity would go on to earn their immortality.

Once Heroset got over her snit and understood that Diadra's aphrodisiac had nearly upended his mission, she would grant him the godship he'd always yearned for. Then he would find firsthand how it felt to walk among the full gods as their equal.

So where was the joy in this moment?

His time with Sage was running short. He'd known it the second he tucked the bullet into the palm of her hand. Instead of the elation he ought to feel, there was only this hollow space in the pit of him, and sinking despair.

It had nothing to do with the drain on his magic. It had everything to do with Sage.

He didn't want to leave her. But what other choice did he have? None. He could only hang onto the memory of the magic that had flared white-hot between them when they'd kissed.

Gods damn it, he wanted more. Yes, even to stop time so he could live in this moment forever.

Curling her tighter in his arms, he pressed his lips to the bright curls at the crown of her head. He measured the slight weight of her body in his arms and the span of her hand as it rested over his heart. *Let me cling to this, the moist heat of her cheek in the curve of my neck, the rhythm of her breath as it warms my skin. The creamy turn of her shoulder.*

What he wouldn't give to kiss her there and trace with his tongue the freckles that dotted a path toward her rose-tipped breasts.

Desire flared anew. His erection returned with a vengeance. He had to stop this before he couldn't stop it. He must use these moments to move her into a safe place before his strider's mark opened an escape gateway.

Fucking mark.

It was both a miracle of bioengineering and a pain in his ass. If he required anything while on a mission—clothing, shelter, a kick in the nuts—his mark tapped into his creation magic to manifest his need into reality. Now was no different. By the time the last tendril of fog parted onto a wooded glen, the golden

invitation of lamplight winked through the windows of the cottage he already knew waited there for them.

This was the place where he would leave her to meet the rest of her life. Her destiny. As soon as he tucked her into a nice warm bed, he would go, grim in the knowledge that once the gateway back to Ethereum opened, she would have no recollection of this night.

Of him.

Too bad he couldn't erase his own memory. Leaving her was going to hurt like a son of a bitch. But to do anything less would amount to serving her soul to the minions on a silver platter. He would give them his own before he let that happen.

Swallowing a knot of hurt, he toed open the cottage door and carried Sage toward the bedroom. He knew she would feel at home here because he'd modeled this place after an image pulled from her mind, a dollhouse she'd loved as a child. Another breach of the rules, maybe, but it wasn't like she would remember him or his use of magic after she woke.

Once he had the gateway in sight, he would plant a suggestion in both her and Russ's minds that they'd rented the cottage for the night.

She would only remember that Russ had gone out for a walk.

She would write off any lingering inconsistencies as one glass of wine too many.

He settled her on the sleigh bed. He would give anything to crawl in next to her, but he contented himself instead with sitting on the edge of the mattress beside her. *Just one last look.* His stare traced her delicate curves until he'd etched every inch into memory. His hands fisted against the urge to touch and possess her.

Goosebumps coated her arms. Poor thing was cold and wet. Could he act a bigger ass if he tried? Scowling, he slid the patchwork coverlet up from the foot of the bed and over her body. She smiled as she snuggled beneath it. Gods, he'd never seen pleasure lend a face such radiance. Unable to check the impulse, he extended a hand to smooth his finger over the arcs of her eyebrows. Featherlight, his touch grazed the sweep of her nose until the pad of his finger rested in the indent that defined her Cupid's bow.

He let his gaze linger there on the perfect heart that was her mouth. The Creator would only design a woman with a mouth like that for one reason—to be kissed, hard and often. His tongue traced the seam of his lips. They were still sweet with the taste of her.

Who would ever know if he were to steal another kiss? A kiss stolen from Diadra was what had lead him to botch this mission in the first place. Harsh laughter caught in his throat.

But Sage was oblivious to the treachery that had brought him to her. She only knew him as the angel who rescued her. As if encouraged by his wicked intentions, she heaved a little sigh and stretched beneath the coverlet with the innocent abandon of a child. The coverlet slipped away to reveal a rose-tipped breast. Need flared in his groin. His control was fading fast. He knew his cock's limitations well enough to know that once she opened her eyes and taunted him with that smoldering gaze of hers, all bets would be off.

Aggravated by his wavering control, he channeled his magic to his strider's mark so it would clothe him in the tight blue jeans so popular in the era. A waste of precious magic, perhaps, but gods knew he needed some kind of barrier between them. A body could only hold up so long when faced with such a tempting redhead.

The pressure of the denim seam was unforgiving as it bit into his semi-rigid cock. Not that the irritation did much to cool his ardor. He knew damn well if he lingered, he would risk far more than a chewing-out by Heroet. It was high time he started acting like the god he aspired to be and put as much distance between

himself and temptation as possible.

He rose from the bed but his knees softened. Perhaps spending magic on the meager protection of the jeans had been a mistake. Even that elementary effort had put a serious drain on his magic. If he didn't leave her now, chances were he would never make it back to Ethereum.

Jaw clenched against the need that pounded in his balls, he turned away. His feet were stone as he plodded out the bedroom to the front door. Only when he pulled it open did he dare pause. With one shoulder propped against the doorjamb for support, he scoured the woods for evidence of a gateway.

Nothing.

Behind him, *everything*, the whisper soft invitation of her breath. He didn't know how much more of this torture he could take. Even the mantle clock in the room behind him mocked as it ticked off the minutes since he'd left her, first one, then two.

Unable to endure any more, he stepped out onto the wide front porch. He only wanted to gain a better view of the woods, so he paced toward the ivy-coated railing that opened onto a broader expanse of forest. It was no fault of his own that his search for a gateway placed him right outside the room where Sage still slept.

Lamplight sparked on the windowpanes. But swear to gods, he wouldn't look. It was simple as that. But even weak magic heeded no ruler other than the Creator. It stirred in his core and reached out to connect with her spirit.

Damn gateway should have opened by now.

His mark had something other than a speedy return to Ethereum in mind. The damn thing wasn't visible in this realm, but he could feel it just fine as it tried to sear a hole in his hand. Agony tore through him, the sternest warning. He'd botched his mission!

The bullet wasn't the threat to Sage he'd been meant to resolve. With his hands braced against the railing, he gritted his teeth against the pain. As best he could figure, he had but a few hours left to figure out what had gone wrong and try again to save the human race.

A fraction of an Earth day to insure Sage fell back in love with the man who'd nearly killed her. When he looked at it that way, turning back time sounded like a fine idea. Too bad he didn't have enough magic left in him to pull it off.

From the corner of his eye, movement. Before he could catch himself, he turned to face the window. Lamplight gilded the simple linens on the sleigh bed. Curled in the middle of them was a treasure that shone brighter than gold. Sage.

As his magic stretched toward her, her back arched beneath the coverlet. Her head dropped back into the pillow. The soft light polished the column of her neck and the swell of her naked breasts.

His palms burned, not from the demands of his mark, rather from the urge to cup those succulent mounds. Though the rest of her remained concealed beneath the coverlet, he could see the shimmering double helix uncoiling above her womb as her magic searched for his.

In a moment, the glass that separated them would do nothing to dampen her hunger.

And he lacked the power to drop a veil of forgetting over her. He couldn't, not if he expected to right whatever event the minions had rearranged. When she woke, she would remember everything. Remember him. She would want him with a ferocity she couldn't begin to comprehend. Her human magic wouldn't allow anything

less.

He knew he didn't have the strength to deny her.

If she fell into the minion's realm because of his kiss, he didn't think he could bear it.

He flattened his palm on the cool windowpane that separated him from paradise. Eyes burning, he closed his eyelids and heaved a sigh.

For the first time since the beginning of his term as a time strider, he had absolutely no idea what to do.

Though Sage was still drifting in that fuzzy place between dreams and reality, she didn't have to wake fully to know she was lying on a mattress. The way she figured it, she must have fallen asleep while waiting for Russ.

But when had their ramshackle bedding ever felt so sinfully soft? She stretched her arms over her head, delighting in the warmth that cocooned her. Yes, she must have fallen asleep waiting for Russ. It was the only explanation that made any sense.

And Jesus H., the dream she'd had! A nightmare turned erotic fantasy, so vivid that her flesh tingled with the memory of the angel's touch. Though a nagging part of her insisted she wake up and go check on Russ, a much larger part of her said, *no fucking way*.

Hell, the good part of her dream had hardly gotten off the ground.

Maybe she ought to feel ashamed that she was already dreaming of new lovers. Almost served Russ right, too. Imagine leaving her up here to stew after they'd just made love. And hot damn, her angel had been a gorgeous thing to behold.

Snuggling deeper beneath the covers, she tried to recapture the details before they fled forever. As she floated back into a doze, she saw a gleaming shock of onyx hair as it fell about his face, softening those roughhewn angles. Eyes, dark enough to drown in. A mouth just lush enough to invite her kiss.

No, she didn't want to wake up, not yet. Not when she could still feel the brawny weight of his arms holding her tight. Even the taste of his kiss lingered, an intoxicating hint of cognac laced with red hot man—angel.

Sweeping her tongue along her lips, she savored the remnants of him—her dream of him. God, but he'd felt real enough. He'd taken her mouth with such ferocity that had he not held her fast, she'd have collapsed into a sticky puddle of want. Her pussy clenched as she remembered the silky heat of his cock pressing against her belly.

Big mistake. Moisture seeped from her opening. Its buttery warmth dampened her thighs. Damn, what she wouldn't give to know what it would feel like to have a cock that large inside her, pumping her long and hard until she all but died from the stretching pleasure of it.

Concentric rings of heat uncoiled in her womb. Her clit hardened into an aching bud. Squeezing her thighs together did nothing to assuage the throb there. Her effort only caused her nipples to follow suit.

She couldn't stand it anymore. Snaking a hand beneath the covers, she took the beaded flesh of one nipple between her thumb and forefinger and squeezed hard. The burning pain was chased by spikes of pleasure. Something in her just knew Trey would take her the same way he kissed, rough and hard, unworried whether he handled her like the well-bred lady of the '50s Russ seemed to wish her to be.

Damn, her nipples must have a hotline to her clit, because she felt the same burning ache there, too. Good

thing she had two hands because if she didn't come soon, she might explode. Her thighs parted, and her trembling hand became his hand as it grazed the length of her belly and swiped a finger through damp curls. Groaning, she unfurled ribbons of sensation through her pussy.

Good God almighty, but that felt good.

Drawing her knees up, she stretched her thighs wider and slipped a finger into the wet grip of her vagina. The way her flesh clenched around her knuckle sent shockwaves of delight through her. Slickened with hot juices, her finger withdrew. She eased liquid heat through her sensitive folds to orbit the nubbin that thrummed at her apex.

A groan caught in her throat. Her hips bucked. Pinching her nipple again, she imagined Trey's teeth nipping her there as he plunged his cock high inside her, a single stroke of possession.

Oh, God, yes!

Her womb clenched in search of the power that had uncoiled there every time he touched her. She rolled her clit between her thumb and forefinger. The biting caress caused her bottom hole to clench. Fire coursed through her as an answering rush of wetness wept from her opening.

She didn't intend to waste it.

While her thumb continued its whirling dance around her clit, she slid two fingers into her pussy, hard strokes, in and out. Back arching, her bottom clutched against the desire for something forbidden, an angel with wicked black eyes. He would flip her over on her tummy and taking her in places no nice girl would dare dream of.

But then, she'd burned her nice girl undies years ago.

Her finger left her vagina to press into her rear opening. As she massaged the tight ring with her fluids, instinct drove her to bear down a little. Her finger pierced the taut ring of tissue to massage the warm channel within. As she stroked herself in that taboo place, the pressure that gripped her womb was exquisite.

She let her finger fuck her there, like that, while her thumb tormented her clit. In, out. Pain, pleasure. A cry caught in her throat as she rocked against the exquisite torture in her ass, the rolling shockwaves that seized her pussy. God, she could feel that onyx gaze of his scorching her skin as she pleased herself.

Oh, yeah, baby. Imagining his hand riding his cock as he watched her play, her orgasm coiled so tight she felt like her soul would fly away if it didn't break soon. Pinching her nipple with her free hand, she shattered into a head-thrashing climax.

Sucking down great gulps of air, she began a slow spiral back down to earth. Maybe it was best that Trey wasn't real, because if he were, she didn't know if she could ever choose between him and Russ. She would want both. Maybe once upon a time, Russ had been a man who'd dive headfirst into a ménage, but not anymore.

Maybe never again.

The point was moot, anyway. The time for dreaming of things that could never be was over. Russ was real. Alive. He was a damn good lover. The kind of uninhibited explorations she craved would come in due time, but for now he still needed an awful lot of healing. She needed to get up off this mattress, see for herself what was keeping him from chasing these horn-dog dreams away of hers away once and for all.

Enough dreaming.

Sitting up, she finally opened her eyes.

But she sure as hell wasn't in the van.

She examined her lamp-lit surroundings, the coverlet, the matching linens, and the oversized sleigh bed. The eerie sensation she'd been in this room before caused gooseflesh to race up her arms. Once, the eyelet curtains tied back with gingham ribbons would have delighted her. Now they only contributed to the eerie prickling at the nape of her neck.

If she'd seen this room once, she'd seen it a thousand times. But nothing about that knowledge soothed her. Instead, she was a heartbeat shy of freaking the hell out. It wasn't every day a girl found herself living in a perfect replica of a dollhouse she hadn't seen in a dozen years. It was accurate right down to the last square of calico in the patchwork bedding.

A cry gathered in her throat, but she clamped down hard on it. The entire situation was mind-numbingly insane. She was beginning to feel like the star of one of those hokey horror movies about a nightmare that never ended. The main character never woke up alive.

But this was no movie. It was her life. And if her fantastic setting wasn't so all-fire creepy, she might even think it was cool.

But enough was enough. Panic frosted her with goose bumps as she was struck by the utter impossibility of everything that had transpired since she went down in the lake. Was it possible she had drowned and that this entire setup was God's twisted idea of Sage heaven?

Or was it, perhaps, her own personal version of purgatory? If this was purgatory, she'd just masturbated here. Worse still, she hadn't even settled for the standard methods of getting her jollies. The kink factor alone ought to add a good zillion years to her time here.

Stop it!

God, if she kept up like this, her heart was going to leap right out of her mouth. Screwing her eyes shut, she sucked in a few slow breaths. Burying her face in her hands, she forced her focus on the situation at hand.

The way she saw it, she had two equally implausible choices. She was either stone-cold dead or the unlikely recipient of a bizarre chain of miracles. To believe that an angel had saved her—well, it made no sense at all. Death was more plausible.

But as far as she knew, dead girls didn't have head-banging orgasms, either. And she doubted she would find any answers until she saw what lay on the other side of the bedroom door. Whether that door took her to heaven, hell, or plain old podunk, she couldn't deal with it until she got off her ass and faced it.

She raised her head from her hands, and a metallic glint flared in the corner of her vision. There, on the pillowcase, a single bullet glittered in the lamplight. Her heart clutched. Russ really had tried to shoot her.

Trey was not only real, he had saved her life. Twice. Then he'd kissed her until every nerve ending in her body sang with some sort of erotic power she could only explain as magic.

None of it had been a dream. And if Trey was the angel in charge of taking her on to the hereafter, then why did he bother to catch the bullet at all? If she wasn't dead, then why on earth would an angel bother with the likes of her?

It made no sense. She and Russ, they were nobodies, a torn-up couple trying to figure out how reassemble the fucked-up pieces of their lives.

But Trey *had* bothered. And here she was, sitting cozily inside her third miracle of the day, the one place in the world that had ever made her feel truly safe. At least that was true when it had been a dollhouse.

How many times as a child had she lay alone in her own bed, staring into her dollhouse? She'd fallen asleep willing her soul into body of the redheaded doll that slept in the sleigh bed tucked between the two male dolls, one blonde and one dark. Just like Russ and Trey.

That she'd insisted on keeping the trio together at all times had irked her mother to no end, particularly when Sage asked for help in planning a pretend wedding, not for two dolls, but for all three. "It simply isn't done," her mother had insisted.

But in Sage's mind, it had been the only way her dolls could find their happily-ever-after. In the end, her parents' need for sleep had won out. Had she been denied the chance to tuck all three dolls into the same bed, they knew she would walk the floor until morning, frantic. Though her father insisted her habits defied reason—and propriety—they'd been left little choice beyond giving in and hoping she would grow out of it.

She never had. She'd just learned to keep her mouth shut.

Our pale reasoning hides the infinite from us.

Something else she'd learned in her obsession with Jim Morrison. Damn, if she could just get to Woodstock, and Jim showed, maybe she could ask him just what he meant by that. Because right now, everything in her told her there was a bigger picture at work here. If there was ever a guy who'd tell her to let go and experience this moment fully, then it was Jim.

Granted, this day wasn't likely to repeat itself.

Comforted by that, she allowed herself to relax. Was Trey responsible for replicating her dollhouse? Perhaps he meant to convince her none of this was accidental. Perhaps he needed to show her that he felt connected to her, too. That all three of them were connected on a level she sensed even Trey himself didn't fully understand.

While he'd denied it earlier, if all these miracles didn't prove he was an angel or even a deity of some kind, she didn't know what could. That she was so inexplicably smitten with him defied reason and morals. Maybe this was exactly what she was *supposed* to feel. And she was willing to bet he'd come to her aid tonight because something larger than just this life was happening to her—to all of them.

Maybe she just needed to mellow out and let it happen.

But no way could she feel safe doing that until both Trey and Russ were in sight. Tucking the coverlet around her as a makeshift gown, she dropped her feet over the side of the bed. Before standing, she took care to confirm the floor had more substance to it than the fog she'd nearly taken a nosedive through earlier.

Thank her lucky stars, it did.

Wicked Temptation: Chapter 6

Trey was flat out busted. He knew it the second Sage dropped her feet over the edge of the bed and settled them onto the floor. The double helix of her magic stretched out before her in a silvery thread leading her out the bedroom door.

He knew damn well where she and her restless magic were headed.

While his mark urged him to wrestle his cock back into his blue jeans, his own magic was weaker than his need. His need to orgasm had all but reached the point of no return. He fell back into the shadows and flattened himself against the wood siding to finish the job that watching her pleasure herself had started. Back braced against the wall, his hips plowed his cock into the burning cage of his fist. The heat of his mark against his flesh only heightened his pleasure.

That was how it would be between them, pleasure so sharp and piercing it stopped just shy of agony. But it wasn't meant to be. None of this was. And the sooner he accepted that, the easier it would be to get on with this mission. Just as his balls tightened, pain trumped the pleasure until only misery remained. He needed to get the hell out of here before he lost all claim to reason.

Already, he could hear her movements in the cabin and the tentative pad of her footsteps as she approached the front door. Her beeline toward him was so direct he knew her magic was driving her to search him out to consummate their fire.

While his own magic was weak, it was by no means too spent to respond to her advancing proximity. If he laid eyes on her again, they were done for. His only hope depended on his hauling ass out of here before she found him.

Without bothering to rearrange his clothing, he spun toward the railing. His muscles bunched in preparation to vault over the side. Gods, he felt weak.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Fuck.

Before he could muster enough strength to leap over the railing, she was there. Small hands gripped his hips and urged him back. "You aren't going anywhere, angel man."

Her breath licked his back with flames. If his dick got any bigger, it might well explode.

"You saved my life. Twice. Way I see it, you've got some explaining to do." Judging by the press of her body against the flat of his back, she didn't intend to cut him any breaks. She was starstruck by the drama of the rescue, a clear case of hero worship if he ever saw one.

Kissing her earlier had done nothing to help cure her of it. He'd only stoked her magic until it had imprinted on his. He didn't have to turn around to know that while her magic was momentarily sated, it was nowhere near exhausted. He could feel it coiling around him, probing. Teasing.

He knew good and well she wasn't about to settle for a simple answer. Soon, she would be hotter than ever. She would continue that way until he could no longer ensure she would become imprinted on the man the Creator intended. Why that hadn't happened before he entered the scene, he had no idea. Her growing arousal was proved by the heat of her nipples boring through the scrap of fabric she wore. Those taut nubs seared his back with pinpoints of fire.

The girl was incorrigible. He sensed it was as much a personality trait as the urgings of magic. Gods, he loved that she would want him even without magic's influence. But if he didn't get control of this situation now, he knew he never would. He turned away from the railing and snared her around the waist. Lamplight poured through the window to reflect the amber lights that burned in her eyes. Her lips parted. Magic streamed out on her breath, shimmering coils of sapphire tethering him and drawing him in.

Hands braced on her shoulders, he set her at arm's length, hating that his grip on her was too heavy for comfort. But for her sake, she needed to know he was serious about putting some distance between them.

He hoped his eyes didn't betray the sorrow behind his false scowl. The wounded slump of her brows proved they did. Seeing her like that nearly undid him, but he couldn't relent. Not now, when he was making headway.

"I wouldn't trifle with the likes of me if I were you," he rasped. "You might just get more than you bargained for."

The wicked tilt of her mouth made clear she knew damn well the struggle between his will and his cock. Not as though he could possibly hide it. Her perusal dropped to his wide-open fly. Her tongue darted out and took a slow pass over her lips. When her eyes lifted to his again, they were lit from behind with molten enchantment. Her magic was taking control.

"So tell me, Trey." Her stare was direct. Fearless. "Do angels fuck? Because, judging by the fact you've had a hard-on since we met, you're in dire need of some serious loving."

Incorrigible. "I'm no angel. And the things I'd like to do to you right now would bring you more pain than your mortal mind can comprehend."

She wasn't having any of it. Arms crossed, her chin lifted in challenge. "So you admit you're not mortal."

"I didn't say that."

"All but."

She looked so sexy like that, glittering with defiance, an untamed woman-child intent on prying a truth from him she would be far better off not knowing.

"Trust me when I say I'm very much a man."

Her stare laved his cock. "No kidding."

A frustrated growl rumbled in his chest. Looking at the safety of the stars, he pushed his fingers through his hair. "You're more temptation than any male in his right mind could walk away from."

"So don't walk away. I need you." Her hand curled behind his neck, urging him to look at her. The playful quirk of her mouth had fled. Her brows were flat with yearning. "And if anyone ever needed an angel on his side, it's Russ."

"I've already told you. I'm no angel."

She was silent for a moment, as if letting the weight of that fact settle on her for the first time. The moisture on her lashes captured moonlight, quivering beads of quicksilver. "If you're not an angel, what the hell are you?"

Knowing he'd brought her even a moment's sadness caused something to tear loose inside him. But he couldn't possibly answer her question. One more broken rule and both his mission and his magic were done

for. *She* was done for.

She mistook his silence for hesitation. Moving closer, she feathered a hand over the angle of his jaw. “Who are you, Trey? And why do I feel like my life didn’t begin until the moment you saved me?”

Her gaze darkened to somber brown. He wanted to tell her that he didn’t know, but that he felt it, too. To do so would only encourage her. Without the magic he needed to spin a veil of forgetting, whatever he said now would stay forever with her—and with him.

He didn’t want his legacy to ride on her heartbreak, assuming he had a legacy after this night was done. Yes, he must go, but surely he didn’t have to be an asshole about it. Pressing his mouth hard against the crown of her head, he smiled into her hair. It played beneath his lips like crushed silk. With one arm drawing her close, he raised a hand to smooth its bright length.

“Sage, sweetheart....” His eyes were sand as he rocked her, consoling. “I promise the answers you seek will come in the Creator’s own time. And once I’m gone, what you’re feeling for me will fade like a dream. Until then, you have to let me do the job I came here for.”

She stiffened against him. “What job?”

Her happiness was at stake. That was all that allowed him to raise his head again and set her away from him. “I need to go, Sage. And it would be a lot easier if you’d quit asking questions I can’t answer. Please, just go inside and wait for Russ to join you. And swear to gods, he will join you.”

“No!” Her protest nearly undid him. Her spine was ramrod straight, the set of her jaw unyielding.

“Everything you are or will ever be depends on you doing as I say. Now.” He hadn’t meant to shout and loom over her like some monster, but her refusal wasn’t an option. He would haul her ass inside and tie her to the bed if need be.

Her jaw thrust and her eyes hardened to agate. “The last time I did as a man said, I nearly ended up dead. Would *be* dead if not for you.”

“Don’t you love him anymore?”

“I do, but not like you think. And I don’t want to be alone with him.”

In the distance, rustling leaves, the dry crackle of brambles. A covey of quail fanned from the underbrush. In their chattering wake, a broad-shouldered form stole from the shadows. The negative energy that emanated from it slammed into Trey like a dark wave.

Sage must have felt it too. She retreated behind his back, trembling.

“Your lover, I presume?”

He could feel her nod as she burrowed for shelter between his shoulder blades. “How can I love him and be terrified of him at the same time?”

Trey didn’t have time to hazard an answer. Russ broke into the clearing. Moonlight sparked off his hair. Though the hollows of his face were shadowed, Trey could sense enough about the man’s appearance to know he wasn’t the villain Trey had expected. Perhaps even hoped for.

Shame curled through him. Hating a bad guy was easy. Hating a wounded one, despicable. And Russ looked more like a seraph than the kind of devil who’d shoot at his woman. In his rugged, rough-edged way, he was as stunning a creature as Sage. Both of them were cut from light, she from fire and he from sun. The Creator had

known exactly what he was doing when he bound their spirits. They complemented each other perfectly. But that wasn't what surprised him. What did were the prickles of appreciation that coated his cock.

He'd never responded in a physical way to a mortal man before—any man, for that matter. But now wasn't the time to ponder the outer reaches of his own sexuality. As Russ stepped into the glen, moonlight polished his sinewy form. He held a rifle balanced at his right shoulder. It didn't require magic for Trey to know where it was aimed.

He swallowed hard. He didn't know if he could catch a bullet right now, much less absorb one. The best he could manage was to throw up a cloaking field to render himself and Sage invisible. It wouldn't last long. But it might score him a few moments to get a grip on the situation.

A breeze ruffled the pines. The cloaking field had done its job. Russ swung the barrel of his rifle in that direction. While his mind might be living in another time and place, his movements were as fluid and measured as a prowling lion's.

Trey studied the man's aura. Or lack thereof. In place of the signature swipes of indigo that identified the auras of the preordained, Russ sported a black cesspool of self-loathing, the perfect playground for evil.

For minions.

Whatever magic the man had brought with him into this world had died in the face of his troubles. While Sage couldn't possibly have seen that, she must have already sensed the depth of the changes in the man she loved. But her fated attachment to him would compel her go on trying to heal him.

Alone, she didn't possess enough power to reignite Russ's natural magic, much less mold human destiny. That left him the only person around here with any magic to spare. Gods damn it, if he hadn't broken the rules, hadn't kissed Sage with everything he had in him, he would have more than enough power to replace what Russ was missing. But now he would need help.

Sage's help. Between the two of them, they had enough power to help Russ.

The problem was that creation magic could only be passed between the preordained mortals through sexual contact. In order to channel the magic he created with Sage into Russ, they'd need to join in a trinity. A ménage, as it was known in this world.

Trey's gut sank as the consequences of such an act struck him. He wouldn't be just breaking his vows. He would be shattering them beyond repair. The cost would be his soul.

It was a small price to pay in exchange for knowing hers would go on.

Turning to face her, he settled his palms on either side of her face. Her magic swept over him, urging him to take her in spite of the danger they'd just dodged. Or maybe because of it.

"Do you trust me?"

Her chin dipped. "From the moment you first touched me."

Her face didn't reveal even a glimmer of hesitation. Her pupils were so wide that he could see all the way to her soul. She was telling the truth. His tension rushed out on a sigh. If she didn't trust him, his plan would never work. Still might not. But he had to try.

The misery in his mark eased as if to confirm his growing suspicion that he'd been created only to spend his soul so that this woman and her lover might live. Love. And gods, such sweet sacrifice. Eternity could offer

him nothing sweeter than sharing pleasures with two of the Creator's most precious souls so they might go on to redeem their kind.

She was so beautiful. His thumb traced the curve of her lower lip. His lips brushed the arc of her brow. Settling his chin on her head, he held her close and inhaled her fragrance. His hand smoothed a trail to the small of her back until it rested on the swell of her ass. He pulled her hard against him.

Her needy hands threaded through his hair. When he raised his head again, the raw emotion on her face clutched his heart. He'd never been loved before. Had never been in love. But he was now.

It was more than he ever dared pray for.

Her fingers sang with magic as they rode the ridges of his belly to the waistband of his jeans. His fading powers trembled in response. She tugged on his pants until they crumpled on the planks beneath their feet. Her pelvis tipped so her mons rode his thigh. Her curls were buttered silk.

The coverlet she wore fell to the porch. His gaze followed. Her body was tight, her breasts pert swells. He hoped she didn't see his hands shaking as he cupped each one. She loosed a shuddering sigh. Her head fell back as her taut nipples kissed his palms. A groan snared in his throat, and he bent to nip the arch of her neck.

When he raised his head, hers followed. Her hair ruffled like flames in the breeze. Her eyes had gone bronze with desire, as if she suspected what he was about to ask her to do.

"Help me heal him."

"How?" Her voice was a breathless pant. Her chest heaved beneath his palms. His heart pounded so hard he thought it might leap from his chest. He angled his head over hers. Her lips parted on a sigh.

"Make some magic with me." To insure she knew what he meant, he infused her mind with the image of what he wanted the three of them to do.

Her breath caught, but she did not flinch. Her lids lowered. "Kiss me, Trey."

A whimper caught in her throat as his mouth dropped over hers. When their lips touched, her tongue was already probing his lips and demanding entrance. She sighed into the kiss. Her magic wound through him, searching for the fading remnants of his. It flared with a welcome spark of renewal. The power in her was stronger than any he'd ever encountered. In the distance, thunder rumbled in agreement. Or was that only the roar of his blood rushing in his ears?

He pulled her flat to him. Her tongue traced the vein that throbbed on the side of his neck. His hands settled beneath her ass, fingers curled in her tight crevice. He lifted her up and her legs tethered his waist. As her arms wound around his neck, he braced her shoulders against the wood siding.

Small teeth nipped his earlobe. His fingertip teased her crevice. The scalding pain of her bites bolted straight to his cock. Magic spun in his core. Wriggling hips mapped his length. Her silky fluids heated his tip with fragrant temptation. He'd never felt a woman so wet in his life.

"Take me, Trey. Hard."

The last wall of resistance in him broke. He drew his hips back, and then thrust. She met him halfway and took him full hilt. A growl tore from him, a cry from her. Her muscles gripped him like a satin sheath. And then she began to move. Slowly at first, then faster until her clit ground against his pubic bone. With his balls clenching hard, his magic threaded through hers, and then rushed through the woods toward Russ.

To Trey's face, everything his heart ever dared dream of was his for the taking. Behind his back, the man he meant to redeem pounded him with the black heat of jealousy. If watching Trey make love to Sage caused that dark emotion to flare, it might just create enough of a fissure in the darkness to let the magic draw Russ into their circle.

By the end of this night, for better or for worse, Trey's mission would be done, the price his soul.

He couldn't think of a more perfect way to spend it.

Sage knew what he wanted and understood the reasons why. What she didn't understand is why she craved him every bit as much as she'd craved air when she'd been drowning. As his cock pounded her pussy, everything in her sang with the certainty that her whole entire life had served only to drive her to this moment, this man—angel.

When it was all over, she would worry whether Russ would forgive her for the wicked needs that railed her body right now. She was doing this for him as much as for herself. All she wanted was for him to be whole again so she they could move on with their lives.

That, and to be with Trey. God, the need he stoked in her was insatiable.

Insatiable! Such sweet torture lashed her body. His cock had her cunt splayed so wide it felt as though she might split in two. But just when she thought she couldn't stand anymore, the pain became her pleasure. His hammering strokes heated her blood until it stormed in her ears like thunder. And oh, God, his cock was fire. It was fire and she couldn't take him deep enough, couldn't cling to him any harder. All she knew was she wanted for him to unleash this coiling need he'd wound up so tight inside her.

Her nerve endings thrummed with power. Her head thrashed from side to side. The siding behind her grated her skin, and she didn't care. She just tangled her fingers deeper in his hair and slammed his mouth back down on hers. Her teeth drew a bead of blood from his lip.

She sucked his lower lip between her lips and soothed the wound. He tasted fresh, like summer rain. Clean, like the angel she still believed he was, but dear God, he fucked like the devil himself. And she wanted more.

"More, please!" She wanted him to climb inside her, fill her, complete her, fuck her until she didn't know her own name. Something in her core shimmered and flexed. His hips rotated against her in maddening circles of flame. Her clit rode so hard against the base of his cock that stars burst in the cage of her mind. With her back arching against the pleasure that stretched her pussy, something in her came unhinged. Her hips pumped counterpoint to his, faster, until she arched hard against him and screamed his name. And just as the flames stoked in her pussy threatened to consume her, he stopped.

Oh, God, he stopped. Before she could protest, he was kissing her with such agonizing tenderness that she thought she might scream. And damn it, if he didn't start moving again, she was going to die.

Damn it, she would die. She could feel herself trembling, inside and out, burning so hot with the need to come that she clawed her fingernails into his back and raked him in wicked long strokes.

"Breathe, sweetheart." One hand left her hip. Only the press of his cock kept her pinned to the wall. His fingertips eased up the sides of her body, lighting up every nerve ending in its path. Gripping her wrists in one hand, he raised them over her head. His mouth worked kisses over her nose, her chin, the length of her neck. Just as her hips began to churn again, his began to rock in counterpoint, maddeningly slow.

"Feel your magic, baby. Feed it with your desire."

The rasp of their breathing tore the night. Her moans rode from her mouth in glowing ribbons, blue, surreal. The world spun in dizzying circles, the weight of gravity drawing them together until they were one.

Oh, yes, they were one. The power arced between them, rising into the night to shower them with stars. Heavy footsteps approached on the porch stairs, but still she hung, spinning at the brink of ecstasy. Only then did she remember why they were doing this. Russ had been out there, watching. She could feel his gaze on them, intent but not angry. Just empty.

Dear God, he was empty, a black hole of pain, his confused core as heavy as stone. As her orgasm gathered, her magic streamed toward him, probing, seeking. The darkness in him shivered as her light brushed against it. Shivered, but did not yield.

She wasn't strong enough. She couldn't burn up the darkness to let out the truth he'd held dammed inside for so long. But she had to. Oh, please God, she couldn't let him keep going on like this, so broken and alone.

And she needed to come, couldn't hold back, couldn't keep banging at the door to his soul any longer unless Trey released the burning tension in her. Her gaze returned to Trey's, pleading. Again her angel came to the rescue. His lips brushed the curl of her ear. "Take my magic in you, Sage. My magic with yours. Relax. Let it spin out on the crest of your climax."

She didn't need to be told twice. The rising wind of their combined power rushed warm over her breasts. Bending his head, Trey took one of the throbbing tips in his mouth. His teeth rasped, nipped, stretching the boundaries of pleasure and pain until she couldn't tell the difference any more, only knew that she wanted more, needed it. Her nipples elongated to aching points.

And then he backed off.

"Stay in control, sweetie." His hips began to move, agonizingly slow, nudging her closer to the brink. His tongue laved her tit with leisure as his cock eased full length into her, in and then out. Slow, then fast and hard, his thickness shuddering inside her as her body trembled.

Together, they hung at the peak, and then finally, he gave her the brutal thrusts she craved chased by a flurry of whisper soft strokes. Her hips rocked into him, urging him to take her harder, faster, until every push of his cock ignited her walls in stretching flames of rapture. So much pleasure magic poured from him, into her, that his incendiary heat rushed in her veins, lighting her from the inside out with angel fire.

And then something unhinged inside her.

A tidal wave of excruciating delight flooded through her. Her power melded with his, her body jolted whip-tight. She opened her eyes and latched onto Trey's. His eyes were black mirrors reflecting the magic that spun around their heads while his erection throbbed in her, a shuddering release. For one infinite moment, time stopped and they were one.

Her lungs dragged for breath in a rasping effort to catch up while her pleasure drifted down and the world wound back into focus. And there, behind her beautiful Trey, Russ groaned. She peered over his shoulder and focused on Russ. Oh, God, he was beautiful, too, light to Trey's dark.

The familiar blue of Russ's eyes had gone stormy as his hand stroked the ridge of his cock. It was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen, his jaw angled tight with lust as he watched her with Trey. His hips rocked as he caressed himself. The magic she and Trey had made settled around him like stardust. In that golden light, he stood still as a statue, Adonis reborn.

"Russ," she whispered, her voice breathless and tight.

Her heart sank a mile as Trey's cock left her. Gently, he settled her on her feet. Though their combined powers still thrummed through her, her knees felt like putty. She leaned into him for support.

Trey pressed his lips to her forehead. "Talk to him."

Trey turned her by the shoulders so that she stood between the two men. Her back pressed into Trey's chest for support as she tipped her chin up to search out Russ. Trey extended a hand over her shoulder to touch Russ's jaw.

Sage's eyes cut between the two men as their gazes met, onyx on sapphire. Magic arced from Trey into her while she tried with everything in her to push it deeper into Russ. Damn it, she wasn't strong enough. His heart was a brick wall, impenetrable.

Russ jerked under Trey's fingers. His features smeared with fury in a brutal imitation of the Russ she knew and loved. Stepping back, he raised the rifle he still held in his left hand and aimed the barrel at Sage.

She cried out, crossing her arms over her face, bracing for the shot.

"Drop it." Trey's voice was Gabriel's trumpet. Lightening quick, he stepped around her and shielded her from Russ. Terror clawed her throat as she peered around Trey's shoulder, willing her magic to scour Russ's soul for some chink in his armor, some way for love to get through.

But he was stone.

He was fucking stone, but she wouldn't quit, so she kept pushing until something flexed inside her head, a white flash of pain so searing she thought she might die from it. Then, beyond the shrill vibration of her own scream, she felt the slightest give in Russ's heart.

A shudder worked over his body. The rifle barrel dipped.

Taking advantage of the hesitation, Trey advanced. While Russ was no small man, in Trey's mammoth shadow, he was porcelain.

Trey extended an arm over her shoulder. Magic sparked from his broad hand as he settled it over Russ's heart.

"What you think you see doesn't exist. Not anymore." His voice was a rhythmic croon as beguiling as Pan's flute. Russ's brow crumpled in confusion. His jaw worked, but no sound followed. The rifle dropped even lower. Trey wrapped his fist around the barrel. The two men hung there frozen for the longest time, silent, unmoving, the rifle trembling between them until Russ's shoulders sagged in defeat.

Trey took the weapon. Opening the chamber, he popped out the bullets and compressed them in his fist. When he opened his hand again, only dust remained on his outstretched palm.

Russ's eyes widened. But just as quickly, his brows knit with suspicion. "Who the hell—what the hell—are you?"

"I am called Trey." He dropped a glance to his own outstretched palm where sparks danced over the bullet residue. It vanished without a trace.

Leaving a slack-jawed Russ to absorb that, Trey passed the weapon off to Sage. She propped the rifle against the wall. A hard shiver rattled her. If not for Trey, the damn thing could have killed her. Hell, would have.

When she turned around again, something between the two men had changed. With Trey bowed over him, protective, Russ caved, keening in misery. Blackness coiled from his mouth, his nose, while Trey smoothed his

hair and rocked him. "Let it go, bud. Let it go."

Whether it was a miracle or mere shock that had driven Russ into the circle of Trey's arms, she would never know. She didn't care as long as Trey could help Russ find his way out of the darkness.

Seeing Russ like that, weak and broken, nearly shattered her. Concern overrode her fear. She nudged her lips against the back of his shoulder. Even there, on the seal of her kiss, she could feel the simmering miracle of the magic Trey's touch had stirred to life inside her.

As she moved around to Russ's side, his face turned toward hers, though he kept his cheek pressed into the sanctuary of Trey's shoulder. She thought she saw a softening, some glimmer of the old Russ. Pushing into him again with her magic, something in him gave like a bursting dam of emotion. His pain slammed hard into her, a brutal punch in the gut.

Suddenly, she was falling in another place, landing face first in mud. And then she knew it all and felt the roots of Russ's misery as if she was reliving it for him. The bite of a fan belt lashed her bare ass and her back. Then her nose burned with the stench of body fluids as she banged her head, her fists in a helpless quest to expand the cramped confines of a stifling black box.

She saw the face of the boy, Billy, Russ had nearly died trying to save. They'd both ended up prisoners of war as a result. Dear God, how could any government dare send so anyone young that far from home only to meet such a cruel death?

But she knew Russ and felt his obligation to shield the boy, to take beatings on his behalf, until one day, protectiveness turned into something else.

Into love.

But that hadn't stopped him from escaping. Gunfire riddled the ground behind Russ's wild dash for cover in the jungle. Billy's tortured screams told Russ the Viet soldiers were tearing the boy apart in a vile effort to force Russ to turn back. Billy's agony echoed in Sage's heart and clawed at her gut. But those desperate wails weren't the worst part of what Russ had endured.

The silence that followed them was.

She felt the sobs that had seized Russ's chest as he ran. He'd vowed to send help back, but that silence meant help would change nothing, not for his sweet Billy.

"Oh, God, Russ."

Russ hung his head in shame. Tears streamed from her eyes as she moved in between the two men. Leaning back into Trey's chest, she opened her arms to her broken lover.

"I don't give a damn that you loved someone else over there. I only care that you came home to me."

Russ remained fixed to his place before her, his bright head bowed in misery. "I left him. I killed him."

"No! You didn't kill anybody. They did it to bring you back, to keep you from sending help."

Russ took another step backward, his beautiful face haggard with misery. "He trusted me."

Sage couldn't check her tears or the overwhelming pity that clogged her throat. Somehow, she had to make him listen to her. "I know you, Russ. You'd never willingly let harm come to somebody you love."

Russ cut a meaningful glance at the rifle. One brow arched in question.

“You never fired it at me, Russ!” She knew damn well that was a lie. Trey’s body tightened behind her as she told it, but goddamn it, she knew Russ. She understood full well what he would do to himself if he thought he’d done anything to harm her.

She also knew she would die herself before she let that happen.

“I loved a man, Sage. Loved him with everything in me.”

“You just stood there and watched me make love to another man, but what I feel for him takes nothing away from what I feel for you. I know you love me, Russ.”

Russ pressed his hands to the sides of his head as he backed down one of the porch stairs. She was losing him, damn it. Desperate, she leaned into Trey, drawing on his power to tether Russ with magic. She wouldn’t let him go. Not until he understood that escaping had been his best option for helping Billy. And himself.

With her magic drawing him back, she riveted her gaze to his and wished he would open his heart to her.

“Maybe that’s why they call it making love, Russ. Who cares where we find it as long as it gets us through all the bullshit life shoves our way?”

Broken, Russ fell to his knees. “I can’t forget him.”

Sage brushed a hand over the bright cap of his hair. Tucking her fingers beneath his jaw, she lifted his chin up so that his gaze met hers. “You never will. But if you’ll just let Trey help us, he can heal you. Help you go on.”

Russ paused for a long moment. “I don’t know how.”

“I do.” Sage kissed her fingers and then touched her hand to the top of Russ’s head. Trembling, she lifted one of his hands from her hip. Lacing her fingers into his, she leaned back into Trey and draped one leg over Russ’s shoulder.

“Come home to me, Russ.” Magic rose fresh in her as he pressed a tentative kiss on her mons. Behind her, Trey’s hands settled on breasts and tugged her nipples. Russ’s tongue parted the curls at her cleft.

“Oh, God, baby. Yes, like that....”

Auburn curls danced on Russ’s lips as he tongued Sage’s clit. Her sweet syrup was his opium, he an addict in search of a fix. He pulled her pearl between his lips, circled it with a slow swirl of his tongue. Groaning, she fell back against the man behind her so that her leg curled tighter against Russ’s shoulder and pinned his head to her pretty pussy.

Dizzy with her fragrance, he was unbalanced by a floating sense of unreality. He knew he was wrapped in some kind of spell and actually felt himself wavering between worlds, one ridden with the horrors of his past, the other rife with sensual magic. But nothing was going to drag him out of this moment. He was so hungry for her taste he might well die from it. He dragged a greedy finger through her slick folds while he suckled her clit. She rewarded him with a husky moan. It was echoed by the throaty growl of the man behind her. Trey.

The audible evidence of Trey’s need lanced Russ with fresh lust and the promise of dual pleasure. His fingers parted the damp petals of Sage’s sex. As he dragged his tongue through her sweetness, a part of him floated overhead, watching himself tongue-fuck this beautiful woman while a dark giant teased her nipples and nuzzled her neck.

And all the while, sparks flew around them, out of Russ, into Sage, through Trey.

Sage's hips tilted, and he shoved his tongue further into her channel. But even as he felt her muscles clench in response, he couldn't help but wonder if he'd made good on his vow to shove a pistol in his mouth and pull the trigger. Because this lightshow must have been borne from a hallucination from his death throes. That was the only explanation that made any sense.

Alive or dead, some kind of spiritual war was going on inside him. And if that meant he was dying, then by God, let him go like this, with her taste coating his tongue and her cream painting his lips.

"Some things can't be explained, Russ. Just let go. Ride the magic," Trey whispered.

Had the man somehow heard Russ's thoughts? Even Trey's voice resonated with otherworldly power. It vibrated like an angel's shout and sent the shadows that still sought to consume his soul skittering to the outer edges of his mind.

And if the price of having Sage now meant having Trey, too, then so be it. It wasn't like he hadn't had a man before. Hell, he'd loved one.

Oh, but he loved fucking Sage, too. She was so hot and wet, her body satin smooth beneath his palms. His cock elongated as his mind replayed the image of Sage being fucked hard by the raven-haired giant behind her. Trey had rammed his enormous tool into her without mercy and she'd given back in kind and had even begged him for more.

While a former version of himself would have liked nothing better than to kick Trey's ass, now all he wanted to do was fuck it. But not before he—they—both made love to Sage.

His tongue moving back to her clit, he slid two fingers into her wet heat. If her taste wasn't enough to drive him mad, then the feel of her sweet cunt milking his fingers was. And one thing was for damn certain. His cock certainly *felt* alive. Breathing deeply, he feasted on Sage's expression only to catch Trey staring down at the both of them. Trey's fingers worked her tits while she leaned hard into him, her sweet little ass rocking against the man's groin while Russ's tongue reamed her pussy.

The sight of him took Russ's breath away. The man was beautiful beyond belief, but that wasn't all that made Russ feel so drawn to him. It was those bottomless black eyes. If there was ever a stare that could plunder the bottom of a man's soul and chase out the darkness, then it belonged to Trey. For the first time since that bomber approached in Nam, Russ knew that if he just let go and let love in, he might just find a way to survive.

If Sage didn't know better, she would swear these two men had done this together a million times. They seemed to exist for no other purpose in this world than to make a woman's body sing with ecstasy.

Russ was gentle to her front, Trey fierce at her back. The juxtaposition of sensation was almost too much, but they wouldn't let up or give her a second to draw breath. With each passing second, another piece of her world dissolved until there were only the flaming fingers in her cunt and on her nipples. Blistering hot need spun in her core until she was on fire with the urge to come.

Desperate to hold on to something and to ground herself, she raised her arms over her head. Threading her fingers through Trey's hair, she hung on for dear life. Russ's fingers pierced her pussy while his hot tongue laved her sweet spot.

Her head thrashed at Trey's chest. The blistering sensations he ignited in her breasts were echoed tenfold in her womb. Atop the scorching heat that bolted straight to her pussy, his magic threaded through hers, weaving

white sparks through every cell. Behind her, his erection pressed into the cleft of her butt, making her long for him to part her cheeks and plunder her there while Russ took her pussy.

The very idea of such a forbidden thing shoved her over the top with a shuddering release. Her lungs heaved for air and her inner walls clenched hard against Russ's fingers. Electric, the pleasure rocked her so hard that she sagged into Trey for support, trembling, spent, wondering if was possible that a girl could die from pleasure.

But her bad-ass angel wasn't done with her yet. Just as the lancing thrills in her pussy began to subside, his finger probed at her rear. Fresh flames thrust inside her, shoving her back to the brink.

Then Russ, wicked Russ, followed suit. His two fingers drew out of her just long enough for Trey to slide another into her bottom. Then they began to fuck her like that, Trey pushing in while Russ slid out, perfectly timed counterstrokes, in, out, over and again until their dueling motions riddled her body with sensations so piercing and intense she couldn't breathe, couldn't move, could only sag into Trey and let run-on climaxes roll over her in relentless waves.

"Please!" she cried, her nails clawing at Trey's neck.

"Please what, sweetie?" The rasp of his stubble beneath her ear as he spoke was enough to send her into a fresh frenzy. She didn't know what she wanted, couldn't find words, could only open her mouth and scream as waves of fire swept away the last vestiges of her coherence.

Wicked Temptation: Chapter 7

Trey's senses were shattered by the raw intensity of making love to Sage, and then pleasuring her a second time with Russ's help. Never had he seen erotic magic look so good on a woman. Their combined powers ignited her hair with a fiery halo. Magic rose from her on a spiral of topaz sparks.

Her sweet ass convulsed around his fingers and nearly caused him to spend. The sight of Russ as he lifted his head, his lips glazed with her icing, all but finished the job. But as much as Trey yearned to sheathe his cock in her tight little bottom, he would not take her yet. He would never want her to think she was nothing more to him than some common vessel through which he sought only to channel magic.

And yet he would be taking her again, both he and Russ. While this first skirmish in redeeming the man from his dark visions was over, the battle for his soul was nowhere near done. The black void that cloaked Russ's aura had faded some, but not nearly enough for Trey to believe the mortal could overcome its hold alone.

But Sage, she was exhausted. She trembled between them, dazed and spent. Russ didn't look much better for the wear. The handsome lines of his face were ravaged by the battle taking place inside him.

They were, after all, mortal. Their frail bodies needed to rest and there was a perfectly good bed inside. Easing his fingers from Sage's bottom, Trey pressed a kiss to the crown of her head and lifted her into her lover's arms. "Take her to the bedroom."

Russ lifted a pale eyebrow, questioning, a lost soul looking for guidance. Sage grumbled out an incoherent protest, her head resting on Russ's broad shoulder. As it should be.

And as it would be, damn it.

"I'll be along in a moment." Trey hoped they didn't catch the emotion that clogged his voice. He watched in misery as Russ vanished through the front door with Sage. As they disappeared from sight, something inside him crumbled.

He had never been able to wrap his mind around the reasons so many mortals were willing to destroy themselves and each other when faced with unrequited love. But now he knew. Oh, gods, he knew it, he felt it in his own heart, and he didn't think he could bear it.

But he fucking had to.

Bracing his shoulders against the wall, he sucked for air. For sanity. For hope. The knowledge that this night was all he would ever have with her shredded his heart to tatters. Teeth gritted, he struggled to tamp down a surge of black emotions he had no right to feel.

Closing his eyes, he uttered a silent prayer to the Creator. *Send me some scrap of reassurance. Tell me I haven't been sent here only to shove the soul of the woman I love into the minion's keep.*

His plan had to work.

He waited for a long moment for some visible sign that he was on the right path and that he could still right the damage done to this couple. Even the crickets fell quiet, the silence a denial of solace.

Starlight slanted through the eyelet curtains and washed the bedroom in an insipid light. But Sage didn't need the heaven's illumination to tell her that the naked male body she was spooned around belonged to Russ.

When she first woke, her forehead had been pressed between his shoulder blades just as it had every night since they'd first pulled out of Jacksonville. The familiar lines of his body soothed her. He was her history.

But because of the magic Trey had unleashed inside her, she could still sense the darkness that ate at Russ's soul. The power Trey had brought to life inside her hadn't done enough to vanquish Russ's pain. It had only weakened it. She knew she wouldn't rest until the battle scars had been erased from her first love forever. If that meant making some more magic with Trey for Russ's benefit? That was groovy with her.

Trey. His name spilled from her lips on a sigh. From behind her, his even breaths warmed her neck. His scent was crisp, like fresh-cut grass after a rainstorm. Her bottom was tucked in the warm nest of his groin. He stirred and draped a bronzed thigh over her hips. She welcomed his protective weight. It proved he was still here.

It proved all of this real.

Though she'd only known him for hours, she couldn't begin to imagine a life without him in it. Because if Russ was her history, then Trey was her hope. She'd never felt this complete. And if she were to judge by the generous ridge of flesh that seared the small of her back, hope was packing a serious hard-on.

She couldn't resist the urge to wriggle her bottom against him. Trey's thigh tightened around her in response. His silken length pressed into the crevice of her butt. Rivulets of sensation skittered up her spine. Sinfully hungry for the attention of both these beautiful men, her hand wove around Russ's hips to snuggle his sack. History, hope, two bodacious hard-ons—could life get any better than this?

Russ stirred beside her, groaning. His hand covered hers to position her fist around his cock. The man was ready for some serious loving.

To her rear, Trey growled as his hand wound a slow trail to her breast and tweaked her nipple to a tight bud.

Russ snaked his hand behind him to pet the damp curls guarding her slit. She couldn't restrain her mewling delight. The magic inside her stretched to life. Hungry for more of what Russ was giving out, she hitched her leg over his hips, giving him better access.

Not to be denied, Trey's teeth nipped at her neck. The magic in her trembled in response. Rising up on one elbow, she kissed Russ on the side of his neck and then bit down on his earlobe. His cock leapt in her hand, approving.

She leaned back to peer at Trey, whose hair draped over them, raven silk brushing her shoulders, as his mouth possessed hers. As she floated on the wings of his kiss, Russ parted her labia, drawing her back to earth. To him.

"God, baby, you're already wet," he rasped.

Trey raised his head from her mouth and turned his attention to the vein hammering at the base of her neck.

"So turn around and help Trey do something about it," she said.

Ever the compliant lover, Russ turned to face her, the length of his chiseled body blasting her with its heat. The barest hint of a smile played at the corners of his lips, shades of the man she'd once loved with such reckless ferocity it had scared the bejeezus out of her.

She wondered if she would ever see that version of him again.

While his gaze still glittered, hard as granite, his libido didn't suffer any for the darkness that stalked him.

Pressing into him with her magic, she felt a definite give in the dark shell around his heart. They could do this, she and Trey. They could bring Russ home.

If Russ felt her magic probing him, he didn't let on. His hand lifted her thigh higher around his hips, spreading her. Dragging her closer to him, her pussy hugged the base of his erection. She could feel his pulse drumming in her folds.

For all his talk about loving a man, he sure knew his way around a woman's body. Searching for a way to connect with him, she brushed her palm over the crisp cap of his hair.

"I miss it long." Her thumb brushed the vulnerable curl of his ear. "The way it was before you left."

Trey kissed her neck in silent encouragement. Russ was quiet for a moment, but not lost. His hips rocked against hers so that his cock massaged her pussy in all the right places.

"Remember how I used to tangle my fingers in it when we kissed?" She was reaching him. She could tell by the bits of blue that sparked in his eyes, evidence of magic. With her own hips echoing his motions, a languid warmth coated her sex.

The scent of her need rose between them. Both men groaned in response.

Suddenly hungry to see both of them, she dropped onto the pillow to peer up at them. Trey's face hovered within inches of Russ's. Desire flooded from her as the two men locked eyes. Trey arched a brow at Russ, suggestive, and ran a tentative finger up the seam of her bottom. Russ appraised him in return.

The flickering of carnal approval flared in both men's eyes. Russ rose onto his elbow, leveling their faces.

"It's okay to kiss him," she said to Russ, tempting him. "As long as you don't stop touching me."

A low growl rumbled in Trey's chest. Russ didn't retreat when Trey's mouth curled into a diabolical grin.

Trey's fingertip breeched her bottom hole. "You heard the lady."

Russ's gaze rested on Trey's mouth, that wicked sinful mouth. He pressed a thick finger into her channel, caressed her inner walls with long strokes. Trey did the same behind her while he leaned forward to brush his lips against Russ's.

A shiver rattled the two of them as their flesh connected. Russ licked Trey's lips. Trey's jaw softened, not just taking the kiss, but giving it back in kind. Sage couldn't hold back her approving moan. Hot tendrils of need wound tight in her womb. Magic streamed in violent arcs between the three of them. She had to reel it in, but the utter depravity of watching the two men kiss, Russ plundering her pussy, Trey her bottom, shattered her control.

Her clit rose to an aching point, greedy for attention. Unable to distract the men, she reached down to roll her throbbing clit between her fingers. Her orgasm stormed through her like lightening. Her back arched against the power that flooded her veins, and her breasts pressed flush into Russ's chest while her bottom pushed into Trey and his magic fingers.

Pleasure lanced her hard. Her breath tore from her in shreds. She was dimly aware of the two men turning her so that she nearly lay on top of Trey. In front of her, over her, Russ raised her leg higher, stretching her wider yet. Cool air rushed over her burning folds while his flaming fingers pumped in, out. The contrast of sensations, cold on hot, only heightened her excitement.

Wanton, hot lips worked her flesh in unison, Russ at her mouth, Trey at the nape of her neck. Somebody's

hands—she didn't give a damn whose—tormented her breasts and her clit until desire buttered the crevice of her ass. Trey's slick, hot fingers—were there two now?—worked her from behind.

Pleasure hitched a ride on their spiraling magic, and she climbed higher. She forced her eyes open to peer into Russ's face. His lips were swollen from their kisses. His beautiful features were tight with ecstasy. He looked wild, wicked, like the Russ she longed to know again.

"Take me, Russ, please."

He positioned his cock between her thighs at her entrance while Trey slid a third finger into her bottom. His scissoring strokes stretched her, branding her insides as Russ eased his cock inside her.

And then Trey's fingers were gone.

Gone!

"More," she demanded.

And her lovers delivered. Russ's cock was hilt-deep inside her and her bottom clenched as she realized she was going to get exactly what she'd wished for from Trey. His cock, satin slick with her fluids, probed at the tight opening to her rear.

Adrenaline ran through her veins, scalding. Fingers of flame licked her womb.

"Shh, baby, I've got you," he whispered. "Just let us love you while you harness the magic."

She didn't know how she could harness anything with Russ pumping her pussy in a maddening cadence that only threw her further out of control. Relentless, Trey nudged forward where his fingers had prepared the way. His teeth nipped the back of her shoulder as his cock breached her where she was still a virgin, where no lady ought to ever long for a man's touch.

Whether her heart hammered from excitement or fear, she couldn't say. All she could focus on was that tight bud of tissue as it ignited into a scorching ring of fire. Her breath was nothing more than ragged gasps as the tissue resisted. But then there was only stretching and delight from the dueling friction of two cocks that filled her until she thought she would split apart.

Magic sang in her blood and vibrated against the cage of her mind. Russ squeezed her clit just hard enough to send her to the edge.

And then she erupted.

Oh God, she shattered. She couldn't get control of the ecstasy. The magic forced her to drive her hips between the two men, her pelvis riding in time to the rhythm of their forceful thrusts. They pumped her in tandem. As one plunged into her, the other withdrew, a maddening blend of simultaneous need and satisfaction.

The world was spinning on the axis of her pleasure. Agony shredded her mind as she forced herself to focus her magic toward Russ. But she was unable to control herself any longer. She flew apart on the dueling sensations these two men hammered through her, possessing her.

"Paradise," Trey murmured, his lips at the back of her neck. His moans vibrated against her ear, a bass soundtrack for the pleasure rippling through her.

Russ's mouth took hers and she screamed her release into his mouth. Clenching spasms ripped through her as Trey's body went rigid at her back. To her front, Russ seized, his ass tight beneath her palms. All three of them climaxed together, united in a pinnacle of bliss. The two of them pumped their hot seed into her until both her

quivering openings were saturated with liquid fire.

Her eyes flew open just in time to capture the indigo flash in Russ's eyes as her magic burned away the last remnants of darkness. His hand settled on her cheek as he rasped for air, his eyes the softest summer blue. Deep in those warm, familiar depths, she saw a glimmer of the untroubled spirit she had mourned for so long.

"Welcome home, baby."

Trey eased his cock from her bottom and pressed a kiss to her cheek. Just as she drifted away on the wings of satiated exhaustion, she thought she heard him say, "I love you."

And she loved him, too. Always would. She would have to remember to tell him so, later, after she emerged from this cocoon of sleepiness now slowly claiming her.

She knew he didn't believe himself an angel, but her heart knew better. Maybe some angels walked the earth not knowing who or what they were. Perhaps angels had to earn their wings by sharing their magic with those humans who were too broken to go on living.

The answers to the mystery of Trey would come later.

For now, she was wrapped safe in the arms of a miracle, her first lover locked tight in her embrace, the three of them forever joined by the magic they'd created between them.

No, not magic.

Love.

Though, come to think of it, maybe love was the most powerful magic of all.

Trey raised himself onto his elbow to slake his gaze on Sage one last time.

He knew he would crave the sight of her like this right down to the last second of his soul's existence. Gods, if he had to lose himself in the void, let his last cognizant thought be of her as she was now, lying here beside him with her vermilion curls streaming wildly across the pillowcase and a sated half-smile playing at her lips.

And then there was Russ, sprawled beside Sage in the deepest sleep he'd experienced in years. A different kind of love moved Trey's heart, a fierce sense of camaraderie. Too bad what he felt for Sage's fated lover was dulled by his own envy. In time, he imagined he could have come to love him with the same driving urgency as he did Sage.

And he hoped the man knew what a lucky bastard he was.

Given another life, or another chance, Trey would fight Russ to the death to call Sage his own. Now his only comfort came in knowing Russ would heal enough to assume his rightful place as the love of her life.

All was as it should be.

Almost.

Gulping down the hurt that clawed his throat, he blinked back the moisture stinging his eyes. He eased himself from the bed, and then pulled the covers over the sleeping lovers. As he did so, his mark vibrated to life, feeding him the coordinates for the gateway that would open within moments.

Too bad he would never have the chance to thank Sage for firing his own magic back to life. He knew he should use a measure of it to drop a veil of forgetting over her. It was the right thing to do. But some stubborn longing stayed his hand.

What was the worst that could happen in letting her remember him? No matter what he did now, this mission would earn him a one way trip to the void. The immortal realm would be scraped clean of any memory of him. Why not let this fragment of memory of him live on here, on the earthly plane, in Sage's tender keeping?

He would have this tiny shred of temporary immortality, this place in her heart. While he knew she would miss him and maybe even cry for him, judging by how tightly she clutched Russ in her arms, she would soon get over him and get on with her life.

She'd only begun to guess the power she harbored inside her. If he left her intact, she would remember how to use it if she must. He had no doubt that should she cross paths with a minion again, she would scorch his slimy ass to cinders.

Most importantly, her awareness of her magic would insure she and Russ would live. Love.

Rules be damned. At the end of the day, that was what a time strider's work was all about.

Love.

Wicked Temptation: Chapter 8

When Diadra saw Trey skulking from the cottage, she stole behind a pine tree for cover. Gods only knew what kind of fit he would throw if he figured out she'd followed him here. Peering through the tree's sweeping branches, she bit back a joyous whoop. Judging by the reek of human pheromones that followed in the strider's wake, he'd had himself a high old time last night.

Just as she suspected, the minion's aphrodisiac had weakened his will enough for the human slut to tempt him into a good deal more than a kiss. The human blood that ran in Trey's veins had taken care of the rest. A bereft expression dragged down his features. Had he lost something beyond magic last night? His heart, maybe?

No. What a scandal this would be. Served the cocky bastard right, if you asked her. Now just look at the big bad strider, running away to cover his tracks. As if! There wasn't any place in the universe where he could hide from Heroset's wrath once she realized he'd not only bungled his mission, he'd fucked it up with his own fool dick.

Literally!

Soon enough, he would belong to Diadra. She would make sure of it.

Her possessive gaze caressed his massive form as he jogged toward the woods. A shiver worked over her. He would look delicious chained beneath her as she flogged him into submission. Somehow, she would wear him down and make him give in to her. Oh, yes, she would.

After all, if not for her intended merciful intercession with Malifor on Trey's behalf, he would waste in the void. And if he still refused to adore her? She would make like a minion and force him to personally hand-feed his lady love's soul to Malifor.

Her thighs clenched in anticipation of Trey's delicious length hilted inside her. She followed his progress toward the woods. As he approached the tree line, she saw the shimmering flex of the Ether of Possibilities as it buttressed the human realm.

Impossible!

But true.

She knew he'd broken his vows. She could smell as much. By all rights his powers should be far too spent to open a gateway. Come to think of it, the timeline around them should be collapsing into the minion's keep this very moment.

But instead of the angry grumble of the earth splitting, she heard only the distant lapping of water. Where were the deafening screams of an approaching legion of minions? Why didn't they peel back the sky to reap the spoils of their age-old quest?

All she saw here was a world at peace. A lone rabbit was poised by the woods, its silly pink nose twitching as it lifted toward a breeze redolent with honeysuckle. Her stomach heaved at the sickening serenity of it all. It was a damn good thing she'd grown some balls and followed Trey through the gateway, because he was undoubtedly the luckiest bastard in all creation. Frustrated, she dug her fingernails into her palm, searching beyond the haze of anger for some shred of clarity.

In spite of the vows Trey had broken, he must have contrived some way to right the wrongs he'd committed. It was the only way he could have reclaimed his magic. Obviously, there was some higher power at work here

that neither she nor the minions had accounted for.

Without the souls they coveted, the fucking minions would never pay up. No way would she let that happen.

Never. Ever. Panic.

Wasn't that the first rule Malifor had drilled into her as he tutored her on the inner workings of chaos? If there was a higher good at work here, then didn't the rule of balance demand there must also be a deeper evil?

And what of the second rule of chaos? Nothing was accidental.

She had chosen to come here, so now she was inserted as an active player in the mortal schemata. So by the gods, she would play the part that had likely been written for her the moment she'd leaped through the gateway after Trey.

If she kept her wits about her, she could still become the final element of chaos meant to tear this timeline down. With Trey oblivious to her presence here, her last best chance for success was still within her grasp.

As she watched Trey vanish through the gateway, she couldn't help letting loose the tiniest trill of laughter. The way she saw it, all his mission needed was a little bit of TLC from her to go straight to B'hoth in a basket.

As if on cue, something stirred in the cabin behind her. Someone in there was awake. If she intended to do this thing, she needed to get on with it before Trey made it back to Ethereum and spouted off to the Council of Higher Gods about how she'd drugged him into breaking his vows.

If Heroset sent her hulking goons here to drag her ass home, she knew she and her plans were done for. Hastening toward the front porch, she noticed the rifle propped against the porch wall. An oily puddle of darkness oozed beneath it, the stinking leavings of evil. Making her way up the stairs, she padded across the wood plank flooring. She kicked the discarded clothing out of her way and knelt to rest her hand on the weapon's barrel. Closing her eyes, she did as Malifor had taught her and traced the rifle's dark history backward until she saw Trey plucking the bullet out of the air to place it into Sage's hand.

Interesting.

Then Diadra heard Sage, on this same porch, lie to her lover, claiming he'd never once fired the gun at her.

Well, well. Trey's redheaded mortal wasn't just a conniving slut. She was a fucking liar, too. And everybody knew the Creator hated liars more than anything. As Malifor had said, where a lie was uttered, there was an open invitation for evil to take root.

Evil, in this case, being herself.

Smiling so hard her cheeks ached, she hoisted the weapon over her shoulder. She called on the dark magic learned from Malifor and assumed the image of a middle-aged man clad in a policeman's uniform. Moving to the front door, she raised a meaty hand to knock just as a blond mortal—damn, he was a handsome one—opened the door.

"Morning, sir." Her voice took on the timbres of a winding male drawl as she hitched her belt up over her paunch. Extending her free hand to shake his, she delighted at the nervous moisture that coated his palm as it grasped her own.

"Bob O'Hanlon, State Trooper," she said.

"Sergeant Russell McKenna."

“Looks to me like we have ourselves an untended weapon here.” Diadra could sense Russ’s struggle to keep his chin level. He lifted his shoulders in a shrug with a contrived air of nonchalance. But she didn’t miss the fact that the intense blue of his eyes dulled a little as he considered his options.

“Who’s to say it belongs to me?” he offered.

“Can’t say anybody has. But we have a half-dozen reports of a man matching your description shooting at a defenseless woman down by the lake last night. If it hadn’t been for that Good Samaritan going out into the water to save her, God only knows what might have happened.”

Diadra had to bite back her delighted grin as the taller man’s face blanched. Those enormous shoulders of his sagged under a new yoke of guilt.

She plucked the strand of beads around his neck so that the elastic snapped back to bite the tender flesh. Wasn’t a damn thing he could say about it, either. One thing she knew about the human world—normal mortals didn’t dare mess with a man of the law.

“We don’t much appreciate your kind around here,” she continued, her voice harsh. Authoritative. “So here’s how it’s going to be. This here rifle’s staying with me. Now you can get your pot-smoking ass inside, pack your bags and get the motherfucking hell out of town, or I can take you in and write up enough charges to keep you behind bars for a half dozen years.”

Russell’s head dropped, defeated. It took everything Diadra had in her to refrain from bursting into laughter.

No doubt about it. Her work here was done.

The bedroom where Sage still slept was warm with sunshine and the golden promise of a new day. The light imbued her hair with an ethereal glow. Russ fisted his hands against the urge to twine his fingers through those flaming curls. He’d never wanted to hold her more than he did right now. But he couldn’t. And that knowledge sent his heart careening into his gut. After today, he would never see her again. But nothing could ever change the fact he would love her forever.

For one brief scrap of time, he had let himself believe they really could put the past behind them and start over. But Christ, he’d nearly killed her, just as surely as he’d killed Billy.

Despair rooted in his gut, clutched at his heart. How could he ever trust himself around her again knowing what he’d almost done? The truth was that he couldn’t. And if not for Trey....

A shudder worked over him. Damn it, he couldn’t bear what might have happened had the man not come to her aid when he did. Maybe he really was an angel, like Sage had said. A guardian angel.

Or maybe all the bizarre fireworks last night only proved he’d smoked too much weed. Either way, the end result was the same. He had put the woman he loved in danger. And he was fucking done with harming the ones he loved.

Fighting the emotions that lanced his heart, he dug the van keys from his pocket and laid them on the pillow beside her. For an aching moment, he just lingered there, etching her into memory. Before he could stop himself, he’d already lifted a tendril of her hair to his lips to kiss her goodbye the only way that wouldn’t wake her.

She still smelled of strawberries and wine. But she also smelled like Trey. Russ wasn’t sure where the man had gotten off to, but given the gilded beauty of the advancing day, he’d probably just gone for a walk.

The man's feral beauty was spellbinding, the erotic pull of his magic irresistible. Russ needed to make damn sure he was out of here before Trey returned and tempted him back into the bed with that diabolical grin of his.

Something shattered inside him as he backed out the bedroom and slid the door closed behind him. He knew he wouldn't rest until he'd put the safety of a thousand miles, hell, an entire fucking ocean between him and the temptation to turn back.

Even that may not be enough to keep Sage safe from his rages. God damn it, he would sink a bullet into his skull before he risked exposing her further to the demons that gnawed at his soul. Who knew when his next berserker would hit? And God only knew what new danger he might visit on her when it did.

He trudged down the wooded path that led to the lake. In the clearing where he'd left the van, he stared at the flat stone where he and Sage had first made love. He stumbled against the intensity of the emotions that railed through him. Like a junkie in search of a fix, he staggered forward to splay his fingers on the stone's timeworn surface. With his other hand he traced the delicate love beads she'd wound around his neck. The longing to be the right man for her tore through him with the brutal force of lightening.

It wasn't meant to be and he damn well knew it. Not in this lifetime.

With his jaw held firm, he wrapped his hand around the neck of his guitar which was still propped at the edge of the stone. Sage had spent half their trip embroidering peace signs and happy faces all over the strap.

Squeezing his eyes shut to staunch the moisture gathering there, he heaved a long sigh, and then turned toward the dirt road that had brought them here. God, had it only been yesterday? It seemed an eternity had passed.

The way he saw it, there was plenty enough money in the van's glove box to see Sage to wherever it was she wanted to go. And then some. Just around the last bend of the dirt road before him, a lonely stretch of highway.

If he remembered correctly, they'd been only a mile or so from the interstate before he'd been possessed with the unquenchable urge to write a song. With those dark strains rising fresh in his mind, dust clouds kicked up beneath his feet as he trod toward the road that would lead him away from this place.

Away from Sage.

Where there was a highway, there would always be a lonely trucker willing to give a soldier a ride to Fort Dix.

Killing people in the name of peace just doesn't make sense. God, how many times had Sage used that line as her argument against his return to Nam?

Every step he took toward the highway caused his heart to stumble over another beat. Ahead of him, sunlight glinted off the asphalt where he would hitch the ride that would carry him away from any danger of harming the woman he loved.

This was the right thing. He knew it. So why did leaving her this way feel so wrong? Dread weighted his feet as he trudged onto the highway's gravel shoulder. In the distance he heard the unmistakable rumble of an oncoming eighteen wheeler's engine. His ticket out of here. Then Sage would be free.

Only the dense thicket of brambles to his right kept him concealed from the truck driver's view. Slowing down a rig that size was going to take some time. If he was going to catch a ride, he needed to make his presence known, now.

If.

He steeled his jaw against the misery lancing his heart. His leg muscles bunched as he prepared to move beyond the brambles.

But remorse held him back. Who was he kidding? Nothing could prevent Sage's devastation when she discovered he'd chosen returning to Vietnam over staying stateside with her. All she wanted was for him to take up the only fight she believed in—the one to make damn sure the war came to a speedy end.

She would never forgive him for this choice. Nor would he forgive himself. No way could he face life knowing she regarded him as the enemy rather than the man he really was—the one who loved her enough to walk away.

He was doomed. Damned, even.

The truck was coming at him too fast to stop. But if he didn't remove himself from Sage's life now, he never would. He couldn't go back. He couldn't go forward. All he could do was focus on his feet and leap into the only place he knew Sage wouldn't hate him for going.

Hell.

As he jumped, he called her sweet name one final time, masking the sound of the oncoming truck's angry horn.

“Sage!”

Trey stumbled from the Ether only to slam headfirst into one of Heroset's rehabilitated demons—neophytes, she called them. Before he could shake the stars from his eyes, the shrouded goon had him shackled at his ankles, wrists and neck. As the beast lurched toward the exit of the Strider's Arena, Trey had no choice but to swallow his last shred of pride and bumble along in the beast's wake.

He didn't need to ask where the demon was taking him. He already knew the neophytes served only to enact the will of the Council of Higher Gods. It was clear he was under arrest. Worse, his knuckle-dragging escort hadn't bothered to issue him a robe, leaving him to face the Council nude—a humiliation reserved for perpetrators of the most heinous crimes.

Shit.

News of his transgression must have reached Ethereum before him. Nothing he said to Council would change his fate, but he'd hoped to seek judgment voluntarily. If only he could report that while he'd sinned his ass off, he'd also managed to save humanity. Perhaps it was small of him, but he wanted to witness the news of his accomplishment registering on the expressions of those Council members who'd cast lots on his failure. But now, nude and in chains, he doubted he would manage to utter a word beyond a direct reply to their interrogation.

The heavy-handed neophyte shoved him through the arching entryway that opened onto the Chamber of Reckoning. With one final kick to Trey's ass, the goon sent him and his mess of chains careening across the crystal floor. Trey struggled to best the cumbersome weight of his restraints. He didn't miss the masculine snickers that drifted down from the Judgment Bench. Brow tight with fury, he faced down the six gods who'd dared laugh at his plight.

Not a one of them dared look him in the eye. Only the High Goddess held her electric blue stare trained on him.

Heroset. His mentor turned judge. Her stare was ice as it bore into him. Though her raven eyebrows were drawn to a singular slash of ire, the furrows spoke of deep sorrow and disappointment.

Gods, his chains felt light compared to the damning weight of her perusal. But he'd expected as much and knew full well he deserved whatever penance he got here today. What he hadn't anticipated was the behavior of the three gods seated on each side of the goddess. Instead of focusing on him, the accused, their attention was riveted on *Heroset* as she prepared to judge him. Their scowling faces proved they hadn't forgotten she'd assigned Trey as a time strider so he might rise above his bloodline to earn a place among the gods. And she'd had to overrule the gods to do it.

What an inconsiderate oaf he'd been. He'd remained so focused on his mission—and then on saving Sage—that he'd never stopped to consider his actions could place more than just his soul in jeopardy. No matter how glorious the mission, he'd broken the rules. And he'd all but thumbed his nose at *Heroset* as he did it.

Silently, the goddess rose from her place at the bench. The alabaster spill of her hair parted around her shoulders as she raised her milky arms toward the dome overhead. In her right hand she clutched the jeweled handle of her judgment dagger. The flame of reckoning leaped from its lethal tip to signal the commencement of the proceedings against Trey.

Heroset's mouth trembled as the bailiff read the list of charges against him. Sobered by her apparent pain, Trey hauled himself to a kneeling position to communicate his humility. While no amount of shame could ever bring him to regret loving Sage, at the very least, he would honor his mentor with this show of respect.

He didn't give a damn what the other gods thought of him.

As if animated by some invisible signal, *Heroset* levitated above the bench. Creation magic changed her eyes to violet as she descended, agonizingly slow, until the silken folds of her train folded on the ground before Trey.

As was the custom, Trey bowed his head. Through his lashes he noted the restless tremor of her fingertips on the hilt of her dagger.

She was struggling with the task before her. He could feel it.

Refusing to let her suffer more anguish on his account, he lifted his chin. With the slightest nod he signaled that he was ready for her to begin.

Heroset's sigh was tremulous as she raised her dagger. She threw her head back to gaze toward the blazing globes that lit the domed chamber. Thunder rumbled as she thrust her dagger toward the white hot light. Blades of lightning sliced toward the apex of the dome from every direction. Their combined light charged toward the weapon's tip. Only when the blade was tempered with the blue-white light of justice did the goddess bring its point to rest on each of Trey's shoulders.

"Do not make false testimony to this bench, Trey."

As was required of any who testified before Council, Trey pinned his stare to the floor. "Only a fool would disgrace your bench with falsehoods, milady."

Heroset snorted. "Only a fool would engage in a dalliance with a preordained mortal."

The insult came like a slap in the face. Trey's head snapped to attention as he engaged the goddess eye to eye. "Fool or not, no one can deny my success. Have I not completed the task that no other strider before me has accomplished?"

With a toss of her pale mane, the goddess grazed the tender skin beneath his chin with the tip of her blade. Winding the fingers of her left hand through his hair, she jerked his head backward. The dagger's edge tightened at his larynx. "Have you gone daft, strider?"

Trey's brow tightened in confusion. "Rest assured I remain in control of my faculties." *No thanks to Diadra.*

"Because of your utter disdain for even the most basic rules, a trillion human souls were nearly lost. Yet you would call the travesty you have wrought a success?"

"Rest assured the human timeline is intact, milady." Trey hadn't meant to shout, but damn it, he would never allow that untruth said in the presence of his naysayers. He hadn't failed his mission.

Trey squelched the urge to recoil from the bite of the dagger at his jugular.

"Do you truly understand the consequences of perjury, Trey?" Heroset's voice was overly soothing, the singsong cadence used with one who had parted with sanity. Why would she urge him to make a false confession when his broken vows were sufficient to damn him?

"Cut to the chase, milady!" His words were dangerously clipped with the irritation he had no right to express. But he didn't care about that, not anymore. He was going to die today no matter what. He wouldn't go to the Void letting the Council believe his actions had damned all humanity. "We both know where this interrogation will end. Why not just damn me and get it over with?"

"Because I *can't*."

The gods above them gasped in unison. Heroset's face was a tortured mask as she reached into the pocket of her robe to produce a black vial. As she held it out for Trey's inspection, steel sparks grazed the circumference of the vessel, vile proof of dark magic and chaos.

"Do you know what this is?"

Trey dipped his chin in grim assent. "I suspect it's a relic from the minions' realm. But, milady, if you mean to use this as evidence to connect me with the minions—"

"Enough, strider!" Heroset's shout rolled over him with the force of thunder. "Enough," she whispered again. She made no move to check the tears that rolled from her eyes. "The vial was found in the pocket of the robe Diadra left in the Strider's Arena."

Stunned, Trey's head snapped to attention. Even if the vixen goddess had done the unthinkable and had colluded with minions, he couldn't wrap his mind around the idea she would leave such a sloppy trail behind her. If Diadra sought to protect anyone from the Council's wrath, it would be her own shapely ass.

"Your daughter may be impetuous," he said, "but she's no fool. Are you sure it belongs to her?"

Heroset's sword dropped to her side. Her head hung so low that her expression was shrouded by the snowy mantle of her hair. "My neophytes harvested her from the human realm. She followed you there, Trey."

Foreboding chilled Trey's blood. The shocked whispers of the gods above him faded to a distant echo. If Diadra had seen him with Sage, there was no telling what mischief her jealousy could have driven her to after his departure. But although his palms itched to strangle her, he now understood the source of Heroset's conflict.

He wasn't the only one who would lose someone most dearly loved today.

"I'm sorry." And he meant it. He felt terrible that he'd handled Diadra's advances so badly. Worse, if Heroset meant to damn him, she had no choice but to condemn her own daughter to the same punishment.

"You forget that the contents of your mind are not hidden from me, Trey," Heroset murmured. "Your lips plead sorrow, but your heart blames my daughter for forcing you into the arms of a predestined mortal."

Trey's brow creased. "Yes, milady, I made love to a human. Diadra's treachery set that into motion, and yet I would thank her for shoving me into the arms of the woman I believe to be my heart mate."

"Then you must see why we had no choice but to abort the timeline."

Trey's gut reeled in denial. "Milady, I swear to the Creator, I left the preordained relationship intact."

"And then Diadra drove a new wedge into it after you left."

"Yet you would still blame her treachery on me?"

"Had you not made love to the human, there would have been no opportunity for treachery available to her. My daughter did not make that choice for you!"

So Sage's world no longer existed. Trey's heart sank. He shivered as he visualized her precious face, tortured, horrified, as she watched her world fall apart at the seams. Something died inside him as he did so.

"Sage?" he rasped.

"She has been consigned to the Cradle of Displaced Souls pending the outcome of these proceedings."

"She did nothing wrong!" Trey shouted.

"Damn it, Trey. She didn't have to. The number of mortal souls in the universe is finite. Exact."

His chin lifted. He felt wounded that the High Goddess thought it necessary to remind him of so elementary a lesson. "Any fool knows that."

"So is the number of those preordained."

Again, nothing Trey didn't already know. "Why the history lesson, goddess?"

"Thanks to your utter disdain for the rules, a preordained soul is without her destined mate. We can't restore the human timeline until that hole is filled."

Trey's mind buzzed, confused and overwhelmed. "What are you trying to say?"

"Before we could tear down the timeline, the soul you knew as Russell McKenna became so riddled with despair that he threw himself in the path of an oncoming truck."

The statement drove through Trey with a hammer's force. A soul could spend eons absolving itself from rejecting the Creator's gift of life. Even if Russ did find absolution, he would never be allowed to withstand the heightened emotions inherent in a preordained soul's life.

"Why did he do it?"

"It certainly couldn't have anything to do with the fact you inserted yourself into his preordained relationship." Heroset's voice oozed sarcasm and bitterness.

"I already told you. I had no other choice."

“We all have choices, Trey. Free will is both the Creator’s greatest gift and the most taxing test of our faith. Diadra made a choice. You made one. And both of you chose poorly.”

Trey’s head dropped, heavy with the weight of the consequences of his actions. Heroset was right. He’d chosen this path the moment he stole a kiss from Diadra. Now they would both pay the price. All for one forbidden kiss imbued with the power to grant the minions free reign over creation.

“Milady... goddess....” Trey’s voice broke. He couldn’t go on. He had no words to express the devastation that shredded his heart.

Stepping closer to him, Heroset raised her sword tip beneath his chin, forcing him to look at her. “When you knew you’d erred, you should have enlisted the Council to restart the human timeline. Then Russ wouldn’t have destroyed himself.”

There was nothing Trey could say. She was right. Dear gods, why didn’t she just slice his head from his shoulders and be done with it?

“You were so hell-bent on winning your godship that you let your cock lead humanity—and the woman you claim to love—to the brink of destruction.”

“But Diadra—”

“Will pay her own penance.” Heroset’s beautiful features were tortured with a mixture of pain and rage. “Granted, she set this debacle into motion, but it was your pride that ensured humanity’s demise.”

The burn of the truth was nearly unbearable. Emotion constricted his throat with a noose of his own making. Sage had suffered unspeakable fear because of him. Russ had ended his own life.

Now Heroset stood to lose a daughter. All because of his fucking pride, the raw ambition to remake himself into something more than the Creator had ever intended.

“Please, just damn me, Heroset. I deserve it.”

“Yes, you do.”

Bracing for the worst, Trey set his jaw.

Instead of slicing his head from his shoulders as he expected, Heroset eased her blade from his throat and slowly bent to lay it on the ground at his feet.

“None can deny you have come closer to achieving the strider’s mission than any other before you. This Council can no longer deny your human blood has afforded you an intuitive advantage that a full god can never enjoy.”

Turning away from him, Heroset raised her chin to address the bench. “None here dispute that Trey is guilty as charged. I would not dare ask you to let his transgression go unpunished. Diadra, too, must pay a penance. All of you all know my intent. Should any of you have an objection, now is the time to voice it.”

The silence that followed was punctuated only by Trey’s breath. He hated that he trembled in spite of his resolve to accept his penance with stoicism. He didn’t fear oblivion. But going to his soul’s destruction without knowing what would become of Sage? That terrified the shit out of him.

As a pair of neophytes moved in to flank him, the floor of the chamber pitched beneath his feet. “Rise, Trey.”

“Creator, forgive me,” he whispered as he struggled to his feet.

Heraset gathered him into the ceremonial Embrace of Forgiveness for the Damned.

“Trey,” she whispered into the curl of his ear. “You were my best and brightest. Now you’re my biggest disappointment. May the Creator have mercy on you as you pay penance for your crimes.”

The bailiff, sinister in his hooded robes, emerged from the right side of the bench with the scroll that contained the specifics of Trey’s sentence.

As was the custom, Trey faced the Council for their oncoming jeers.

“Trey,” the bailiff droned, “you are hereby consigned to the Ether of Possibilities. There you shall wander through the shadows of time to reunite the preordained couples whose fates you have rent asunder. As you pay penance, your lust shall drive you to seek love often, yet never find it in return. You will be branded with the mark of your sins, and it will chart your progress toward the completion of your task. Further, you will deliver news of your sentence to your lover who sleeps in the Cradle of Displaced Souls.”

Trey dropped to his knees, shocked. He scoured his mind for the words that might express his gratitude. There wasn’t a single word in the universe that could begin to express it.

Extending an arm, Heraset curled her hand beneath his chin. Tears she ought not to spend on his behalf dimmed her once-purple eyes to the muted hues of twilight. “Do not fail them, Trey. The timeline is so unstable that only trinity magic has a chance of working. Nothing will be as you knew it before. If you don’t complete your penance, there will be nothing we more we can do protect humanity from the minions.”

“What about Russell McKenna?”

Heraset hesitated. “If you succeed, your final task will be to replace him on Earth.”

Trey nodded, flush with amazed hope that in the end, he and Sage might be together. The vibrating din of the Judgment Gong announced the beginning of his sentence. As the Neophytes set about removing his shackles, Trey murmured a prayer that the Creator would grant him wisdom as he sought to undo the damage he’d done to so many. To Sage. To Russ, that he could somehow forgive himself enough to join him and Sage if they ever found their way back to the Realm of Immortals.

The incandescent globes that illuminated the bench blinked out one by one as the Council members filed out of the chamber. Trey crumbled to his knees, spent. With his face buried in his hands, he scraped his heart for some remaining shred of strength.

“On your feet, strider.” The neophyte’s guttural grunts were strangely gentle as he urged Trey to his feet.

The time had come to tell Sage that because of him, she must slumber in the Cradle of Souls forever unless he fulfilled his sentence and entered the human timeline as her preordained mate.

Assuming she would even have him.

Wicked Temptation: Chapter 9

Sage bent her head against the winds that wailed through the dim corridors. Her hair lashed her shoulders like unruly tendrils of flame. That her wayward locks provided the only shock of color here probably ought to cast the fear of God into her. But dismal as this place was, nothing could horrify her more than the mind-numbing void she found herself in after the world ended.

Dear God. The world. Gone.

She couldn't let her mind go there. Not yet. Better to keep her focus pinned to a more immediate concern, the hulking beast before her, leading her to the unknown. Under any other circumstances such an ominous creature would have set her knees to quaking, especially given that she'd glimpsed only impenetrable darkness where his face ought to be. She hadn't sensed any evil there, but his sheer size was enough to overwhelm her. He towered over her by a good six feet, not including the immense black wings he held folded over his back. Was she in the company of the grim reaper?

She didn't dare ask. She wasn't altogether sure whether she was really dead, and in the event she wasn't, he could easily snap her in two without breaking a sweat. But it could be worse. Already had been, a million times over. The last hours had taught her the only thing that could cast more dread into a body than the end of the world was the utter nothingness that followed it. Even this imposing presence was a vast improvement over that forlorn silence. She would do anything, even trade her soul, to avoid going back there. So she followed along, unquestioning but not unafraid.

The longer the hollow wind whined bleak in her ears, the more her mind sought solace in images of Trey. During her time with him, she'd witnessed miracles she'd once believed impossible. What if there were also horrors her mortal mind couldn't fathom, evils far worse than this absence of time and place?

What if this creature before her was Death? What if he was taking her to Hell? Adrenaline surged, and her heart pounded as if she would run as fast and far as her legs could carry her. She ought to run. Now. But at her back stretched a blackness as impenetrable as the face of the being who'd come to collect her.

No, running wasn't an option. She prayed that at the end of this journey she would find the answers to the questions that dragged down her heart. If Trey really had been an angel, why hadn't he spared her all this? And where the hell had Russ gotten off to?

Chances were she would never know. Tears prickled at her eyes as she grappled with the gut-churning fear she might never see him again. Either of them. Face it. Her prayers probably didn't rank high on any deity's to-do list. Christ, her last act on Earth had been a threesome, one she'd loved every scorching second of. Granted, she'd embarked on it for the best of reasons, but she knew what folks back home had to say about those who went to meet their maker armed with good intentions.

Fingers of warmth rode the crests of the frigid winds that assailed her. If not for that welcome comfort, she might have believed them headed toward Hell's mouth.

She thought she saw the faintest corona edging her dark escort's form. With each passing footstep, the light advanced to beat back the shadows.

A smile teased her lips despite her efforts to quash it. After all, didn't light symbolize the promise of goodness? She figured as long as she didn't see any signs advising her to abandon hope, she wouldn't give up just yet.

Her escort came to an abrupt stop. She all but slammed face first into the oily nest of black feathers that

covered his wings. Before she could force down her dread of what new horrors might come, she heard the creaking groan of a door, wooden, immense. A fierce blast of heat shoved back the winds as the creature stepped aside to motion her through a sweeping archway.

Bruised patches of purple swam before her eyes, working to accommodate the brightness within. Behind her, she heard the rustle of her escort's shroud as he retreated through the doorway. The grate of hinges was chased by the drag of wood over the stone floor.

A metallic click told her the door had closed behind her. The finality set her teeth to chattering. Whatever awaited in this new place, the beast had left her to face it alone. Still half-blinded by the fierce brightness, the heat now blasted at her. A charred scent, so like the oily aroma of burning coal, brought fresh visions of fire and brimstone coursing through her.

To her right, she heard the slow scuffle of footsteps. Their uneven progress was punctuated the harrowing groans of a body besieged by overwhelming agony. No fucking way was she going to stand here and let them do to her whatever was happening to that poor son of a bitch!

She spun back toward the doors and shouldered full force against them. Her breath whooshed violently from her but the doors didn't so much as tremble. Chest heaving, she splayed her hands on the unyielding panels. She was trapped!

Trapped, damn it, and she couldn't bear it. With her nails biting into the rough surface, she rasped down the splintered length of the door. She would fucking claw her way out of here if need be.

"It's okay, sweetheart. I've got you."

I've got you.

Something inside her shattered as she re-lived the last time Trey uttered those words. She remembered how her flesh had trembled against him with an erotic mixture of fear and need. But trust had won out and urged her to experience pleasures she'd never dreamed possible.

Familiar hands settled on her shoulders, turning her. As her eyes struggled to accommodate the brightness, her tightly balled anger trembled inside. She wanted to seek shelter in his embrace, but she could never truly trust him again, not after he'd abandoned her.

Bitter words burned on her tongue. Anger heated her blood. She felt the blind urge to hurt him like he'd hurt her. She raised her hand, intent on slapping the ever loving shit out of him. But her vision cleared now, and her gaze snagged on his chest. Her arm froze mid-swing.

Instead of the stinging slap she intended, she flattened her palm over the chained heart tattooed on his once unadorned chest. A shuddering groan tore through him as she made contact with the ink. Beneath her outstretched hand, his heart drummed a frenetic rhythm. His chest labored for every breath with audible proof of his pain.

The tattoo's design was expansive, making the source of his suffering apparent. Intricate links looped over his shoulder and wove a tortured path down the length of his arm. Instinctively, she extended a fingertip to soothe the raw edges. This was no ordinary tattoo. As her flesh grazed the individual links, she heard the whispers of lost souls as they shared stories of fates upended. Souls she could sense Trey was obligated to reunite. But why?

His knees buckled as his hand shot up to grip her wrist.

"Sage, I don't have much time. We have to talk."

The voice that had so recently resonated with the thunder of gods was now brittle, a dime store imitation of glory. Though the fingers of his free hand twined with hers and gripped her hard as if he feared she would vanish, his expression told a darker story. Those wicked, lush lips that had so recently stirred her to ecstasy were drawn to a formidable slash. Dark shadows had hollowed out his cheekbones and his eyes, leaving his face ravaged.

What had they done to him?

A million questions clamored at the tip of her tongue, half-crazy with the need for answers.

Gasping, she lifted her eyes up to search Trey's.

The second his onyx eyes locked onto hers, she knew the magic that had flared between them with such ease hadn't died just yet. The remnants of it sparkled in her core as she poured herself into him and scoured his soul for cause of his heartache.

Stiffening, he cut her off from this probing. Her magic slammed into the wall of his resistance. Irritated, she pushed harder.

"Sage, stop."

Closing the scant distance between them, she pressed her finger to his lips to shush him. "You asked me once if I trusted you. But you would deny me your trust in return?"

His sigh seeped out on a groan of submission. She pressed her forehead into the hollow of his neck and tethered him in the noose of her arms. His body relaxed into her embrace. His resistance yielded to the delicate push of her magic. It laced through him, searching for the source of his darkness.

God, so much pain! The sucking depth was ravenous. It fed on the faces of the ones he felt beholden to, those poor couples whose voices had whispered to her from the tattoo's links.

But what did those shattered destinies have to do with her and Trey? With Russ?

As if he heard her thoughts, Trey reached up to snare her beneath the chin. Lifting it, he pressed his lips to her forehead. The last stubborn remnant of his resistance surrendered and the room around her fell away. She was back in the cabin, looking onto herself and Russ, observing them through Trey's eyes.

He thought them beautiful. Precious.

But also forbidden.

Before she could muse on that, the scene melted. Her magic lifted her, a flying carpet transporting her to another memory. She stood in a dark chamber now. Shackles bit the tender skin of her neck as she studied the faces of those who would judge him. The yoke of his misery was so heavy on her shoulders she could hardly stand beneath it.

She experienced firsthand the reasons Trey felt he'd singlehandedly destroyed her world. Before she could digest the notion that her heart had been bound to Russ's at the dawn of time, her spirit plummeted into the dark core of Trey to face the festering sore of his despair—the meaningless kiss with Diadra that had triggered Russ to take his own life.

Oh, my god, Russ!

Shock forced her eyes open. Grief gutted her. Knees softening, her magic flew apart, spun around them in a

rapidly darkening helix. If not for the sheltering grip of Trey's arms at her waist, she would have collapsed under the weight of their combined despair. "Russ, I'm so sorry."

"No!" Trey's voice was lightning. The fierce strike of it commanded her attention. His hands cupped her face and his thumbs shoved aside her tears. "I did this. Not you. Me."

Though the hollows beneath his eyes blunted the intensity of his stare, nothing could hide the beads of moisture on his lashes. His intent grew wings, fluttered through her, and implored her to hear him. But she couldn't buy into it because the last dark thing she sensed in his soul had nothing to do with forgiveness and everything to do with hell.

Her hell.

Russ was dead, and when Trey was done here, she knew she would return to the mindless half-sleep that had sucked her dry of memories and dreams. Identity. There she would wait while an eternity passed so time could turn full circle to offer her one last chance to get it right. With Trey. Not with Russ.

Bracing her palms against Trey's shoulders, she tried to wrench herself free of his embrace. "I can't go there again. Not alone."

"Never alone, baby." Trey captured her hands and tucked them in the nest of his. He lifted them to his lips to press a feverish kiss to the back of each one. When his eyes found hers again, the harsh lines of his face had softened. She caught a glimpse of him as she'd first seen him, larger than life. Angelic.

"I swear to the gods," he said, "the best part of me will wander the Void with you until we meet again."

She thought she could see right into the core of his heart. Her fading magic rushed in and drove back the shadows to illuminate the essence of him. His soul.

She gasped as she sensed a piece of him peel away. It wove through the last traces of her magic to catch a ride just before the wave rushed back into her.

That gossamer bit of him settled amongst the spent cinders of her magic and tethered her heart with hope. Her hands flew to her breast, confirming the radiant warmth centered there.

He'd told her the truth. She would never be alone again. He'd given her a piece of his soul to prove it. Regardless of how many eons it took him to right human destiny, she knew he would never be completed until they were reunited.

"It only has to be hell if you let it, angel," he said.

Could hell be any more horrible than now, and real.

Not her words, but Jim Morrison's. It was the rare quote of his that had driven her to wonder how much acid he'd dropped.

Her perspective shifted on its axis and shimmered between them, bright as a new penny.

The damnation men had feared since the dawn of time was self-inflicted, the road to it paved by a soul's refusal to hope for something better. No hell in the universe could be worse than now.

But only if she let it.

Relaxing in the circle of Trey's arms, she rested her palms on his shoulders. His gaze reflected amber glints from her own as she angled her head to study him.

He was still hurting. For her. For Russ.

Trey had loved her so much that he'd bartered his soul for a last chance to help her heal Russ. She wanted to tell him that Russ had already been lost long before Trey came on the scene. No matter what transpired between the three of them, the only one to blame for any of this was an age-old travesty called war.

But how could she explain the intricacies of human frailty to someone who'd only experienced her world in starts and fits?

She couldn't, not in the brief window of time they had left. Nor did she have the magic left to do it. All she could do was love him and believe that somewhere at the end of forever lay a real chance for humanity's redemption. And for theirs.

Would that redemption come for Russ, too? They were all connected. She felt sure of it. Trey wasn't the only one alive in her heart. Russ was, too. Always had been. If he was truly lost to her, she would know it.

Rising onto her tiptoes, she pressed a kiss to the swollen heart on Trey's chest. Beneath her palm, she felt the steady beat of his heart fall into sync with hers. God, how she loved him.

And he loved her.

Tipping her head back, she threaded her fingers into the silken strands at his nape and pulled his head down so his lips hovered over hers.

"Do you trust me?" she asked, echoing the question he'd asked her back at the cabin.

The sparkle in his eyes told her he did.

"We saved Russ once. We can do it again," she whispered. "Make some magic with me, baby."

Trey's hands snarled in her hair. He crushed her tight against him. "Are you sure?" he murmured.

Her chin dipped briefly and then she tilted her head back. Dropping her lashes, she parted her lips to his kiss.

As his mouth dropped over hers, the last vestiges of her fear dissolved. They would make the magic they needed, and she would send Trey forth to work that magic for all it was worth.

But that would come later. Now, safe in the strongest embrace she'd ever known, her soul slowly drifted toward Nirvana on her angel's promise of forever.

"Come back for me," she urged him as the forces of destiny pulled them apart.

As their fingers lost hold of each other, his eyes vowed to her that he would.

About the author:

Liane Gentry Skye was considered the girl most likely to become a nun in high school. Upon graduation, she wasted no time revising her destiny. Two marriages, one real life alpha hero and four beautiful babies later, she decided it wise to exchange her rhinestone thong for soccer mom sweats.

These days, her walk on the wild side lives (mostly) in her imagination.

Three Kinds of Wicked

Will Trey save the human timeline?

Coming in August 2009:

To Touch a Woman by Alice Gaines

Edward and Margaret Sinclair are very much in love and would be deliriously happy in their marriage except for one thing—as good Victorians, neither have had much experience with the marital act. As a result, sex is painful for Margaret and frustrating for Edward. They encounter a mysterious stranger named Trey who may be able to help them solve their problem. Can Trey teach Edward how to touch a woman?

Excerpt:

Chapter One

Why did love have to be so bloody hard? As the carriage rattled over country roads, Edward Sinclair gazed across the narrow space that separated him from his wife of three months. With nothing but the lanterns outside for illumination, she resembled a fae creature of fragile beauty. The shifting light played over her amber curls, pale skin, and deep green eyes. Even in near darkness he could read her fear. Fear she tried to hide behind a brave but faltering smile. Fear of him, for the love of God. Fear that he'd want carnal knowledge of her body again and that he'd muck it up. Again.

"Are you quite well, Margaret?" he asked.

She gave him the pleasant expression she always did, an upward curl to her lips that masked the trepidation in her eyes. "I'm very well, my darling."

"You seem..." Oh hell, what word would he use tonight? "Out of sorts."

"A bit tired. It's been a long day."

"We should reach Baresford soon. The inn there is clean and sets a decent table."

"There you are," she said. "I'll be fine."

If only he could believe that. They'd shared such happiness before their marriage. Such joy at falling hopelessly, madly in love with each other. Such excitement when their parents had approved the match. Then, on their wedding night, when they could finally make the ultimate commitment to each other, he'd hurt her with his clumsiness. Things hadn't gotten any better since.

"I want you to be happy, Margaret," he said.

She leaned across the seat they shared and put her hand on his. "I am, my darling. Truly."

He lifted her fingers to his mouth and kissed the backs. "I'll make that other thing good. I don't know how, but I will."

Mistake, that. She stiffened. Not much, only enough for a loving eye to catch. She smiled as she pulled away and settled back against her seat.

"We should talk about this," he said. "Other couples must have faced the same problem. They'd have worked through it somehow."

“We will, too.”

“Only if you help me. I need to know how to please you. I need to know what makes you feel good.” Damn him, he already knew what hurt her.

“Everything you do feels good.”

Now, she’d started lying outright. She couldn’t think she’d fool him with that. She only hoped to put off the conversation. Well, he wouldn’t allow that any longer. His body craved hers like a drug. If they didn’t do something soon, he’d go mad with wanting her.

“My darling, I know you’re reluctant to talk about this, but—”

The coach stopped suddenly, nearly throwing him across the seat and onto her lap. Outside, tack jangled, and the horses whinnied and stamped their feet. He regained his balance and stuck his head out the window. “Ned, what’s going on out there?”

“A stranger, Mr. Sinclair. I swear, he jumped out at us.”

“Make yourself known,” Edward called. Most likely, the fellow wasn’t a highwayman. If he had been, he’d be issuing orders by now. More likely a farmer who’d drunk too much and had gotten himself lost.

The man who approached the carriage was no farmer, though. He wore a finely cut suit of black wool, every bit as expensive as Edward’s own. When he removed his hat, he revealed dark eyes and gleaming black hair a bit too long for fashion.

Coming in September 2009

Reckless Exposure by Anne Rainey

As fashion photographer, Rand Miller listens to all the reasons why his sexy lover must move out of not only his apartment but also his life, he decides to give her the going away party of a lifetime. The list of party goodies includes: massage oil, margaritas and their mysterious neighbor, Trey Madison. But when dawn creeps over the horizon, will Rand be able to watch the only woman capable of taming his wicked ways walk out of his life forever?

Coming Soon!

Renegade and His Rebel by Titania Ladley

When her deserting cad of a husband Renegade LaMarr reappears in Moose Junction, tomboy Cassandra “Rebel” Thatcher’s as spitting mad as a peeled rattler and prepared to shoot the handsome coward right out of his boots. She’s got her rifle at the ready and a fine-looking, mysterious drifter named Trey to warm her between the sheets and guard her jaded heart against Renegade. Armed with a secret and determined to get rid of Trey, Renegade plots to finally claim Rebel, chaps, spurs, boy breeches and all. Only problem is, before he can draw his six-shooter and declare a challenge, Renegade finds himself falling under Trey’s magical spell right along with his passionate, spitfire wife.

Triple Threat by Mia Varano

Vegas showgirl, Brandy Tate, is on the run from the mob and the FBI. When stoic FBI agent, Ridge Coltrane, tracks her down he puts them both in danger until a mysterious stranger named Trey rescues them. Brandy opens her heart... and her bed... to both men. Will her desire to trust end in heartache, or will it introduce her to a world of seductive delights at the hands of two men?

Check the “Coming Soon” page
at www.eRedSage.com for more previews
of upcoming stories in the *Three Kinds of Wicked* series!

And check Trey’s website at
www.threekindsofwicked.com for inside information,
letters from Trey, sneak peeks, and other deliciously wicked treats!



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