

A photograph of a red electric guitar with a white pickguard. A black lace mask is placed over the bridge and pickup area of the guitar. The title "Tangled Web" is written in a white, cursive font across the top of the image.

Tangled Web

Jade C. Jamison

Tangled Web:
A Steamy Heavy Metal Novella
Goodreads sample

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Can she ever tell her best friend she wants him to rock her world?

Tangled Web

A Steamy Heavy Metal Novella

Katie Logan has had a secret crush on her best friend Johnny Church since high school, but he's never looked at her the same way. So when Johnny—now a famous rock-and-roll guitarist—comes home to visit, Katie can't bring herself to tell him she's engaged to be married. She should have, though, because she soon discovers that maybe the attraction is mutual...

Katie and Johnny embraced each other. "I always forget how much I miss you until I see you again." They both patted each other on the back. As she started to pull away, she felt that Johnny wasn't ready to let go yet. So she leaned her head against his chest again and lost herself in his hug.

Inherent in the hug was the message that he had missed Katie as much as she had missed him. That much she believed and knew in her heart. He did let go, almost reluctantly, Katie thought, and she smiled. It really was good to have her best friend here.

But as she did at last pull back and her eyes met his, she realized she was dead wrong. It was more than that. His pupils were dilated as though he had been in a dark room for several minutes, and they were gazing into hers. Could it be...?

Yes. She read him like her favorite book, and their lips met before she could ponder it more. A thought, an image of her fiancé Grant flashed for all but a second in her mind, and then it was swept away, along with any guilt she should have felt. Her brain told her that Johnny had been in her life long before Grant had been, and so what they did together didn't matter. It was a lame justification, but it was out of her mind almost as quickly as it had entered. This moment had been a fantasy for far too long, and there was no stopping it now...

What readers are saying about *Tangled Web*:

S. Novack, 5-star review on Amazon: "I honestly loved this book...the overall story and characters are very satisfying. I will be watching for more from this author; I can tell that there is more to come."

From Maryse Black of Maryse's Book Blog: "I got 'into' it, pretty much immediately . . . it provided for a good enough angsty ride, and had a lot of 'flashbacks' that helped build the issue that was troubling the characters today.

You know those kinds of books... where they're just 'okay' or 'pretty good' but they had that one moment that will forever be burned in your memory, and that very thing just suddenly puts it up there in the 'gotta tell ya about this one part...' category? Well this was one of those for me."

Jenn, 5 stars on Goodreads: "Loved this can't wait until the 2nd book comes out!!"

Deanna Villalpando, Goodreads: "I thought it was a GREAT 'Sit outside in the sun with a cold drink and read' kind of book!"

Lizz, 5 stars on Amazon: “I couldn't put it down... I can't wait for the second book to come out!!!”

Jennifer Foor, author of *Hope's Chance*, 4 stars on Amazon: “If you are looking for a quick read that is steamy and painful (in a good way), than this is a great choice.”

5 stars on Barnes and Noble: “Couldn't put it down!”

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Part I

Chapter One

KATIE LOGAN SAT quietly, looking at the pained expression on the woman's face. The woman had come in to the Child Protection offices of her own accord, and Katie was part of the intake team. Any calls of abuse or child neglect went through her office. And so, at 4:15 that afternoon, Katie sat listening to this woman's story.

Libby, the woman, looked up at Katie. "I just don't think he's appropriate around my daughter."

"Yes, you had mentioned that before." Katie looked down at the three-year-old blonde child playing with blocks on the floor below them, a miniature version of her mother. Katie's gaze returned to Libby, whose own blonde mass of hair was piled into a sloppy bun at the back of her head, uncombed and stringy underneath the black scrunchie that held it together. "What exactly have you found inappropriate?"

"Well, he, uh..." Libby paused, letting a small breath of air escape from pursed lips. "He patted her on the bottom last night. It wasn't that but the way he did it. And then later, she sat on his lap, and he was stroking her thigh. But it wasn't affectionate. It was...like she was a piece of meat or even a date."

Katie jotted a few quick notes on the yellow legal pad in front of her. She looked up again. "I can see how that might be concerning." She looked back down at her notes. "So, Rod, you said his name was?" Libby nodded. "Do you know his full name?"

"His last name is Carriger." Libby looked down at her hands. "That's all I know."

"About how old would you say he is?"

"About thirty, give or take." She looked over at her daughter, then glanced at the pad where Katie was jotting some notes.

Katie planned to check their files later and see if this character had a history with her agency. If he'd already been in trouble before, she could launch an official investigation. Until she knew, though, she wasn't going to say anything to Libby...although she wouldn't have said anything to Libby anyway. Libby was the type that would warn Rod it was coming, even though she *was* worried about her daughter. Katie pressed on. "How long have you and Rod known each other?"

"Two weeks."

"Has he acted like this around Destiny before?"

"This is the first time he's met her. The last time he was at my house, my sister watched her."

"Did he do anything else to her or do anything else that concerned you last night?"

"Nothing else I can think of."

Katie glanced down at the pad again and then focused her brown eyes on Libby. "Okay, well, there's not much I can do at this point. Fortunately, he hasn't harmed your child, but he's set your alarm bells off. My advice to you right now is to listen to your instincts. If you feel like he's being inappropriate, he probably is. So the best thing to do now is keep him away from your daughter."

A small tear eased its way out of the corner of Libby's eye. The woman wiped it away with her index finger. "But I think I love him."

Katie's sigh was inaudible. Seven years ago, she might have passionately lectured the woman—likely not even twenty-five-years old yet—sitting across from her. She probably would have begged her to think about her child's future, to put the child's needs in front of the mother's. But the time spent on the job—more than a decade—had dulled her to strong emotions, had made her feel numb. In one way, it was good. She could maintain a calm exterior, and the people she dealt with seemed to respond well to that kind of reaction. More than that, though, Katie didn't go home crying at least three nights a week anymore. But it didn't mean she was used to it—not by a long shot. Her voice was low and professional when she responded. "I appreciate that you have feelings for this man. But I want to impress upon you that you would never forgive yourself if anything happened to Destiny." Libby began sobbing, and Katie grabbed a tissue out of the box on the side table and handed it to her. Libby took it and began wiping at her face, streaks of black from her eyeliner and mascara smudging under her eyes. Katie noticed the dirt under Libby's fingernails before she finally started talking again. "I'm not saying you can't continue your relationship with Rod, but be cautious."

Libby shook her head. "I guess I'm just not destined to be with someone." Her sobs grew louder again, and Katie handed her a handful of tissues.

"Oh, no, that's not true. You're young, and there are plenty of people out there." Katie sucked in a deep breath. She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost time to go, but she expected to be here long after the doors locked. Part of her wanted to tell Libby that if she didn't frequent bars, she might find better quality men. But her job was not to lecture, not to evaluate, not to judge. It was, instead, to protect the welfare of the child. And right now that child was patting her mother's knee, telling Mommy everything would be all right. Katie's mouth screwed up into a frown. She didn't know the last time she felt like she had actually been able to save a child. Maybe, though, she could help Libby make the right choice. Libby looked up at Katie, little gullies of flaked black mascara making trails halfway down her cheeks where they abruptly stopped, having been wiped clean. "I know right now it doesn't seem that way, but—"

Libby gulped and nodded. "No, you're right. You're right. I guess maybe I can keep seeing him but leave Destiny at my sister's when I do."

"Yes, that's one possibility." Katie knew her calm façade wouldn't betray the fact that she was disappointed. Libby had made the choice she would not have recommended, had, in fact, chosen the one Katie had tried to sway her from. She had to offer one last bit of advice: "Just remember that if you feel he's not treating your daughter in a manner you think is appropriate, keep him away from her."

Katie saw outside the meeting room that some of her coworkers were shutting off lights here and there and preparing to leave for the day. She wound up spending another twenty minutes with Libby, offering her advice but knowing that the young mother had to make her own choices. Katie just hoped they were good choices, but she knew she would likely be seeing Libby again in the near future.

* * *

Dean, one of the workers in her unit, stopped by her cubicle. "Kate, it's late. You going home soon?"

She looked up from the computer screen, moving a wisp of brown hair out of her eyes. "Yeah, I just want to finish documenting my last visit. I'll be leaving in ten minutes tops."

"Promise?"

Katie's smile didn't stretch too far, but she tried. "Promise."

“Good. Grant made me vow to keep a good eye on you while he’s gone. I don’t want to have to tell him you were down here all night long.”

Katie shook her head, this time her smile stretching out, her gleaming white teeth making an appearance. “I have Sam to take care of, so no worries. I promise to leave no later than eight.” Dean raised his eyebrows. “Just kidding. I should be out of here by six.”

Dean smiled and nodded. “All right. See you tomorrow then.”

“Yep.” Katie returned her gaze to the computer screen and read the last two sentences she had typed. When she could, she tried to get her documentation over as soon as possible while it was still fresh in her mind. Yes, she could have just as easily done it in the morning, but it was safer to do it now, while the details were still crisp and sharp. She shrugged her shoulders and rolled her neck around, loosening the stiffness, then resumed tapping on the keyboard, her slim fingers appearing to fly as sentences appeared, one after another on the screen. When Katie finally left the hulking brick building, she was the last one out the doors, turning off the remaining lights and securing the alarm system. There was still plenty of light out tonight, so if Grant asked, she could assure him she hadn’t been here “all night long.”

* * *

Katie slid the gold key into the lock of the thick wooden door that was the entrance to her home. She opened the door and was greeted in seconds by Sam, her white long-haired Angora cat. Sam uttered a squeaky “meow” and then began twirling around Katie’s legs. Katie set her purse on the small table beside the door and bent over. She rubbed Sam underneath the chin. Sam smiled back. “Yes, I missed you too, silly.” She locked the screen door, then shut the large wooden door and locked its deadbolt.

After the long day at work, Katie was ready to ease into her evening routine. She wouldn’t have admitted it, not even to herself, but because she found her work so traumatizing, so draining on a daily basis, she had over time created a safe haven away from work. Stability in everything she did and a solid routine helped Katie feel comfortable. No curve balls, no troubles she couldn’t foresee. Katie’s life was *boring*, but she liked it that way.

Her routine was slightly varied now, though, because Grant, her fiancé, was out of town for work, so Katie and Sam were on their own tonight. Katie made her way to the kitchen. She checked her voice mail—no calls. She sifted through the mail—one bill, one health magazine, and two credit card offers which she immediately tossed in the trash. Sam continued to purr, meow, and rub on Katie’s legs. Katie looked down. “I suppose you’re wanting some canned food, huh?” Katie smiled and walked over to the pale brown cupboard. She got out a can of gravied cat food, Sam’s favorite, and pulled the metal lid off. Sam started howling in anticipation. He continued meowing at her as she walked across the room, can in hand, until she placed it beside his dry food and water dish.

Sam taken care of, Katie peeked in the fridge. There wasn’t much there, so she decided she’d have a salad for dinner. No sense cooking for just herself. She planned out the rest of her evening: a workout on the exercise bike, followed by a shower and dinner, and then she would curl up in bed with a new book, maybe brushing Sam at the same time.

Almost every evening in Katie’s life mirrored the one before. Grant usually visited two or three nights a week, nights when he didn’t have his daughter. Those evenings revolved around him, but Katie didn’t necessarily prefer those evenings. In fact, she savored her times alone. She didn’t have close girlfriends, so she didn’t ever go for a girls’ night out. She visited her mother every Saturday like clockwork. Katie’s life was comfortable but dull. She didn’t complain, though, because she saw what “excitement” could do to families. After working in

Child Protective Services for more than ten years, she had learned to prefer her own safe, sanitary life to the alternative.

She walked to her bedroom so she could change into athletic wear and out of the navy blue pantsuit she'd worn to work today. She paused at the bedroom mirror to take off her jewelry. Thanks to exercise and diet, Katie didn't look thirty-four; she looked like she was still in her late twenties. She was thin, fit, and firm. Her straight shoulder-length light brown hair framed her face and complemented her ivory skin and light brown eyes. Gazing at her reflection, she tried to picture herself in a white lace gown. Just last month, Grant had proposed. Katie had accepted without much thought. They had been dating for almost three years and were compatible, so she had no need to wonder if it was the right decision; it had felt inevitable. It was the next step one took in a relationship. But they hadn't yet set a date, and she still had problems picturing herself as a bride. Grant had been married once, but Katie had never been married or even engaged. It wasn't that she hadn't been in relationships; they'd just never progressed to that point. She'd never wondered why that was. She *knew* why.

Katie's feet ached, so she slipped off her shoes and placed them in an empty shoebox in her closet. She then moved back to the dresser and had finally undone the clasp on her necklace when the doorbell rang. She jumped; she wasn't expecting anyone. She placed the necklace in its appropriate slot in her jewelry box and left her bedroom. Sam was sitting on the beige living room carpet looking content. He was licking his lips and blinking his eyes at Katie. She smiled at him, then continued walking to the front door.

Katie unlocked the door and peered through the screen. Dusk might have been approaching, but June's stubborn sun refused to give up. Bright sunlight shone on the face of the man at the door, making it hard to discern his features. Katie paused, then smiled. "Johnny?"

* * *

Katie Logan, a freckly-faced preteen, sat in the dirt and overgrown grass beside an irrigation ditch that ran along the length of the town of Winchester, Colorado. It was right around the block from her house, and she had ridden her bike there. It was August. The summer had wound down to boring, and Katie had little to do. She was tired of video games and books. She was tired of playing other games with the girls who lived on her street, and she'd pretty much exhausted all the outdoor fun she could think of. She was sick of swimming and roller skating. She no longer enjoyed any of the activities she usually relished. Her family had gone camping one week in July, and she'd visited her cousins out of state for a week in June, but now all the summer fun was over. Katie wouldn't admit it to her friends, but she was ready to go back to school. She'd begin fifth grade this year, and she was ready to see her friends again, meet her new teacher, learn new things. She wanted to get back into a routine. She appreciated weekends when she had to work hard all week. Months of nothing to do unnerved her, and she was ready to have tasks set in front of her.

So she sat by the bank of the ditch, tossing in small stones, just for the sake of doing it, not even aware that she was. She started dreaming up stories in her mind to occupy the time. She didn't even hear the footsteps of the young brown-haired boy; in fact, she didn't even notice him until he sat next to her. "So, is this what you guys do for fun around here?"

Katie looked over at the boy. Sitting next to her, he appeared to be her build and even her height. His hair, light brown, was short but a little shaggy, and his ice blue eyes twinkled at her. She scrunched her nose as if she had smelled something funny. Then she said, "No. I'm just bored."

He smiled. "So what do you usually do for fun?"

Katie shrugged her shoulders. “I dunno. Normal stuff.”

“Normal stuff like what? Do you *have* anything fun to do around here?”

Katie looked over at him, as though considering what she wanted to say. “It depends, I guess.”

“Depends on what?”

“On what you like to do. What do *you* like to do?”

“Video games. Softball. Other stuff.”

“Me too. If you like to swim, the public pool is about five blocks that way.” She pointed to her right, in front of the boy’s chest.

“My name’s Johnny, by the way.”

She smiled. “Katie.” The two youngsters shook hands, a sight that would have had their mothers giggling. The act may have seemed formal, but it cemented what would become a lifelong friendship. Katie then proceeded to tell Johnny every activity she had already participated in that summer and asked him about his move to her town.

And Katie and Johnny spent the rest of the summer together. Suddenly, swimming, video games, and playing outside weren’t boring anymore. Johnny Church helped young Katie find the fun in the world again, and when school began the end of August, she was sad. But by then, she and Johnny—her new neighbor one block down—were tight. Had Johnny’s mother moved to the small town of Winchester a year later after puberty had set in solidly, the two might not have ever become friends—hormones and mood swings might have interfered with their budding friendship. Instead, the two of them attended the same elementary school and Katie had the pleasure of introducing her class to her new best friend Johnny. The two remained close friends throughout middle school; Katie thought Johnny was a better friend than her girlfriends—there was less drama and fewer fights. By the time they started high school, there was no question that Katie and Johnny would be “Best Friends Forever.”

* * *

“Katie,” the man outside her door nodded and smiled. “Good to see you.”

Katie unlocked the screen door. Johnny wrapped his arms around her in a hug, lifting her off the ground. She giggled. “Come in.” Johnny of today still looked like Johnny in fifth grade, but with some noticeable differences. His lanky body sometimes reminded Katie of a young Tommy Lee, when Mötley Crüe was still touring for their second and third albums in the 80s. Johnny had sinewy but not bulky arms. His right arm was hidden under a tattoo sleeve of various colors and design, and the left arm was well on its way to being fully covered. His hair was still shaggy and short-ish, his face clean shaven, but now his ears were pierced multiple times on both sides. And he was tall, well over six feet, dwarfing tiny Katie who couldn’t even make it to halfway between five and six. To this day, he had the sly, lopsided grin that Katie had always found endearing; he still had the smallest hairline gap between his front two teeth that would have looked goofy on anyone else but somehow Johnny pulled it off. He wore a black Static-X tee and faded blue jeans with a black leather belt that matched his biker boots.

He walked through the front door into the living room. “I’m glad I found the right place. I stopped by your mom’s house and she gave me this address.” He looked around the room, his blue eyes not seeming to miss any detail. “You live alone here, or...?”

Katie nodded. “Yes.” She grinned. “Well, not entirely. I do have Sam over there.” She hunched over and stuck out her finger. Sam let out a little “mew” and sauntered over, rubbing his cheek on her finger. She picked him up and held him in her arms.

Johnny grinned. “Cool. You still have him. Hey, Sam.” He patted the cat on the head. “So why such a big house for little ol’ you?”

Katie laughed. “Why not?”

“But you don’t have a dog or anything, right? It’s awfully domestic of you.”

“Yeah, no dog. But I’ve started gardening. And this house is mine—I’m not renting. I got tired of paying all that money every month for nothing.” She felt silly explaining herself. “I’m in my thirties, you know...time to grow up.”

Johnny looked up at the ceiling as though pondering what she’d said. “There is that, I guess.”

Katie set the cat back on the carpet. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Sure. Whatcha got?”

She started walking to the kitchen, and Johnny followed close behind. “So what brings you back to Winchester anyway?” She tried not to think of the last time he visited. She knew already, though, that whatever brought him back to town this time wasn’t as bad as last time. She could tell that just by looking at him.

Katie opened the door to the refrigerator while Johnny spoke. “Mmmm...just needed to come back home for a while.”

“Well, I have water, some tea, soymilk, and—” she pushed aside a carton and two jars “it looks like one beer—a Bud Light.”

“If you’re offering, I’ll take it.” Katie nodded and pulled it out. She handed it to Johnny and indicated that he could sit at the breakfast bar that looked over the living room. She sat on the stool next to him as he twisted off the cap.

He took a sip of the beer. “It’s more than just needing to be home, though. The band and I decided it was time to part ways. So I did a lot of other things for a while, but music’s in my blood, Katie. I decided to come home to kind of clear my mind, and then I’m going to start back up again.”

“You’re going to form a new band?” Johnny had been a member of no fewer than three bands of varying degrees of success since graduating from high school. Katie had hoped for Johnny’s sake that his career choice would pay off, but it had seemed to cause more pain and problems for him than it brought joy. Still, Katie didn’t feel it was her place to tell her old friend how to run his life. At least he was doing better now than a few short years ago.

“Yeah. I have to. I’m not cut out for regular work, Katie. I tried it.” She folded her hands in front of her and stared at her knuckles. Even if Johnny was “cut out” for regular work, he certainly didn’t look the part. He *looked* like he belonged in a band. What employer would consider hiring him if Johnny happened to find another career he cared about? “But, shit, I didn’t come here to tell you my plans or to catch up. I just wanted to hang with my best friend. It’s been too long.”

“Do you want to stay for dinner?”

“I’d love to.” He took another sip of the beer. “You know what? We could have Napoli deliver a double pepperoni.” Napoli was a local pizza parlor, known throughout the county for its pizzas and pasta. When the two had been in high school, it had been their favorite hangout.

Katie winced. “There’s something I guess I need to tell you.”

Johnny raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“I’m vegetarian now. So how about cheese instead?”

“Seriously?” He laughed. “My little Katie who loved nothing better than a greasy cheeseburger covered in bacon? Didn’t see that comin’.” He shook his head and laughed again.

“I have a better idea. Why don’t we go there instead? Then you could get whatever you wanted. I haven’t been there in years anyway. Besides, we could get a pitcher too.”

Katie stood up from her stool and smiled. She thought it might be nice to get out of the house for a while. Her workout could wait until tomorrow. “All right. Just let me change clothes.”

“What’s wrong with what you have on?”

“A little overdressed, don’t you think?”

“I guess,” Johnny said.

“It’ll just take me a minute.” And it did—she took off her suit jacket and skirt but left on the white satin blouse. Then she slid into snug blue jeans with white sneakers and grabbed her jean jacket out of the closet in case it turned cool in the evening. She joined Johnny in the kitchen as he set his empty brown bottle on the counter. She tousled the fur on Sam’s head, grabbed her purse, and followed Johnny out the door.

Chapter Two

THEY FINALLY MADE it to Napoli Pizzeria after debating who would drive. Johnny only had his motorcycle, but Katie had a gray four-door Camry. He told her she needed to live a little. Playing to Katie's core, he said, "Besides, it's earth friendlier," placed his helmet in her hands, and sat on the bike until she finally conceded. It turned out that the purse was a nuisance, though, so she made Johnny wait while she removed her wallet and keys, stuck them in her jacket pocket, and placed her purse back inside the house. Johnny grinned at her, triumphant, until she sat behind him and wrapped her arms around his taut torso.

Napoli hadn't changed much since high school. It was a homey, poorly lit little place on Main Street that would be forever infused with the smell of garlic and oregano. Johnny had said he hadn't been there in years, but Katie hadn't either, even though she could have gone any time she'd wanted. Anymore, when she bothered to eat out, it was usually at the deli in the strip mall or the little restaurant attached to the health food store. She had avoided pizza parlors and burger joints since she'd taken on a healthier lifestyle several years past. But leave it to Johnny—anytime Katie ventured into what he called "boring territory," he managed to break her out of it when he was around. She had always found it hard to tell him no. He was usually spontaneous, creative, and lively, while Katie was grounded, practical, and, yes, sometimes dull. And that's why they'd always been so compatible. Just as Katie needed someone to liven her up, sometimes Johnny needed someone to tone him down or to tell him that his bright idea was actually dangerous or mean, only because he hadn't thought his idea all the way through.

When she got off the motorcycle after Johnny had parked in Napoli's tiny parking lot, she removed the helmet and handed it to Johnny. She ran her fingers through her hair, sensing that the helmet had probably made it staticky and unwieldy. When she dropped her arms to her side, she caught Johnny's stare. He was still standing in the same spot, still holding the helmet, just watching her. A tentative smile crossed Katie's face. Was her hair that messed up? "What?" She reached up and began smoothing her hair again.

Johnny grinned. "Nothin'." He laughed. "Are we a little paranoid?" She laughed too, and Johnny locked the helmet onto the bike. Then he hung his arm around her shoulders. "Man, it's great to be hangin' with my best friend again. Been way too long."

"Yeah, it has." She wrapped her arm around his waist, and they sauntered into the front door of what used to be their favorite restaurant, the low-lying early summer sun hitting their backs before the door swung closed behind them.

Johnny pointed to his right. "Hey, check it out! Our favorite booth is open."

A waitress approached them. "Two?"

"Yeah, but can we sit in that booth over there?"

The waitress obliged and took them to Johnny's favorite spot. "Can I get you started with something to drink?"

Katie said, "I'd love a glass of ice water with a wedge of lemon."

Johnny snorted. "How about a pitcher of beer? Coors okay with you?"

Katie wrinkled her nose. "If you're gonna make me drink with you, make it Light."

He scrunched his mouth into a grimace, then laughed. "Okay, Coors Light then."

"I'll be right back with that. Do you still want the water, ma'am?"

“Yes.” The waitress walked away. Katie lowered her voice, wincing at Johnny. “God, do I really look like a ma’am?”

Johnny grinned again. “Depends on how old your audience is, I guess. But as far as I’m concerned, I’d say you’re at least two years away from reaching ma’am territory.”

Katie stuck her tongue out, then smiled back. “So what are you in the mood for? I seriously just want a salad.”

“Aw, come on, Katie. Don’t be a party pooper.”

“I’m not that hungry.”

“Is that why you’ve gotten so skinny now?”

“I’m not skinny. I’m in shape.”

“Hmmm.” Johnny looked back down at the menu.

“Okay, how about if I get a mini cheese pizza with a salad? Would you be happy with that?”

He smiled. “That’s better. And I think I’ll skip the salad and get a medium pizza covered in double pepperoni. I’ve been craving that for at least a year. Nobody else does it as good as Napoli. And, believe me, I’ve looked.”

Katie smiled back and shook her head. “So, are we going Dutch? Or I can pick up the tab if you want.”

“No way. This was my idea. My treat.”

“Yeah, but you’re in between bands, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m good. I get some monthly spending money off residuals. I have a couple albums out there plus there’s this new band just starting up that did a cover of a song off my first album. You’ve probably heard it on the radio. Anyway, there’s always a little money rolling in.”

“What’s their name? Which song did they do?”

The waitress approached the table again, placing Katie’s water in front of her, then on the table set a pitcher of beer already forming condensation on the glass and two chilled beer glasses. “Are you ready to order?”

“Yep.” Johnny pointed to Katie, letting her order first, then ordered his food. Once the waitress left, Johnny asked, “What were we talking about?”

“I think we were talking about what you’re doing career wise now.”

Johnny reached for the pitcher, pouring Katie a glass first, then pouring himself one. “Well, Scathing Vengeance just wasn’t going anywhere artistically. Everything we’d written most recently sounds just like the last album. Sure, it’s hard, it’s loud, even awesome by most people’s standards. It’s everything metal should be, but...we just weren’t growing. *I* wasn’t growing. It was the same old shit, different day. And I’m not getting any younger.” He took a long swallow of his beer. “I need to work with people who care that what we’re doing is not only quality but says something too, means something.” Katie nodded and took a tiny sip of her beer to be polite, then took a big drink of her water. “You know what I mean?”

“I think so.”

“Besides, I already did the whole ‘big rock star’ thing. You know that. I’ve spent the last fifteen years living that...partying hard, hooking up with nameless chicks in every port, writing the angry, loud stuff. I just...I just want it to mean something now, you know? If this is going to be my life, then it has to mean something.”

Katie took a deep breath. “So do you think getting a new band together will help?”

“Hell, yeah. With Vengeance, we all considered ourselves equal partners. We all contributed. Brian wrote the words and the rest of us guys collaborated on the music.”

The waitress stopped by with a salad that she carefully placed in front of Katie. A faint smile crossed her face, but she didn’t say a word. “Thanks.” Katie picked up the fork.

Johnny took another long drink of beer. Once the waitress left, Johnny asked, “Tell me this: do you think our third CD sounded any more mature than our first or second one?”

“Did it sound different at all, do you mean?”

Johnny looked at her over the rim of his glass and then set it down again. “You know what I mean.”

She did; what he’d said before was true. No smoothing it over. He wanted her honest opinion. “No. It just sounded like more of the same. But it was great more of the same.”

“That may be. But no growth. That’s what I mean. So, here’s my theory. I get together a bunch of guys eager to work and desperate to make it. I already have the connections and the credibility. Hell, I even have a fan base. I do all the writing—lyrics, music, all of it. Then I’m assured we’re doing what I want. It’s gonna be my fucking band, so I want that kind of control.” He took another drink. “Besides, it’s not like they’re not gonna make money with me. They will. They’ll get it all—the fame, the fortune, the chicks. But I can maybe also help them avoid all the stupid mistakes I’ve made.”

Katie had been nibbling at her salad. “It sounds like a great plan, Johnny.”

“I think so too.” He poured himself another glass of beer. “But enough about me. What have you been up to since I saw you last?”

Katie scooted her fork around her salad. She knew the conversation would come here at some point. But she didn’t know that she was ready for it. For one thing, she hadn’t wanted to think about the last time Johnny had been here. She’d been afraid for his life, thought that she’d never see him again, and if she did, she’d feared he’d never be the same. But he’d pulled through it—survived and even thrived. Still, it was a dark period in their friendship that she’d prefer to forget. But it had changed everything. The last time Johnny was in her life had made Katie rethink her life and change the way she lived it.

Which led her to the matter of Grant. Yes, Johnny would find out soon enough that she was engaged to be married. Hell, she’d probably even ask him to be her best man if she could convince Grant that it was okay for them both to have best men. But she didn’t know that she was ready to tell Johnny. For far too many reasons, she wasn’t prepared to tell Johnny about Grant and her plans for the future.

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