

Sweet Revenge
By Rebecca Zanetti
(Excerpt for Website)

Prologue

Southern Tennessee hills
Twenty years ago

Matt stood at attention, the cold block walls sending chills to his bones. Yet he stood straight, shoulders back, face blank. Based on his size and strength, he figured he was about twelve years old. He'd killed, and he'd almost died for reasons he didn't understand. Now he'd earned answers.

Another boy stood next to him, also not moving.

The commander glanced up from his metal desk, black eyes flashing. "You demanded to see me, Cadet Matthew?"

"Yes, sir." Matt relaxed his stance, arms behind his back. Fatigue weighed down his limbs, but he refused to show any weak emotions. He ignored the woman sitting at the corner table as she furiously scribbled in her ever-present notebook. Dr. Madison did nothing but poke around inside his head, and he was tired of her.

The commander nodded at the other boy standing at attention. "Cadet Emery, your hand-to-hand fight yesterday was excellent, but you nearly killed another cadet." The man's tone held respect and...pride. Yeah, that was pride. "We don't want our own cadets killing each other."

Emery was probably a year older than Matt, and his voice had already dropped low. "If he didn't want to die, sir, he should've fought harder."

The commander chuckled. "You make a good point, young man. You're dismissed."

Matt fought nausea. Emery was an asshole who liked to hurt people, and he acted like his younger brothers were expendable, and only there to back him up. The commander seemed to enjoy the psycho's exploits. If the bastard came after one of his three brothers, Matt would take him down. Hard.

The reality of how far Matt would go nibbled away at his façade of calmness. The line between right and wrong had been blurry ever since he could remember, but now the division didn't exist. To protect his brothers, he'd become the monster the scientists had engineered. That truth squeezed his lungs as strong as any grappling clinch hold.

Emery saluted and pivoted to leave, slamming his shoulder into Matt's arm.

Matt growled. Someday he and Emery were going to have it out. But for now, Matt had another problem to deal with. "I saw the transfer orders for Jory."

"So?" The commander lifted one dark eyebrow.

Unease slithered down Matt's spine. The knife in his boot warmed while his heartbeat thrashed in his ears. Still, he kept his voice calm. "I want to know where my youngest brother is being sent."

"Wherever I choose to send him. Dismissed." The commander returned to his paperwork.

"No." The word rang through the barren room.

Dr. Madison gasped. The commander stilled and then slowly lifted his head. "Excuse me?"

Matt's mouth dried up. He shifted his leg forward three centimeters in case he needed to go for the knife. "I said no."

Metal scraped when the commander pushed away from the desk and stood. "Cadet Matthew, you are dismissed."

It took every ounce of will Matt had to remain in place and not run from the man who stood at least a foot taller than he. For now. A sick sense of dread accompanied dots crossing his vision. “I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s going on with my brother.”

The commander’s lip twisted. He narrowed his gaze, and silence wrapped around the room. “Fine. Jory is too small and not strong enough to be a cadet here. So we’re sending him to another camp.”

“Bullshit.” The word shocked Matt as it slipped out of his mouth. His teeth ground together. “We both know what happens to *cadets* who don’t make it here. Don’t we?”

The commander smiled in a way that rolled Matt’s gut. “You don’t know anything, Cadet.”

Yeah, but he had an idea. Kids who disappeared never showed up again. Maybe there was another camp, most likely not. Regardless, he couldn’t protect his family if they weren’t with him. They genetically came from the same father, had the same gray eyes, and the same build. There was no question they were family, even though they had been created in test tubes and had never met their parents. “You are not taking my brother.” He enunciated each word, careful to coat over the Southern accent that got them shoved in the brig. His legs tensed, and his shoulders drew back in a fighting stance that came naturally to him.

For his brothers, he’d kill *now* if necessary. Good thing he’d brought the blade.

Dr. Madison returned to her notebook, pursing her lips as she wrote. “This is interesting,” she mused.

“You have two other younger brothers to worry about, and considering Shane’s last blade-fighting test, you’d better worry about him.” The commander stalked around his desk. “Nathan, on the other hand, is quite safe here.”

Nathan had fighting skills beyond anybody else at camp, but his obsession with perfection from himself and everyone around him was going to get him killed. Matt feared the day he exploded. “You get all four of us, or you get none of us.” His shoulders tensed and wanted to shake. “Jory is only around seven years old. He will grow, and he’ll get stronger. I’ll make sure of it.”

In the corner, Madison’s heart rate picked up. Matt tuned in his enhanced hearing to check out the commander. His heart rate and breathing remained calm and normal. Nothing ever shook the soldier.

The air shifted—and Matt knew the commander would move before he did so. In fact, Matt knew exactly where he’d go and how far he’d move. Someday Matt would take his special ability to perceive movement, one the commander remained unaware of, and kill the man. Without question.

The commander stepped closer and peered down. A gleam lightened his fathomless eyes. “You have a deal. If one of you fails at training or on a mission, you all get...*transferred*.”

Fear tasted like thick dust. In that moment, Matt learned the reality of making a deal with the devil. “I understand.” Turning on his heel, he exited the room, not waiting for permission to leave. He made it to the barracks he shared with his younger brothers before dashing into the latrine and puking out his guts. He finished on hands and knees, body heaving.

A towel appeared on his shoulder.

Wiping his mouth, he turned around and sat on the freezing concrete, his back to the stall door. Through the tears in his eyes, he studied Nate.

Nate leaned against the door frame. At about ten years old, he was tall and skinny, but he had the same build as Matt, and would probably soon fill out. He lifted his chin, gray eyes swirling with terror. “Well?”

“Jory can stay.”

Nate breathed out. “Good. Okay. That’s good.”

Matt shook his head. His pulse raced, and he made an effort to slow down his heart so he wouldn’t puke again. “Maybe, maybe not. If one of us fails in a test or on a mission, all four of us are dead.”

Nate jerked back, and he frowned. Tilting his head to the side, he slowly nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Heat roared through Matt’s lungs as he shoved to his feet. “How is any of this okay?”

“Family is all we have. If one of us goes, I want to go, too.” Nate smiled. “Besides, we’re the Gray brothers. Even though we don’t have a last name, we’re brothers, and we ain’t going nowhere.”

“Say it right,” Matt snapped.

Nate straightened. “We aren’t going anywhere. Sorry.”

Matt closed his eyes. Even his skin hurt. He couldn’t worry about last names right now. Someday, when they found freedom, they’d choose a real family name. “It’s not okay. Not anymore.” His lids flipped open, and his voice went hoarse. “I’m gonna have to train them, train you, until you guys hate me.” That idea scared him more than the commander killing him. All he had were his brothers.

“We won’t hate you.” Nate grabbed his arm. “I trust you, Mattie. You’re better than the commander.”

God. Nathan's blind faith was as difficult to face as Jory's innocence or Shane's hope. But Matt had studied psychology the last few years in training, and he understood Nathan's need to believe. If Nate believed Matt was invincible, the kid could sleep at night—at least for a while. Responsibility weighed like cinder blocks on Matt's shoulders, and the urge to escape narrowed the room into a tunnel. But that wasn't who he was, and he wouldn't leave his brothers. "I won't let anything happen to you, Nate. I promise. The four of us... We're *never alone*. Ever."

"*Never alone*," Nate repeated, standing even taller.

"Has the commander discovered any of your abilities beyond the special senses?" Matt asked, his mind calculating plans and a possible future for his family.

"No. He knows we can hear and see better than most people. I haven't told him or Dr. Madison about anything else."

"Good. From now on, we don't tell them anything." Which would probably get them killed if the commander found out they were hiding information. With the commander almost sending Jory away, he'd put himself on Matt's enemy list. There was no returning to ally—Matt's world had to be absolute or he couldn't survive it.

Nate nodded. "I won't tell the commander shit, and now we'll train Shane and Jory—make them tough, too. Someday, we're getting out of here."

Matt exhaled. He'd do his best to find freedom for his brothers, but it wasn't going to be easy. Heartburn tingled up from his gut. "I need your help."

Nate's chest puffed out. "Anything."

Matt rubbed his chin. His mind cleared, and his body relaxed as he committed fully to his plan. "I'll push them and train them, but you need to protect them. If I go too far, you have to tell me."

Nate sobered, his eyes darkening and making him look years older. “Is there any such thing as *too far*? In *our* lives?”

“Probably not.” Matt shoved up his sleeves, mentally listing drills for the rest of the day as he hustled to grab his gear from the barracks. “I guess we’re about to find out.”

Chapter 1

Present day

Stab wounds hurt worse than bullet wounds.

Crouched on asphalt in the dark, Matt Dean leaned against the brick building and scanned the vacant alley. Garbage cans lined the doorways of the now-closed businesses. The place smelled like honeysuckle.

What kind of an alley smelled like honeysuckle?

He'd been stabbed in Dallas two days ago and had to get as far away as possible from what now must be a bloody crime scene. The staples he'd used to keep his flesh together had all fallen out during the last hour after riding over rough roads, and blood stuck his T-shirt to his skin. Time to staple again.

Two of the men in Texas who'd jumped him would never jump, much less breathe, again. The other two might wish for death when they awoke. How the hell had they found him?

His phone had been damaged in the fight, and he'd had no choice but to continue on the mission, hop on his bike, and ride across three states. Out of their reach.

Time to break into one of the businesses and call his brothers.

He shook off his leather jacket and glanced at his destroyed shirt.

A door opened several yards down. He stiffened, reaching for the knife in his boot. At two a.m., nobody should be in the alley.

"Eugene?" a female voice whispered.

The tone shivered right down his spine. Sexy and frustrated, the tenor promised heated nights. He'd always had a thing for a woman's husky voice.

So he turned his head.

She stood in the moonlight in a compact yoga outfit, her mahogany hair up in one of those clips. Damn, he'd love to let that mass fly. Tiny but toned, she reminded him of a pretty figurine he'd seen in a store once. Feminine and mysterious.

Blood loss must be getting to him.

"Eugene?" the woman called again, holding the door open with her hip. She glanced down the far alley, alertness in her stance. "Your walk should be finished by now, and enough is enough. Your moodiness is getting to me."

Who the hell was Eugene? It was a matter of seconds before the woman noticed Matt, and he didn't have the energy to fight the mysterious Eugene. Irritation grated along his skin at the sudden, albeit beautiful, distraction. He needed neither witnesses nor questions right now.

She gasped when she saw him. Pretty green eyes widened, the pupils expanding. Her heart rate sped up enough that he could hear each thump with his enhanced hearing.

Great. Now she'd run inside and call the police.

Except she didn't.

The woman rushed toward him, dropping to her knees. "Oh my God. You're hurt." She swallowed several times and levered away. Her eyes were the color of an emerald he'd stolen from a Colombian drug lord years ago while on a mission. "I'll call an ambulance."

Surprise kept him immobile for two seconds. She wanted to help him? Why? He narrowed his gaze and caught her arm, careful not to break the delicate bones. "I'm fine."

Pressing his other palm against brick, he shoved himself up and helped her along. “Though I’d accept an aspirin.”

She looked up, way up, toward his face. “Um—”

He tried to smile. “I won’t hurt you.” Yeah, right. He was at least a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than her, found bleeding in her alley. All he needed was duct tape and a ski mask to be a bigger threat to somebody so small.

“Right.” She swallowed and shook her arm free. “You’re harmless. Anybody could see that.” She stepped back, her gaze darting around.

Damn, she was cute. He assessed her, figuring out how to get an invite inside so he could use the phone. With a harmless shrug, he tilted his head toward his motorcycle. “I’ll just get on and leave you alone. Sorry to scare you.”

“I reacted before thinking.” She frowned and rubbed her forehead as she studied the bike. “Did you fall?”

“Yes,” he lied smoothly. “Hit a pothole and basically landed on my head. I was tired and not watching the road.”

Indecision crossed her classic face. She leaned forward to eye the tattoo on his arm. “You were in the marines?”

“Yes.” Yet another lie. He’d been undercover as a U.S. Marshal, then as a marine, and the tat was temporary.

“Oh.” She exhaled. “My brother was a marine.”

“Was?”

“Yes. He didn’t make it home.”

Matt's chest thumped. Hard. "I lost a brother, too." Finally, a truth he could give her. "Hurts like hell and always will." Five years ago, he and his brothers had escaped the military camp in which they'd been raised, but they'd never found freedom. Not completely. In searching for freedom, they'd been on missions. It was Matt's fault Jory had died two years ago, and Matt had been paying for it ever since.

Besides, he'd broken the one promise he'd always made. Jory had died alone. *All alone.* For that, Matt would never be whole again. The pain gripped his heart, and he gritted his teeth to keep his expression calm.

Some souls were meant to be damned, and he deserved the agony of hellfire.

The woman sighed, resigned wariness filling her eyes. "Well, I can't leave an ex-marine in the alley. Come in and we can get you cleaned up, but if you're injured too badly, I'm calling an ambulance." She levered under his arm, her slender shoulders straightening to assist him.

Intrigue and an odd irritation filtered through him. "You shouldn't help strange men, sweetheart."

"All men are strange." The grin she flipped him warmed him in places he thought would always be frozen. "Besides, I'm armed."

There wasn't a place for a weapon in her little yoga outfit. He nodded anyway, pleased to be getting indoors. "Okay. Then I'll behave." Perhaps he should let her call for medical help, considering he was in town to find a doctor. The woman he'd been hunting the last five years. But he wanted to be on his game when he found the bitch. "What about Eugene?"

Matt's rescuer bit her lip. "I'm sure he'll be along shortly."

Who the hell was Eugene and what kind of a threat would he pose? Matt tuned in his senses but failed to hear any footsteps. A couple argued several blocks away about who should

drive home. They both slurred their words, so neither should drive. For now, Eugene was absent, and Matt needed to get inside and call his brothers.

He released the woman and forced his feet to move toward his bike. He'd lost too much blood. "Do you mind if I park my bike inside? I'd hate for anybody to steal my baby."

She chuckled. "In Charmed, Idaho? Nobody will take your big motorcycle." Yet she opened the doorway wide. "You can park inside to the left."

He rolled the bike inside an organized storage room holding toiletries and cleaning supplies. "What's your name?"

"Laney Jacobs." She locked the door and gestured him toward another doorway. "Let's get you an aspirin."

He stalked through another storage room that held all types of alcohol and into a closed bar. A sports bar with wide-screen TVs, pool tables, and dartboards. He glanced down. "You work at a bar?" He'd figured her for a yoga instructor or a teacher. Not a barmaid.

She gently pushed him onto a wooden chair by a worn table. "I *own* a bar." Her pretty pink lips turned down as she glanced at his demolished T-shirt.

"Oh." He frowned. The woman was much too delicate to be closing a bar by herself. Whoever the hell Eugene was, he needed a beating for leaving her alone at night like this. "By yourself?"

She lifted a shoulder while walking behind the bar and returning with a first-aid kit. "My brother and I owned it together." Her eyes remained down.

He understood that kind of sorrow. "I'm sorry, Laney."

She blinked and met his gaze with those amazing green eyes. "Me, too." Taking a deep breath, she straightened. "Let's see what you did to yourself."

He gingerly tugged off his shirt.

Her cheeks paled from rosy to stark white in seconds. Emeralds shimmered when her eyes opened wide. “You’re really bleeding.” Her eyelids fluttered, and she swayed.

He caught her one-handed before she hit the floor in a dead faint.

What the hell?

Easily picking her up, he glanced around the bar. The booths were circular at an odd angle, and the chairs were hard. He could either place her on the bar or on a pool table. Gently, he laid her on a pool table, warmed by how nicely she fit against him. Indulging himself, he removed her hair clip so it wouldn’t poke her and allowed the curls to tumble free.

She was pretty, and she was sweet, and no way in hell should he be touching her. Her kindness in asking him inside had been without any ulterior motive, and that just confused him. Even so, he ran a knuckle down the smooth skin on her face. The softness mellowed something new inside him.

He’d been without a woman much too long.

Now was not the time. Yet he couldn’t help taking a moment to appreciate her classic features. Delicate and soft women were a mystery to him and something he’d only seen on television. He believed they existed but definitely steered clear.

This one? This one needed protection, and he’d have a nice talk with Eugene when the bastard finally showed up.

For now, he’d lost enough blood. Flipping open the lid of the medicine kit, he frowned. Not what he needed.

Prowling behind the bar, he searched the low shelves. *Aha*. A rusty tackle box rested in the back. Inside, he found thick fishing line and flies with hooks. Bending one, he poured

whiskey over it to kill germs and threaded it like a needle. He took a swig of the alcohol, allowing the potent brew to slam into his gut and center him.

Minutes later, he'd successfully sutured both wounds. The one on his upper chest took twice as long as the wide gash along his ribs. The guy who'd stabbed him knew how to use a blade.

So did he.

He glanced at the stunning woman on the pool table. How long did a fainting spell last, anyway? The phone behind the bar caught his attention. He slapped sterile pads across his wounds and reached for the phone to dial in a series of numbers while peeking into a tidy office behind the bar. A second doorway revealed a modern kitchen.

"Swippy's Pool Hall," a man answered.

"Deranged Duck 27650," Matt said.

Several beeps echoed across the line as it was secured. Finally, silence ensued.

"Where the hell are you?" his brother growled.

Matt wiped a hand down his face. Shane sounded worried. "I'm in place. Had some trouble in Texas, however."

"What kind of trouble?" Shane asked, computer keys clacking in the background.

"Jumped by four men—well trained. They found me in Dallas as I was heading out here." How had the commander found him in Texas? He'd been there only a week, to gather intel on the woman he'd been searching for. After helping his brothers to escape the commander five years ago, Matt had set out to find the doctor who'd implanted deadly chips near their spines—chips that would explode in several weeks, killing them. It had taken this long to track her down, but he was close. He could feel it.

“No mention of a problem on any police forces or news outlets.” Shane sighed. “They covered up the scene quickly.”

Which meant the commander had new resources in the government. Terrific. “Are you sure the woman is here?” Matt asked.

“Yes. We finally traced her to Charmed, but we don’t know who she is. I’ve narrowed it down to a family practitioner, a veterinarian’s assistant, or the coroner.” Shane clicked more keys. “My money is on the coroner.”

The woman they hunted had been a top-rated surgeon and biochemist before disappearing and hiding. Chances were she was still cutting into people. Most surgeons couldn’t let go of playing God. “I’ll boot up my laptop tonight and have you send me the files.” Matt’s gaze caught on a HELP WANTED, PAY PLUS BOARD sign in the window. “I may have found my cover while in town.”

“Good. She went by the name of Doctor Peters while working for the organization, but I haven’t discovered her real name yet. When she went to work for the commander, they wiped her past.”

Yeah. The commander was a master at making reality disappear. “Keep on it,” Matt said.

“I will. Stay in touch, Mattie.” The line went dead.

Matt rubbed his chin, his gaze on Laney. Pouring a glass of water, he maneuvered over to her. Now all he had to do was get her to hire him.

Laney slowly opened her eyes and tried to ignore the bar swirling around her. What in the world?

A man stood over her, and her memories crashed back.

She shot up, her hand going to her aching head. “What happened?”

“You fainted.”

The low rumble of his voice matched his battle-scarred chest. A tattoo of some type of symbol gracefully decorated the area above his heart. Even with two pristine bandages, old wounds lived among the hard ridges and ripped muscles. And the guy was *ripped*.

A warning flutter rippled through her abdomen. She kept a line of sight on the exits. This is what happened when her routine was interfered with, damn it. Her bouncer and main waitress had eloped the previous week, leaving her high and dry...and on deck to close the bar at night.

A pounding set up in her temples at even thinking of the next two weeks. She and Smitty, the bartender, would never survive the rush of bikers riding through town. Desperation swirled through her brain.

Her visitor cleared his throat. “You’re drifting off, sweetheart,” he said.

Her gaze swung back to the injured soldier. Actually, she was heading for a full-on panic attack at the stressful nights still coming her way. “Um, I’m fine.” Though being alone with the muscled stranger might negate that assurance.

As if he’d read her mind, he set a glass of water on the pool table and took several steps back. Giving her space.

“Drink,” he said.

Not a man of many words, was he? She took the glass and sipped, allowing the water to cool her heated throat. The pool table was surprisingly comfortable, the gaze studying her, not so much. She knew better than to let strangers into her business when she was there alone late at night. “Who are you?”

“Matt Dean.” He rubbed a hand through his shaggy hair.

He still had dried blood on his impressive abs, and she shoved down the panic rising inside her. The mere sight of blood had made her pass out within seconds. She shook her head and tried to focus. The man didn't seem like he wanted to hurt her. If he had, her passing out was a prime opportunity. Even so, she eyed him for possible weapons. "Why are you in town?"

He shrugged. "After the marines, I decided to tour the country for a while. I find nice places to visit, work for a bit, and move on afterward."

Sad. The guy was obviously running from old horrors. "Is it working? I mean, the traveling?" Maybe she should take off and just run.

"Yes."

The blood disappeared as his physique took center stage. Wow. Strong, broad, and naturally cut, his body defined *male*. Intriguing gray eyes studied her with a knowing intelligence. The new warmth drifting through her veins had nothing to do with caution. Tension emanated around him with the promise of fire and passion.

The kind of guy who'd burn a girl, but it'd be worth it.

He gestured toward the sign in the window. "You need help?"

Always, and right now from her own libido. "Um, no." Hell yes, she needed help. But from a wounded soldier who veiled his expression so well? She had enough problems. "Thanks, though."

He grinned, and the air somehow thickened. "You have a 'Help Wanted' sign in the window."

"Yeah, but I don't know you." Even though he was half-naked.

"Hmmm." His expression shifted into wounded. "Don't like hiring soldiers, huh?"

Her back straightened, and she studied the battered planes of his strong face. Was he for real? “My brother was a soldier,” she reminded him quietly.

“Then why?” he asked softly.

She swallowed. The truth wouldn’t do, and she couldn’t think of a good lie. “This bar is my life, and I have to be careful with it.” In fact, the business was all she had. Of course, if she didn’t find help for the next two weeks, she’d never make it. Talk about being in a difficult, crappy spot.

He grimaced and leaned back against a table.

Her heart fluttered. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” He paled. “Just a bit of pain.”

She bit her lip and glanced around at the clean bar. The man had kept her from hitting the floor and then given her space to get control of herself. If he’d wanted to hurt her, he would’ve already done it. Plus, she was beyond desperate, and this was just temporary. “You need money?”

He pressed his lips together and shook his head. “No. I’m fine.”

Crap. She’d embarrassed him. The guy was probably a war hero, and now she’d made him feel bad. Her throat thickened with the need to make things right. “Have you heard of the Rally in the Mountains?” she asked.

He frowned. “The motorcycle rally in southern Oregon? Yeah, I’ve heard of it.”

She took a deep breath. The least she could do was temporarily help the soldier. The guy had neither taken nor hurt her while she’d been defenseless, so that wasn’t his goal. “Well, the rally is in two weeks, and many of the bikers from the east drive through town. We’re incredibly

busy for those two weeks.” She eyed him. At several inches above six feet and broad, he’d be a deterrent to any problems. He’d seen war—the guy was definitely wounded.

And tough. He’d be able to handle any disputes. In fact, with that hard gray gaze taking in the room, the bikers wouldn’t mess around. Of course, with Matt’s thick black hair and strong-boned face, he’d draw in the women. The face of a fallen angel and eyes that had seen hell were an intriguing combination. As an amateur photographer, she itched to take his picture. To capture those shadows on film.

The man needed help, and she needed a tough guy in her corner. Plus, he’d served his country and was one of the good guys in a scary world. “I need a bartender/bouncer for two weeks.”

He smiled, revealing strong teeth.

She swallowed again. Wounded and scowling, the guy was handsome. Smiling and charming, he was downright devastating. Her heart rate picked up again.

His smile widened. Why? It wasn’t like he could hear her heart.

Frowning, she scooted to the edge of the pool table. Strong hands instantly banded around her waist to lift.

She gasped, not having seen him move. “You move fast.”

He settled her on her feet and waited until she regained her balance.

She tilted her head back—way back—to glance at his face. This close, a masculine shadow covered his jaw.

His hands remained at her waist, warm and strong.

“No,” she murmured.

His eyelids creased. “Why not?”

“B-Because.” She couldn’t help but focus on his full lips.

“A woman who ventures into a darkened alley and helps a stranger is brave and likes to take chances.” Challenge and something darker lurked in his eyes.

He smelled like the forest: wild and free.

Heat washed down her torso, and she tried to breathe slowly. What in the world was going on? She liked safety, and she liked security. Plus, she loved her daily routine. This guy would blow that to bits. “I hate taking chances.”

His mouth quirked as he studied her. “Somehow I don’t think so.”

“I do.” She pushed away from him.

“Okay.” He turned and drew a shirt from the bag he’d tossed on a table and pulled it over his head. Dark gray, it matched his eyes perfectly.

A yowling set up outside the entrance door. He pivoted, shielding her.

Her skin chilled from his removed hands, while her heart warmed at how quickly he’d moved into protector mode. “It’s all right,” she said, stepping around him.

One hand banded around her arm and tugged her back as the yowling increased in volume. “What is that?”

She chuckled. “Let me go.”

“No.” He released her and moved toward the door, gingerly unlocking it to open a crack. A heartbeat later, he stepped back, surprise lifting his dark eyebrows.

Matted brown fur came into view first before a battered face. Eugene meowed at seeing her. She dropped to her haunches. “There you are.” *Thank God.*

She rubbed his thick fur, careful to avoid his scars. He'd been wounded when she'd found him, and she was the only person he'd allow close. For a brief moment, she'd feared he was in danger again.

"Thank goodness you're all right," she crooned.

Matt locked the door and leaned against it, muscled arms crossed. "I take it that's Eugene?"

"Yes." She smiled as Eugene purred like a diesel. "I thought maybe—" Oh. Too much information to the stranger. "Nothing."

Matt frowned. "Maybe what?"

"Nothing." She relaxed. "He's fine."

"Why wouldn't he be?" That gray gaze narrowed on her.

She cleared her throat, feeling suddenly like a specimen on a slide. "Life isn't always smooth, even in a small town." Her life was nowhere near peaceful. Life was also too short to spend time dumping her problems on a guy who had enough of his own.

"Are you in trouble, sweetheart?" he asked softly, pushing off from the door.

Yes. Definitely. Trouble with all capital letters stood before her like every dangerous fantasy a girl had about tattooed bad boys on motorcycles. "No. So, how about you start tomorrow?"

He rubbed his chin. "The sign says 'Pay and Board.' Where's the room?"

Heat flushed down her torso. "Um, no room." No way, no how.

"Oh." He blinked and took a deep breath before wincing. "Okay. The forests look decent around here. I'll head out and find a nice campsite." He lurched off of the table, his face paling further.

Thunder rolled above them as if on cue.

She sighed. God, when had her heart gotten so darn soft? “Fine. There’s a room upstairs you can rent by the week while you’re here. I’m across the hall, and I have not only triple locks but a couple of guns I know how to use.” As a threat, it was accurate.

Matt stepped into her space, bringing warmth and the scent of male. One knuckle tipped up her chin. “Sounds perfect. You saved me in the alley, and I owe you.”

The absolute strength and determination across his face should scare her. Lava burned through her veins instead of fear. While she had issues, no doubt the biggest threat stood before her with hard muscles and bloody jeans—because against all caution, she wanted to avoid reality and jump into the heat.

That’s how a woman already in danger got burned.

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