

EXOTIKA

ELLORA'S CAVE

CARA
McKENNA

Getaway

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Cara McKenna

A sequel to Backwoods and Shivarree.

Six months ago Natalie drove away from Louisiana and a three-day, two-man rebound to be reckoned with. Now back in snowy Rochester, she wasn't expecting to see either of those Southern gentlemen again. She certainly wasn't expecting to find one standing in her work parking lot one afternoon without a word of warning.

Cold turkey is what Shane's after. He's been with his lover Gabriel for a year now — a year of hot sex and obsessive attraction that's left him with a death grip on the tattered remains of his heterosexuality and too many sleepless nights. Desperate for a clean break, Shane hopes hiding out at Natalie's for a week or two will do the trick. She sure as hell owes him one fine rebound.

But Shane quickly discovers that banishing Gabriel from his heart and his head is easier said than done. His cold-turkey recovery is headed straight for an epic relapse, and Shane's going to have to make a choice—the traditional life he thinks he wants, or the man he can't seem to live without.

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Getaway

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GETAWAY

Cara McKenna

Dedication

For Shane Broussard, whose suffering is directly proportional to my writerly glee. I suspect I owe you a new couch, considering how thoroughly the old one's been abused since I flounced in and wrecked all your plans. Also, I know where your stash is.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my very first editor, Jaynie, for coming this far with me and these twisted characters. Though you've left me in capable hands, it would have been nice to finish this saga with you... Plus Kelli's got this 5,000-volt editorial cattle prod thing that she pokes me with every time I dangle a modifier. It really stings. Miss you.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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Chapter One

Natalie clocked out at five past three, dead on her feet. Another Thursday done. One more day to get through and the relief of a lazy weekend would be hers. She waved to the new front desk girl and the elderly residents milling in the sunroom. She tugged on her hat, heading outside to face the stinging cold—good old Rochester in the dead of winter. Gray sky like a hangover, dry wind like a punch to the lungs.

She fumbled in her purse for her gloves as she made her way to her parking space. Then she spotted something that slowed her steps—a man. A familiar man, leaning on the closed tailgate of an equally familiar, faded blue truck. She knew that face, vaguely, but it was all displaced, tough to label surrounded by her familiar work parking lot, the white expanse of the nearly frozen pond and the snow-covered trees. Then—

Ho-ly shit. Shane Broussard.

They'd shared a lover—simultaneously, in fact—for a couple of steamy nights in Nowheresville, Louisiana. Two men, one woman, a rebound to be reckoned with. She covered the last few paces at an ice-cautious jog, a smile overtaking her mouth. She stopped in front of him and craned her neck to meet those blue-gray eyes. Seeing him triggered a change in the atmosphere—from Rochester winter to the bayou in August in a blink.

"Hi, Shane."

"Hi yourself, Miss Natalie." That warm, lazy accent brought a faint blush to Natalie's cheeks. His tan was gone and heavy stubble peppered his jaw. He had a distinctly travel-worn look about him, but otherwise it was the same old Shane she remembered.

"What are you doing in my parking lot?" she asked.

"It's still a free country north of the Mason-Dixon, ain't it?"

She smiled. Shane's surliness hadn't faded in the cold. "Are you here to see me?" Natalie offered a teasing, not entirely flirt-free smile.

"If I wasn't this'd be one fantastic coincidence."

"I just finished work. Do you want to go someplace? Get a coffee or something? Tell me what the heck you're doing in Rochester?"

Shane nodded. "Sure. It's fucking freezing out here. How d'you people live this way?"

"We're very hardy. You want to follow me?"

"Sure."

"Can I hug you first?"

"Have at it." He opened his arms and Natalie wrapped herself around his middle, squeezing his strong body and marveling anew at how big this man was. He didn't squeeze back but gave her shoulder a few friendly pats. She pulled away, offering him a final fond smile as their few seconds of shared heat dissipated.

She crunched through the salted parking lot to her own truck off in the employee section, stomach suddenly souring. As the windows defogged she watched Shane in her rearview, ramrod straight in his driver's seat, hands on the wheel, staring into space. Natalie only had two guesses why Shane might have driven all the way to see her with no warning, and they weren't pretty. She backed out with anxiety clenching her middle, Shane following her onto the road.

Maybe Gabriel died. It was a bizarre thought. It made logical sense, given Shane's appearance, but it was impossible to imagine a person so lively not...alive. Maybe Shane's lover had just up and gone, the way Shane had told her he sometimes wished might happen. Just suddenly disappeared, leaving Shane free to get on with his life, pick up the pieces in the wake of crippling infatuation.

Natalie led him six blocks to a chain coffee shop and they parked, slamming their doors in sync. She noticed as they approached the entrance how underdressed Shane was.

"You really ought to buy a winter coat." She gave the sleeve of his light jacket a tug. She held the door for him but the gesture with met with a glare. Natalie shook her head, letting Shane do the door-holding and preceding him into the café.

"You haven't changed," she told him as they got in line.

He shrugged. "It's only been about six months."

"Oh. I guess you're right. Feels like a lifetime ago. To me, anyhow."

Shane unzipped his jacket and she was relieved to see he at least had a sweater on.

"So, you going to tell me why you're here, Shane?" Her gut twisted again, fearing one piece of news, praying for the other.

He became rather distracted by his zipper pull. "My, um...my aunt passed away."

"Oh no. Your aunt who opened the bar?"

He nodded, clenched his jaw in a way that forced Natalie to fight off an urge to hug him again.

"I'm so sorry, Shane. Is that related to whatever brings you here?"

"I s'pose. I just got to thinking..." His attention moved to the front window as he trailed off.

"Next!"

Natalie jumped and hurried to the counter, ordered her coffee then looked to Shane.

"Large...whatever. Nothing fancy. Not decaf."

They fought for a moment over who paid and Natalie won, elbowing Shane and his bills out of the way.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

Their drinks were handed over and Natalie led Shane to a free pair of easy chairs in the front. They had a view of the parking lot, the wind pushing old flakes off the roof to dust the mud-splattered cars, a rather uninspired snow globe.

"Here, have a seat." Natalie pointed to a chair.

Shane sank down with an almighty huff.

"So your aunt passed away," Natalie said, settling in with her cup. "When?"

"Couple weeks before Christmas."

"That's awful, Shane."

His jaw shifted again. "Yeah. So, anyway. I got to thinking how, now that she's gone, I got no family left. None I want to know, anyhow. And you know..." His voice trickled to a mumble. "Me and Gabriel."

She nodded, tried to ignore the flush that ran up her neck at the mere name.

"The way that's headed...nowhere, I mean. I dunno."

He shrugged and Natalie leaned forward in her chair, putting a hand to his knee—a more tender gesture than they'd managed in those three bygone days they'd spent banging one another's brains out all over the apartment above Shane's bar.

"It was just time." He sipped his coffee. "Marie passing was like a brick to the head. I got nobody, family-wise. I'm not working toward a family of my own, and him...he's no partner, you know. Not even if we were like, out there with everything."

As far as Natalie knew, the only people who were aware of the sexual status of Shane and his bar's resident musician were the women sent to him for permission when Gabriel wanted to take an outside lover. Natalie had been one of them, though she'd largely violated the whole permission clause.

She nodded. "So why are you here? Did I grossly underestimate how charming you found me?" The recollection of their not-wholly-sexual tension from those few days the previous August buzzed in her veins, stronger and hotter than the coffee in her hands.

"I'm real happy to see you, Miss Natalie. But mostly I came because this is as far away as I can get and still know somebody. I needed to get away. Cold turkey."

"Gotcha. You afraid of a relapse?"

Shane grinned and nodded guiltily. Gabriel was a damn hard fix to quit and Natalie could appreciate that she was lucky, having escaped as cleanly as she did.

"Maybe you came because I kicked the habit you couldn't. Maybe you need a sponsor." She offered another smirk, suddenly charmed to have this huge man in her hometown. It wrecked the fantasy quality of the strange few days she'd passed in Louisiana, but Natalie didn't mind. She liked Shane the person more than Shane the memory. "In any case, you're welcome to stay with me. My apartment's not crazy roomy, but the couch folds out."

He nodded. "That'll do."

"For how long, do you think?"

"No clue. Couple weeks? As long as you'll have me. I'll give you rent, obviously."

She sputtered her lips at him, dismissing the idea with a wave. "Is that what you think of northern hospitality? Keep your money, thanks."

Shane shrugged.

"I still owe you for the work you did on my truck." She leaned back in her seat and crossed her legs. "How was the drive, by the way? You ever driven in snow and ice before?"

He shook his head. "Nope. And it is *fucked* up. Why'd you idiots settle up here in the first place? In the tundra? It's fucking miserable."

Natalie put a finger to her lips and glanced pointedly at nearby parents and small children.

"Sorry. Frigging miserable."

"Plenty of us would say the same about your humidity and bugs, you know."

"Maybe, but I hear the food up here sucks too."

Natalie rolled her eyes. "Oh, you are going to be one charming houseguest, I can feel it."

"Sorry. Just hate the cold." He looked down at his hands, flexed his fingers. "My knuckles been aching since Cincinnati."

"Poor baby. Well, I'll crank up the heat and keep you full of warm home cooking, how about that?"

Shane smiled, the expression looking cagey as always. "Sounds just peachy, Miss Natalie."

"Good. Actually, I'll need to get some food... You want to go to my place and take a shower or nap or whatever, and I'll head to the store and stock up?"

"I'll go with you. I don't mind."

"Okay. Oh," she said, frowning. "How did you find me, by the way?"

"Googled you. Saw your name listed in the staff directory at your work."

"Ah. A bit of a heads-up wouldn't have hurt, you know."

He shrugged. "Wanted to be free to change my mind at the last second."

She nodded and stared into her open paper cup, still trying to wrap her mind around this man's presence. She wondered if he was being honest—with either of them—about why he'd chosen to run to her. She wasn't sure but she guessed she might still be the only person who'd really seen Shane with Gabriel. Not just literally. She suspected she was the only one who really understood just how helpless Shane could be around his lover. She took another sip, studying Shane's somber face over the rim of her cup. He couldn't have shaved in the last three or four days and his brown hair looked a month overdue for its buzz cut.

"So who's running the Shivarree with you gone?" she asked.

"One of my barmen, Zach. Finally shut him up about what a waste it was earnin' his business management degree. He'll do fine."

"That's good. What about the garage?"

"I had a bunch of vacation time due to me. The other guys can manage without me for a few weeks." Shane took a deep drink, weary eyes on the parking lot.

"You've been staying in motels?"

He nodded. "Just the one, outside Lexington."

Natalie toyed with the lip of her cup then met his eyes again. "Can I ask how old you are, Shane?"

"Thirty-six."

She nodded.

"How about you?"

"Thirty-one, since just after Christmas." She laughed. "It's weird the things we don't actually know about each other, considering the things we *do* know."

Shane smiled tightly, looking as if he agreed but didn't want to make a conversation out of it.

They nursed their coffees in semi-comfortable silence. Natalie stole glances at Shane, wondering what was troubling him...grief or withdrawal, plain old exhaustion. Some invisible blow to his manhood, coming here to ask his erstwhile sexual rival for a place to stay. Maybe all those things. Natalie made a decision to forgive Shane's attitude. For as brief as it'd been, their relationship had been a complicated one, muddled with jealousy and exposure and resentment, rolled in unbelievably hot sex and hard-won kindness. Over as quickly as it had started.

She took a deep breath and stood, tossing her cup in the nearest trash can. Shane followed suit and they confronted the cold to climb into their trucks. Natalie watched him in her rearview, this character from the most surreal chapter in her life to date, following her to someplace as mundane as Wegmans...and it didn't dull his shine. On the contrary, having Shane here made the old snow and the dingy ice sparkle in the day's dying sun. He made her skin flush as warm as it had in the height of August, and as good as it felt, Natalie knew it was doomed to get complicated.

* * * * *

Shane slammed his door and followed Natalie across the ugly brown crust of the parking lot. So far that's what Rochester was to him—an endless slideshow of identical slippery, salty parking lots under a bland gray sky. But there was Natalie too. She had on a long red coat—some style Shane didn't know the name for—pink gloves and matching pink hat. She looked like a Valentine against all the gloom and Shane reminded himself to not be such a grumpy asshole for a change.

Natalie turned to look at him as the automatic doors slid open. She kept giving him that same smile, some mix of amusement and resignation, he guessed.

"What?"

"It's just so weird, having you here suddenly." She gestured at him with an up-and-down sweep of her arm then tugged her gloves off. "You look the same, you know. You're still all huge and your voice is the same except now you're in Rochester."

"Why would I be any different?"

"I know, of course you're the same. It's just strange." Shane caught a pinkening in her cheeks as she pulled a cart from the line. Maybe it was just from the cold. She lowered her voice. "Everything that happened when I was with you last was like a dream. Like a three-day dream. If I'd known I'd see you again, I wouldn't have expected you to seem so...familiar. It's nice," she added, poking him softly with her elbow.

"Here." He nudged her out of the way and took over steering the cart.

He hadn't shopped this way in ages—browsing for potential meals. Too many aisles, way too many choices, he decided, scanning the huge store. Big enough that you could multiply Shiloh, Louisiana's sole market by fifty and house them all inside this place with room to spare. Shane only ever bought breakfast stuff, nearly always skipped lunch and had takeout for dinner. He couldn't guess what a person might fill an entire cart with. Natalie led the way through the produce section, which looked more like a garden center to Shane.

"Shit," he said, glancing at signs and displays. "I don't know what half these things are. How'd you guys manage to make vegetables so damn complicated?"

Natalie gathered potatoes and bell peppers, adding them to the cart. "We like variety up here, Shane."

Shane winced at that word, *variety*. Gabriel's need for *variety* had kept Shane up any number of lonely, sleepless nights.

"You like pot roast?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Good. I haven't had an excuse to make mine in ages. Actually, I'm supposed to have dinner at my mom's on Monday. You'll have to come. Now *she* can cook."

Shane had to smile at that, at the prospect of a mom-cooked meal. Or a Natalie-cooked meal. Both ideas made him feel a little warmer, a little comforted. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been handed food by someone not wearing a restaurant uniform. And even if it made him a sexist caveman, Shane would be happy to watch a woman like Natalie lean in and set a plate of steaming meat in front of him. Especially if her top was low-cut.

There were two things Shane wanted out of this trip. One was a friend, and the other was a chance to figure out whether or not he'd wrecked his heterosexuality irreparably. He hoped Natalie might be the right woman to help him with both.

He stopped the cart at Natalie's request and she stacked some cans inside. He watched her selecting items and considered what she'd said earlier. He didn't know what he'd expected when he saw her again. He'd been so numb on the drive north—even before the temperature dropped below thirty—he hadn't considered his plan. Hadn't considered it when he'd stopped at the library to use the internet or as he'd driven over to her work, or when he'd been told she was off at three by the front desk girl. In fact, he hadn't wondered about her reaction until it had been too late, until she'd been walking out into the parking lot toward him.

She'd said Shane looked the same, and she was the same too. Dressed different, her cutesy shoes swapped for winter boots and her sexy blouses by a disappointingly unrevealing sweater behind her open coat. Still, she was as pretty as before. Pale skin and eyes, shiny dark hair. Same mole on her jaw, like a *put thumb here and kiss* marker.

Prettier now that she wasn't an active threat to Shane's precious, codependent wet dream.

They finished shopping and Shane managed to wrestle a few twenties into Natalie's hand, even if she was the one who got her bank card into the swipecard device first.

He pushed the cart out to where they'd parked side by side, loading the bags onto Natalie's passenger seat. He spotted a shiny silver tube in one of her cup holders—lipstick. He frowned to himself, wondering who she'd be wearing lipstick for these days. Then he reminded himself of his resolution to not be such a moody motherfucker, and let it go.

He started up his own truck and followed her through the city for five minutes to a quiet neighborhood of modest, two-story houses. Natalie parked on the street in front of a yellow one with a small porch. Shane grabbed the shopping bags to tail her up the steps. She slid her mail from one of two boxes and unlocked the door. Shane followed her to the left down a short hall, where she unlocked a second door with a brass A nailed to it.

"You got a neighbor?"

"Yeah. My landlady lives on the second floor."

She pushed the door in and they stepped into a decent-sized kitchen, probably a cheerful space when the sun was still out. Beyond the counter was a big living and dining room. Shane set the bags down and went back out for his meager luggage. Natalie took his coat and hung it alongside hers by the door then disappeared down a hallway. He looked around the room, noting she had a thing for spider plants and those weird hanging vases, glass globes suspended in artsy wire frames dangling in the windows, leaves tumbling out of them.

Natalie reappeared, having replaced her boots with spangly, pointy-toed shoes. She stopped to flip open the thermostat panel and punch some buttons.

"Wondered how long you'd last in practical footwear." Shane pointed at her sequined feet.

"These are slippers," she said defensively, looking down and modeling them for herself. "And you should see the Frankenstein shoes they make me wear at work. I need these for my spiritual well-being."

"You liking your job?"

"Not as much as the hospice where I worked in Miami...but it's okay. I mean, any job's a good job in this economy."

"Guess they can't outsource the nurses."

She laughed. "Don't give them any ideas. So, are you like, dying for a shower?"

"Wouldn't hurt."

"I'll show you where everything is."

She gave Shane a quick tour of the bathroom and the living room, the futon where he'd be sleeping. Natalie seemed to like red...red shower curtain, red drapes and slip covers, red cloth on the small dinner table parked at the far end of her living room. Shane wondered what color her sheets were. He wondered if he'd be finding out soon. Soon like tonight.

But he shoved his libido aside, body infinitely more interested in the comforting over the carnal for the time being. He shaved and took a long, steaming shower, melting his muscles only to have them tense up again as he stepped out of the tub. He changed into fresh jeans and a tee shirt, mercifully clean socks. When he strolled back into the cool dryness of the hall he could already smell dinner — spices, onions.

Natalie was in her kitchen cutting potatoes, a lump of beef taunting Shane's empty stomach from the center of a casserole dish. He leaned on the opposite side of the counter, his primitive brain fusing the smells and the profile of Natalie's breasts and the

relief of being inside, in the warmth, in clean clothes, feeling human again. Feeling distinctly male again.

She arranged the potatoes around the meat in the dish. "So what's up, Shane? What have I been missing since I moved back north?"

Her gaze held his, smile warming his insides. "Just the usual. You and...you and him are the only interesting things to come my way in the last year or so. The rest's all work."

She nodded, rinsing carrots.

"How about you?" he asked. "You happy to be back with your family? Your mom and sister live close, right?"

"Yeah. My mom's just up the street, actually. My sister Alicia lives about a half hour away."

"Cozy."

"Yeah, it's great." She set down a carrot. "Plus my sister's like..." She put her hands out, miming massive pregnancy.

"Oh. That your first niece or nephew?"

"Niece, yeah. First grandkid in the family, all that good stuff." She picked up a cleaver and chopped the carrots, smiling to herself.

Shane swallowed down a little hurt, that same old dull ache he got when he thought about family. He'd lost all the relatives he'd loved and avoided his dad's rotten side like the plague. "That's nice," he said then cleared his throat of the stickiness. "You think you ever want that? Husband and kids and all that?"

She made a face, part surprise, part ambivalence. "Yeah, sure. I like kids. Not sure where I'm going to conjure a husband from anytime soon, but yeah, that'd be nice. Something to aim myself toward in the next few years." She met Shane's eyes as the carrots tumbled into the pot. "What about you? Now that you and him..."

He shrugged. "That's kinda why I had to pull the plug."

Her smile came slow and a touch mischievous.

"What?" Shane asked.

"I dunno. I know we don't know each other that well or anything, but it's a little surprising. You're not the cuddliest man I've ever met."

Shane frowned and Natalie reached a damp hand across the counter to touch his wrist. "I'm not saying you wouldn't be an awesome husband or dad though. I mean, you're hardworking and good-looking, and when you're not busy acting like an asshole, you're really quite thoughtful."

Shane mulled it over, decided she had him pinned pretty well and filtered the compliments from the slights. "Thanks."

"And you're great in the sack," she added, lips pursed to hide her grin.

Shane's neck warmed and he rose happily to the invitation to flirt. No doubt his dick had had a say in where he'd chosen to escape to when he'd left Louisiana, no shock he wanted to resume where he and Natalie had left off, minus the third party. "I do believe you're flirtin' with me, Miss Natalie."

She turned away to grab a pepper grinder. Shane watched her twist it over the ingredients, watched the tendons in her throat as she chose her response.

"I don't hear you denyin' it," Shane said.

"I'm not trying to flirt, Shane." She licked her lips. Probably had no clue how fucking sexy she looked when she did that. "I know what it was like between you and him. That's not a rebound I want any part of."

Fine, they could play that game. "Seem to recall being tapped to take part in *your* rebound."

Her smirk told him he was winning. "Yes, and an epic one it was, Shane. But I dunno. You two were complicated. You should give yourself some time to..."

"Grieve?"

She shrugged.

"I been doin' too much of that lately."

"Time to get over him then. Let the next woman you go after get all of you. Not just whatever's left right after he goes away. I mean, don't act like you two were just some random, yearlong fling."

No, definitely not.

"You said you were in love with him," she added.

"I don't know about that anymore. Don't know if that was love. Felt like somethin' else, somethin' ugly sometimes."

"Like jealousy?"

"Like...like whatever love feels like when you don't trust the other person any farther than you can throw them."

She nodded. "I hear you."

"Anyhow, it's over now." He hadn't exactly told Gabriel that in so many words, but he would...if his sudden absence hadn't already made the break plain.

Shane decided to let Natalie focus on her cooking, let himself avoid talking about his ex-lover. "You mind if I just zone out to the TV for a bit? I could use a nap after the drive."

"Oh sure. Go crash in my bed, if you want. Dinner won't be for an hour at least."

"I'll just switch on the tube, maybe pass out on your couch."

"Knock yourself out." She waved a hand in the direction of the television. "You want a drink? I've got some beers, I think."

Shane perked up. "Please."

He waited until she came back from the fridge and grabbed the hand she had wrapped around the bottle. He smiled, aiming his eyes at the beer, the food, her chest. "You just get better and better."

Natalie raised a skeptical brow and he released her hand. She pulled a drawer open and got a bottle opener, popped the cap for him. "You haven't changed," she said again.

"Beer, hot meal, permission to nod off on the couch watching TV? How'm I not supposed to hump your leg for that?"

She laughed, pretty face turning damn sexy. "You're rusty with the ladies, aren't you?"

"Maybe you'll give me a little practice then?" Shane inched his free hand closer to where hers rested on the counter.

Natalie picked up the opener and rapped his knuckles with it.

"Ow."

"Take a seat, Broussard. Go cool yourself off."

He scowled at her and walked off with his bottle. He deciphered her remotes, finding the evening news and zoning out for a few minutes. The ads came on and Shane glanced around the room, let comfort ooze over him for the first time in ages. Warmth, the smell of real food, the faintest buzz from the alcohol, a stronger one from Natalie's proximity. He could get used to this...maybe not this region and its fucked-up idea of winter, but this family-type feeling. He'd missed this. His eyes settled on the hearth beside the TV stand.

"You got a fireplace," Shane said, pointing his bottle at it.

She glanced up from behind the counter. "Yeah. It works and everything, I think. But I don't know how to use it."

"I do. You got any wood?"

She shook her head.

"Shame." Swirling his beer, he stared out the window into the dark backyard. He drained the bottle and stood. He pulled on his boots by the front door and grabbed his jacket from the hook.

"Heading back home so soon?" Natalie teased.

"I just got to check on something."

She opened the oven door with a creak. "All right. But be careful—it's icy."

Shane braved the frigid wind and the slick sidewalks, and tried three houses before he was met with success. He arrived back at Natalie's after ten minutes' absence, balancing his newly acquired firewood in one arm as he got the doors open.

"You ready to kiss my feet?"

Natalie turned from the sink, brows rising. "Whoa. Who gave you that?"

"Diane."

"Who?"

"Older lady across the way in the green house," he said.

"Wow. I've never even talked to most of my neighbors."

Shane set the wood on the tile by the door. "That's 'cause you're from the north. You guys know nothin' about neighborliness."

"Well, good work. I'm sure *Diane* found your accent both charming and perplexing."

"You got a light?"

"Someplace." She set the cutting board in the dish rack and dried her hands, disappearing into another room then returning with a big box of matches.

"That your bedroom?" Shane nodded toward where she'd gone.

"Yeah."

He took the box. "These your matches for lighting candles when you seduce hapless men into your bed?"

She gave him a withering look. "So what if they are?"

He shrugged. "So nothin'. You got any newspapers?"

She dragged a recycling bin stuffed with junk mail in from the kitchen. Shane got to work building them a decent fire then relaxed back into the couch cushions, domestic bliss complete. Once dinner was over there'd be just one base desire left to meet. He scanned Natalie's body from across the room, curious. He hadn't been with a woman in a long while—not since he'd been with Natalie six months earlier, in fact—and he

missed it. Missed the softness, the smooth skin and a comforting female voice, small hands. He shifted in his seat.

"You almost done over there?" he called.

"Just about." She turned off the faucet. "I'm having a glass of wine, if you want one." She pulled a bottle from a cupboard to show him.

Shane got lost in his head for a moment, lost in the memory of a hundred hangovers and the face he'd never be able to divorce from the taste of red wine. Natalie must have read his mind, as her shoulders slumped and she set the bottle down. She crossed the living room to sit on the arm of the couch.

"Sorry. That a sore spot?"

Shane did his best imitation of a bored shrug. "Nah. Don't worry about it." He imagined kissing her later, tasting wine and how it'd make him feel... Fuck it. He'd driven cross-country to escape that man. He wouldn't let a goddamn beverage get to him now.

"Go get yourself a glass, Miss Natalie."

She squinted at him as she stood. "Why do you always call me that?"

"It's your name, ain't it?"

She headed back to the kitchen and set a glass on the counter. "Why the 'Miss' bit, I mean? I feel like you're making fun of me or something."

"It's considered polite where I'm from." Shane watched her uncork the bottle and pour herself a healthy glass before grabbing another beer from the fridge. She crossed the floor and handed him the bottle.

"Thanks. You want me to call you something else?"

She shook her head. "No, just wondered what that was about."

Shane took a deep drink, cold beer to balance out the warm, dry heat of the fire. "How about you move down south with me and I'll make you a missus?" A tease, but Shane didn't mind the thought of such a thing.

She laughed. "Yeah, right."

He glanced at her over the bottle as he drank, one fucking beautiful sight in the firelight. "Why not? Natalie Broussard's got a nice ring to it. Plus our kids'd be so damn good-looking."

"Oh yeah, you and me and our brood of surly babies." She sipped her wine. "Gimme a couple more bottles of this and maybe that won't sound like the worst idea ever."

Shane cupped a hand over his crotch. "Thanks a lot. Didn't know it was possible to get kicked in the nuts without a foot being involved."

"You know what I mean. We've got thousands of miles and a weird bit of history between us."

"I like our history," Shane said. More than he could tell her. Natalie was the one woman he knew—the sole person—who could begin to understand what he was going through, post-Gabriel.

She sipped her wine. "You didn't like me much at first."

"I fixed your truck and gave you a place to sleep."

She shrugged. "Yeah, you did. Even after I kind of crapped all over your wishes."

"Damn straight." Shane took a drink, fixing her with a cocky look.

"The other thing we've had between us is Gabriel."

Shane flinched at the name.

"Literally between us," she added. "If you're looking to move on, I'm not the cleanest break you could pick. In fact I'm probably the worst."

"You trying to tell me you ain't interested?"

"In marrying you and birthing your many gigantic, angsty children?"

Shane laughed. "Nah...just, you know, interested in me?" He bobbed his eyebrow at her, kept it up until she laughed.

"Too complicated."

"Sex was great though, right?"

She pursed her lips, stared into her glass.

Shane frowned. "Feel free to lie."

Sighing, she aimed her eyes toward the ceiling. "The sex was awesome, Shane. Duh. But I'm not ready to just jump right in and be like that with you again."

"Why not?"

Her gaze dropped to meet his. "It's just messy. *We're* messy."

"And we're drinking." He held his bottle up to illustrate. "Things'll be less complicated after you have another glass."

She smirked and shook her head. "Shameless as always."

"Not as shameless as some houseguests."

Her gaze drifted away again. They sipped their drinks, watching the news until Natalie stood to check on the roast.

Shane leaned into the cushions and let the smells and the warmth and the comfort of female company wash over him. He nodded off for a while, waking to Natalie's hand squeezing his shoulder.

"Dinner's ready."

Shane glanced at the hearth. "You let the fire practically go out."

She headed back to the kitchen. "I don't know anything about fires, Shane. You're the man. That can be your job while you're here."

He stood with a grunt, feeling the last few days' driving and anxiety in his stiff back and achy muscles. He added a couple logs to the embers and met up with Natalie as she was carving the beef.

"That's another man-job." Shane elbowed her out of the way. He sensed the eye-roll he couldn't actually see in his periphery. Elbows and eye-rolls, him and her to a tee.

"Meat and fire and trucks and whiskey," she said through a sigh. "You're just a walking stereotype of American manliness."

Shane laughed. A combination of sleepiness, gratitude, intimacy and alcohol led him to add, "Yeah, except for that whole banging-another-guy thing."

"Yeah, I guess that one doesn't quite fit the mold." Natalie accepted a thick slice of roast and scooped vegetables from the dish.

Shane swallowed, determined to use this visit as practice for wrapping his head around everything he'd been struggling with for the past year. "Meat and fire and whiskey and good old, patriotic cock sucking," he said grandly. "Drape a flag on me and cue the bugles."

She gave him a sarcastic salute and he grabbed his bottle and followed her to the dinner table.

He felt small just now, naked and vulnerable. It felt surprisingly nice. He trusted Natalie. He had to, or else why would he have come here? As close as they were to strangers, she knew him better than any other living person, save one. It would've been a depressing thought if he wasn't here with her now. "Thanks for taking me in," he said.

"Happy to have you. Sorry this didn't happen at a nicer time of year though."

"Not your fault your forbearers settled in such a miserable place."

"Ahem, humidity? Mosquitoes? West Nile virus? Hurricanes?"

"Louisiana's got enough troubles lately without you adding your two cents," Shane said.

"True. And you're right, it is sort of miserable here this time of year. I didn't realize it until I'd spent a winter in Miami. It never occurred to me that in some parts of the world, people don't have to shovel their cars out."

"In the South we drink to cool down," Shane said, taking a sip of beer. He nodded to her glass. "You kids drink to warm up."

Natalie smiled and swallowed. "Actually, I should own up and say the summers here can climb into the nineties, and it gets humid and there's tons of mosquitoes."

"See?" he said, triumphant. "You're going to love moving down and being my wife."

She shook her head and Shane let the conversation trail off, the drone of the TV and the crackle of the fire filling his head; warm, home-cooked meal leaving him sleepy and content. He stole a glance at his hostess every few seconds, eyeing the threshold of her bedroom door and wondering how long it'd take him to get himself invited there. Not long, he hoped. She owed him a hell of a rebound.

Chapter Two

Firelight and a full belly, the proximity of a warm male body Natalie knew well enough to have kept herself entertained with on any number of lonely nights since she'd returned north. Tempting. That body worried her too, since she didn't entirely trust herself around it.

She shifted in her seat beside Shane, wondering if he was taking in any of the action movie they'd agreed on after twenty minutes of channel surfing. She stared at the images, but other ones were running through her mind. Shane's strong, naked body, the mean face he wore when he was aroused, the sheen of sweat on his skin in the summer heat.

He reached for her hand and she jumped. He slid the remote away. "I'm not really watchin' this. Are you?"

"No, not really. I'm pretty wiped out."

He clicked the TV off and set the remote aside, the weight of him shifting the couch and the nearness of his body filling Natalie with bad ideas. He leaned one arm along the back of the futon, turning toward her.

"And I need to be up by six to be ready for work," she said.

His broad, warm hand cupped the back of her neck.

"Shane."

He leaned in to kiss her and she ducked to the side.

Shane pulled away with parted lips and a raised eyebrow.

She sighed, mainly from her own frustration. "Sorry, Shane. I'm sort of seeing somebody."

He withdrew his arm to clasp his hands in his lap. "Sort of?"

"Yeah, sort of. I don't know what we are but I don't think I'd want him kissing other women behind my back, so..."

"What's this sorta-somebody do?" he asked.

"He's a doctor."

"Oh." His brows knitted. "Well, you coulda told me all that a couple hours ago."

"I know...and I should have. But it's nice, you know. Flirting with you again."

"Uh huh. Not as nice as the fucking ache between my legs. Thanks for that."

She checked his expression and saw he was just teasing her. She tried her best to return the smirk but sexual energy was still flooding her body, clouding her head in tandem with the wine. The last time she'd seen Shane before this afternoon, she'd been naked in his bed with another man between them. The next morning she'd slipped out while Shane was in the shower. Having him suddenly here in her world, the offer of more sex on the table...if she'd known this were going to happen she'd have absolutely kept herself a hundred-percent free.

She patted his thigh, wanting to squeeze it and remind herself how hard his muscle was. Instead she set her curious hand on the back of the couch. "Even if I wasn't sort of seeing someone, you getting into something like that with me when you're trying to get over Gabriel... It doesn't seem like the best idea."

"Methodone," Shane said.

She slapped his cheek lightly, disparaging the metaphor.

"Sorry," he said.

Natalie sighed, combing her fingers through her hair and staring into the fire, trying to ignore her frustrated body. "Don't be sorry. I'm glad you're here. I'm really happy you came up."

He nodded, eyes cast down at his knees. "Wasn't sure if I should. I mean, you left without sayin' goodbye."

"I know. In the end, it was weird. I didn't feel like I was supposed to say goodbye to you. As strange as it sounds, it would've been harder to say goodbye to you than Gabriel. You did a lot for me. Saying goodbye would have felt like closing a book, I guess."

"Oh. Well, maybe that's why I'm here then." Finally, another taste of that familiar, smug grin. He leaned back into the cushions. "Maybe you can finish your story. I bet it ends by me driving you up the fuckin' wall until you kick me out on my ass."

"A girl can hope. And you know...I've thought about you more than him."

Shane laughed, either embarrassed or disbelieving.

"No, really. I know Gabriel's...well, he's magic," she said. "He's beautiful and he's scary-talented, but he's like a dream, like I said. You get away from him for a week or two and he fades to two dimensions. But you're real, Shane. You don't fade like he does. If you hadn't been there I might have started to think I hallucinated that whole weekend."

Shane stared down at his hands. "He don't feel like no dream to me."

"No, I bet he doesn't. Did you tell him where you were going?"

"Left him high and dry."

Just as Gabriel had surely left Shane dangling any number of long, sleepless nights. Natalie had shared one of those nights with him, lying beside Shane in his bed, waiting for Gabriel to come through the door and ease both their impatient minds. He hadn't. They were strange, those two. On the outside Shane was the cruel one, the one who seemed to have all the control, but underneath it was the complete opposite. Gabriel could play people as surely as he could a mandolin or a fiddle or any other set of strings he got his masterful hands on. At the same time, she'd seen the way he looked at Shane... Her guest might not agree, but she bet this breakup wasn't any easier on Gabriel than it was on Shane.

"I better get to bed soon," Natalie said.

"Sure."

"I'll get you some blankets and pillows. Anything else you need?"

"Don't think so. What's happening tomorrow?"

"Well, I work seven to three. I've got spare keys, so I guess you're just on your own. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Not like I gave you any notice."

"Feel free to use my computer and eat whatever you want. Call me if you have any questions tomorrow."

"I'll be just fine. I'll surf for the nastiest, most fucked-up porn I can think of and leave your computer a mile deep in pop-up windows."

"That's fine, just don't break anything."

Shane smirked at her. She returned it, then stood and went to her bedroom to gather spare sheets and blankets from the top of the closet. She caught Shane trying to peer inside her room as she headed back to the den.

He followed her to the couch, watching as she stripped off the futon's slip cover, unfolding the bed with a creak and making it up with clean sheets.

"Thanks very much."

"This might be a bit short for you," she said, nodding at his legs. Her bed was plenty big but she bit back the flirtation fighting to pop through her lips and mention that fact.

"Beats the shithole I crashed in last night, trust me. You're quite a hostess, taking me in like this."

"Like I said, it's nice to have you here. Lovely change from the boring end to January I'd been imagining." She handed him a couple of folded blankets then headed back to her room to bring him a pair of pillows.

"Anything else?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Shane gave her a last taste of sexual harassment, running his eyes up and down her body. "No, think I'm good."

"Cool." She stifled a yawn then stepped close to peck a sisterly kiss on his jaw and pat his chest. "Sleep well. Have fun tomorrow if I don't talk to you before I leave in the morning."

"Call me when you're done with the old folks," he said. "I'll meet you someplace for dinner, if you want the night off from cooking."

"Will do. Sleep well, Shane."

Shane watched her saunter to the bathroom then sneaked to her bedroom door, scanning her bed and nightstand, the entire setup, so he'd know what to picture when he doubtlessly jerked himself to the idea in a few minutes' time. As he went back to the foldout, a thought dogged him. How ruined must he be by now? In the year since he'd met Gabriel, that man had been the only thing on his mind when he came, either while fucking the guy or by himself. That'd never happened with a woman before, that kind of effortless mental fidelity. He tried to blink away the guy's face and replace it with Natalie's, but already he was having a tough time picturing her.

"Fucking doomed," he muttered.

He closed up the fireplace and turned off the lights, stripped to his underwear. As he settled beneath the blankets, his formerly eager body had already cooled by a few degrees. He stared at the ceiling, mind simultaneously blank and racing. He snaked a hand down his stomach and palmed his cock. A few thoughts of Natalie's mouth got his blood moving, his dick growing hard and heavy in his hand. He'd never been sucked by her before, though he'd seen her do it to Gabriel. He imagined that, imagined spreading her thighs with his in her bed, feeling her soft skin and watching her breasts bounce as he fucked her. His fist tightened but even as his orgasm built, he felt other memories tugging at him, his brain splicing in unwanted images, a beautiful man staring up at him, strong hips pinned under Shane's hands.

"Fuck." He let his cock go, fisting the covers. He'd rather go to sleep hurting than let those memories win. Cold turkey, he'd promised himself. He took deep breaths, getting his foggy memories of Natalie's naked body cued up and waiting until his cock was pounding from her and her alone. The thoughts sped with his strokes, got him to the brink of coming before he lost them again, brain swapping in a flash of tan skin, five o'clock shadow, Gabriel's black eyes on Shane's face and his mouth wrapped around his cock.

"Fuck." He released his dick again and turned onto his side. His body was a clock, wound too tight, drawn around and around in circles, pulse ticking away the maddening seconds as he prayed for unconsciousness to come. Prayed these restless nights wouldn't dog him 'til his death.

* * * * *

Shane slammed his truck door, hoisting the bundle of firewood he'd bought at the supermarket and lugging it up the porch. Only a little past two and already the sun seemed to be fading. He fished for the spare keys Natalie had left him and shuffled out of the frigid wind and into the warmth. He left the wood by the fireplace and ditched his jacket, went to work searching her cupboards for coffee.

He froze as his phone buzzed to life in his jeans pocket. Pulling it out, he frowned at the familiar number on the screen. He'd told his staff at the Shivaree that he was on vacation, to be contacted for emergencies only. Still, if someone was calling from the bar, at least that meant they probably hadn't managed to burn it down in his absence. "Shane Broussard."

"Hello, Shane."

His heart stopped. From confusion, since he'd always assumed Gabriel didn't know how to operate something as modern as a phone. From joy too—cocky triumph that he'd driven this man to seek him out. And from terror, realizing his worst addiction had learned to inject itself independent of Shane's will.

"Hey," Shane said. "Didn't know you had my number."

"Zach did. I'm in your office right now."

Shane pictured it, that magnetic man with his black eyes and hair, that lean, strong body lounging in Shane's chair in the club's shabby back room.

"Zach let you in there?" he asked.

"He did."

Shane sighed, faking irritation as his heart pounded so hard he thought he might pass out. "What's up?"

"Where you at?" Gabriel asked in his lazy voice, a raspy baritone crippled by two insanely heavy accents, Cajun and Cuban. Cubajun, Shane called it.

"I'm in Rochester, New York, visiting Natalie Foster," Shane said, so casual he knew he wasn't fooling anybody.

"Oh. How is she?"

"Fine. She met a doctor." He walked to the futon and took a seat.

"Tha's nice."

"Yeah, ducky."

"When you comin' home, Shane?"

He swallowed, hating the thrill that question gave him. "Dunno. Why? You missin' havin' someplace to sleep?" Gabriel came and went like an ownerless cat, crashing with Shane most nights, shacking up who-knew-where the rest of the time and robbing Shane of his sleep and sanity.

"I miss *you*, Shane."

"Uh huh. Well, I'm staying here for another week, at least. I earned some vacation time. You'll just have to fend for yourself, I s'pose."

He heard the soft, satisfied grunts of Gabriel stretching. Shane could picture it—that long, slender body leaning back in Shane's ancient office chair, shined old shoes

propped on the desk, maybe that worn-out porkpie hat set on Shane's laptop, a clash of eras.

For a long time there was silence, so long Shane wondered if maybe Gabriel had wandered away and left the phone off its cradle. Then, "I miss your body, Shane."

Blood rushed south to get Shane's cock as heavy and warm as if the very man's hands were at his belt buckle. "Do you then?" *Idiot. Hang up now.* An addict didn't just have a little taste of heroin and Shane knew he probably couldn't handle just a taste of his intoxicating lover. Still, addicts lived for their relapses.

"I'm lonely, Shane." His voice sounded dark and hungry, just as it did when he sang.

"You'll live," Shane said flatly.

"Miss your hands on me."

Shane's cock turned instantly stiff and insistent and he glanced to the clock. At least forty-five minutes before Natalie got home...not that she hadn't seen it all before. Still, this'd be like catching Shane with a rubber tie strapped around his arm as he primed a needle full of something regrettable right here in her living room, guilty as the sweetest sin he knew.

Shane pinned his phone between his cheek and shoulder and unbuckled his belt. "Tell me," he said. "Whose hands are on you right now?"

"Mine."

Shane swallowed and took the phone in his left hand. "You lock the office door?"

"Yeah."

He eased his fly down and cupped a palm over his erection, light — that teasing way Gabriel was such an expert at. "Tell me what else you're missing, boy."

"How you taste," Gabriel murmured, voice reminding Shane of hot breath warming his cock.

"It's my hand on you now," Shane said, pushing his own underwear down to free his dick. "Make it tight."

Gabriel moaned into the phone and Shane imagined those talented fingers fisted around his lover's hard length. He swallowed a moan of his own.

"What're you missing most?" Shane asked.

"Your cock."

Shane tightened his grip, stroked himself slow. "You want it now?"

"Yeah."

"Tell me how."

"Fuck me," he begged. "Fuck my ass, Shane."

"I'll bend you over that desk." Shane groaned, picturing such a thing. "Shove those pants down your legs and spit in my hand, get you nice and wet."

"Yeah."

"Tease you with my cock 'til you're begging for me." He could feel it now, the smooth, tight skin of his head taunting Gabriel's spit-slick, puckered asshole.

"Please, Shane."

Fuck, those two words that never failed to suck the sense right out of his brain. He made his stroking hand into a tight circle with his thumb and forefinger, eased it over his head and moaned. "Yeah. I'm pushing inside you. Lemme in."

Gabriel moaned right back, sounding real for a moment, more than a voice coming through the ether, so real Shane thought he could smell the man's wine breath. He licked his fingers, squeezing them over his crown and mourning the warmth that was missing.

"Yeah," he murmured. "You're so tight."

"More, Shane. Please."

Shane drew his fist down his cock, slow and mean. "Fuck yeah. I'm fucking you deep, boy. You feel so damn good."

Gabriel moaned again and Shane wondered if he was jerking or finger-fucking himself...pants down to his knees, bare ass against the sticky, fake leather of Shane's desk chair. He imagined pulling those pants all the way off, pushing Gabriel's knees against his chest and slamming himself in deep, sending them both rolling across the floor to slam into the wall, maybe earning a curious knock from one of the staff.

"You're so big, Shane. Fuck me hard."

"I am."

"Turn me over. Push me back on the desk."

Shane reassembled the scene in his head, shoving everything off the table and pushing Gabriel onto the wood with his thighs spread, dark eyes on Shane's cock as he rammed it home. "Oh, you're takin' it, boy. Lemme watch you stroke."

Gabriel's grunts sounded pained, sounded so exactly as they did when he was getting fucked for real that Shane damn near lost his mind. "Fuck... I'm gonna come. Take my cock. Take me." His fist stroked, tight and fast and frantic as he imagined Gabriel doing the same exact thing more than a thousand miles away.

"Shane."

He knew that sound anywhere, the sound of both of them losing control.

"Good. Here I come, boy. Here I come." Shane's own moans drowned out his lover's as he lost it, coming like a force of nature into his hand. "Fuck yeah."

"Shane."

For a few moments there was only panting on either end of the line, two men fighting for breath and saying good riddance to their dignity.

Shane looked to the clock on the cable box, to his hand, feeling the high abandon him as reality punched him in the face. "I gotta go. She's due home any minute."

"All right, Shane."

"You take care." He fumbled with his phone and jabbed the End button, tossing it to the far cushion. "Fuck. Fucking idiot."

He stood and got his jeans buttoned then went to the bathroom to rinse his right hand and the front of his shirt of the mistake he'd just made. He stared at himself in Natalie's oval vanity mirror and shook his head. "Good fuckin' job, genius. Way to go."

"Shane?" Natalie's voice came from the kitchen and Shane heard the door click closed.

He shook his head and wandered out to meet her. "Hey there."

She met his half-assed smile with a confused frown. "Hey yourself. Your shirt's all wet."

"Accident with a cup of coffee. You're back a little early." He glanced to the couch, relieved there was no evidence of what had just gone on there.

Natalie set her purse on the counter and rummaged in it. "Yeah, it was pretty quiet so I clocked out. Listen, Alex—the guy I'm seeing—he wants to meet up for an early drink. Just the one. You want to come?"

Hell no Shane didn't want to have a drink with *Alex*. What had just gone on had ripped him open, left him frustrated and humiliated. Left him eager to find somebody to absorb all the anger he was feeling toward himself. "Don't he know you got a houseguest?"

"It's Friday." She took out her wallet and counted her cash. "And he's the closest thing I have to a boyfriend. Aside from a ninety-three-year-old Korean War vet named Howie who pinches my ass every time I pass him at the residence. And Alex wants to buy me a drink. Come along if you like, otherwise I'll be back in an hour or so with a pizza."

Shane sighed, openly petulant. "In that case a drink'd be just plum-dandy."

"I can hear your eyes rolling, Shane." She zipped her bag and met his gaze. "I'll be ready in a couple minutes."

She left him to disappear into her bedroom, emerging shortly in snug jeans and a sweater that showed off the tops of her breasts.

"You'll catch a cold in that, Miss Natalie."

She raised her eyebrows at him and pulled the elastic from her hair, letting her wavy, dark hair unfurl from its bun and mussing it with her fingers.

Shane pursed his lips, leftover aggression from the phone call still stirring up his blood. "That hair always looked better spread out across my pillow."

She glared at him then took a few steps closer to tap a finger against his lips. "And that mouth always sounded better when it was full of Gabriel's dick."

He laughed, burned by the remark but willing to let her win. "Low blow."

Natalie smirked. "Get your layers on."

"Yes ma'am."

"And Shane?"

He smiled at her, as innocently as he could muster.

"Be nice."

* * * * *

A half hour later they arrived in Rochester's gray and modest downtown. Natalie parked her truck and led Shane to a flashy, new-looking bar. He flared his nostrils as they entered, glancing around in the low light at the flat-screen TVs and the young professionals chatting at high, brushed-aluminum tables. Shane lived and breathed the Shivaree, and being in another bar felt like cheating. He didn't like this place, not its fake-vintage beer signs or canned pop music, its professionally printed menus or its cold, northern clientele. He especially didn't like the man who stood from his stool to touch Natalie's arm and kiss her on the mouth as they approached.

She turned to smile at Shane. "Shane, this is Alex; Alex, this is my friend Shane I mentioned."

Alex sized Shane up with a flash of his eyes then slapped a too-friendly grin on his pretty face. "Nice to meet you, Shane. Welcome to Rochester."

"Thanks."

They shook quickly, Shane's tight grip probably racing past confidence and right over the cliff into meatheaded intimidation. Being in this foreign bar made him feel even more eager to assert his dominance than usual. He had a good three or four inches and fifty pounds on this guy, and he hoped his caveman shake underscored that fact.

Alex took his seat and Natalie followed suit. "Natalie said you're from Louisiana," Alex said.

Shane stayed standing, crossing his arms over his chest. "Yeah, near Baton Rouge. You from here?"

"I grew up in Buffalo, actually. Just moved here a couple months ago for work."

"What sort of doctor are you?" Shane asked.

"Surgeon," Alex said, neither proud nor humble.

"Uh huh."

"What about you?"

"I own a bar."

"And he's a mechanic," Natalie offered. "Shane fixed my truck when I was on my way back from Miami."

And banged her ever-loving brains out, Shane added to himself. *Natalie ever tell you she fucked two Southern gentlemen at the same time? No? Oh, too bad. Good luck sleeping at night.*

"Can I get you a drink, Shane?" Alex asked.

Shane felt drunk already, high on a hundred dangerous brain chemicals from the phone call. "Sure. Bottle of something domestic and a shot of whiskey. No ice." He pulled out a couple bills to kick in but Alex waved them away. "Thank you kindly," Shane said, shrugging on airs of overdone Deep South friendliness, more bees than honey.

"Babe?" Alex said to Natalie.

Shane's fingers tensed, itching to form fists.

"Genny Light, thanks."

Alex left them to seek the bartender at the far end of the long metal counter.

Shane shoved his hands in his pockets and raised an eyebrow at Natalie. "Surgeon, huh? You're moving up in the world."

"From brewer? Yeah, I guess so."

"I meant from mechanic and musician, but if we don't rate, then —"

"Shane." She glared at him, disapproving but not angry. "Don't be like that. Neither of you were ever mine. He certainly wasn't. He was yours, and you made that abundantly clear. Please don't make this awkward. Alex is a really good guy."

Shane ground his teeth and got control of himself. "How long you been seein' him?"

"Just a couple weeks."

You fucked him yet? "He treat you good?"

"Yeah, he does."

"But he ain't your boyfriend?"

Natalie shrugged. "Not yet. Maybe soon. Maybe soon if you don't keep flexing your arms like you plan on putting him in a headlock."

He smirked at her.

"Maybe your red-blooded-thug shtick plays well with the ladies in Shiloh," Natalie said, "but up here we like our wishes respected, thanks."

"Understood."

"Good. So behave yourself if you want my futon."

Shane smiled and laughed softly. He leaned in close to murmur, "Remember tellin' you the exact same thing, Miss Natalie. And I don't remember you complyin'."

She looked poised to snap right back then shut her pretty mouth, shook her head with a smile. "Touché, Broussard."

Alex returned, juggling their drinks.

"You ought to be a waiter." Shane picked up his shot as Alex set the glasses on the bar.

Alex grinned. "I was, all through med school."

Shane scowled to himself, wanting Alex to be a spoiled rich kid whose mommy and daddy had paid his way. Disappointed, he shifted his judgment to Alex's hair, which he suspected had been coiffed with the aid of some kind of mousse to get that wind-proofing. He glanced at his hands next, equally relieved by his way-too-tidy fingernails, the hands of a man who was useless with tools.

"You, uh, you work on Natalie's truck for her, now she's back north?" Shane asked, knowing damn well his open skepticism was bordering on rudeness.

Alex laughed. "It hasn't come up yet, but I don't think I'm the best guy to turn to with mechanical issues...unless Natalie's truck needs a bypass."

Shane grinned tightly. *Scalpels versus socket wrenches. Fine. We can play that game, doc.*

* * * * *

Natalie returned from a trip to the ladies' room, anxious as she rounded the bar. Shane and Alex were just as she'd left them, twenty minutes into semi-awkward small talk, two mismatched examples of what it meant to be a man. South, North, crass, polite. Brutishly sexy versus the breed of non-threatening handsomeness moms and dads alike prayed their daughters might land. Natalie shook her head at her own libido for always picking the Neanderthal. She touched Alex's shoulder as she passed him to take her place, reminding herself to keep making better choices.

"What'd I miss?" she asked.

Shane answered, offering her a cheerful grin she didn't trust one bit. "Just shootin' the shit about your beautiful Rochester weather."

She laughed. "No comment. I stayed in Miami as long as I did for a reason, and it wasn't just because of my lousy taste in men. Present company excluded," she added with a warm glance at Alex.

Shane cleared his throat and stood. "Listen, I've horned in on your little date for long enough. I'm gonna grab another drink. Why don't you two cozy up at a table or somethin'?"

Natalie knew what that meant. If Shane didn't excuse himself, he'd say something they'd all regret. She could *feel* him itching to pick a fight with Alex. A perverse part of her wanted him to...just being near the both of them together, she knew which type of man her body preferred.

No. Bad. Give the nice guy a chance. Shane was being good and she'd be well advised to follow his example.

"Sure. Thanks, Shane." Natalie flashed her eyes at Alex and picked up her drink, and he followed her to a small table by the window.

"That was decent of him," Alex said, pulling her chair out.

"Surprisingly decent, yes."

He pulled his own chair closer and sat, leaning close. "I'm glad he did, actually. I have a surprise for you. And a question."

Natalie felt the room go cold and her mouth fall open. She closed it, but not quickly enough to cover her horror.

Alex laughed. "Don't panic—it's not a ring."

She put a hand to her chest, relieved beyond belief. "Oh my God, you scared me. No offense."

"None taken. It's only been a couple weeks."

"Yes, exactly. Okay, breathe." She laughed, fanning herself.

"But my question—or rather my surprise, since I hope you'll say yes, since it's already paid for... I was hoping..." He reached for his wallet and drew out a brochure. He unfolded it and handed it to Natalie.

She stared at the palm trees and aqua sea and swoopy wording, not quite understanding. "Montserrat?"

He grinned. "For a week in March, right when the snow turns from gray to brown around here. What do you think?"

She laughed, confusion morphing into alarm. "I think that's very generous of you, but I don't know. I mean, it's not always easy to get time off from work. And my sister's baby will be here. And..."

"And?"

"And I didn't know we were even like, a couple or anything. I don't think I'm ready to go away with you. As delightful as it all sounds. I mean, a weekend in New York City, maybe, but not a vacation in the Caribbean." She slid the brochure across the table toward him. "I'm sorry, but no. That's too fast for me."

Alex smiled tightly. "It's a trip, not a proposal. And we're in our thirties...now's the time to take chances, you know? No time to waste, right?"

She stared at him for a moment, realizing what he was. Alex was a particular sort of boyfriend, the kind a woman tried on to see if he'd make a good husband. But Natalie didn't want a husband, not anytime soon, at least. She wondered what she was to him...probably more of the same, a potential life partner audition as the opening night for traditional adulthood edged ever closer.

Natalie made a poor decision and looked to the bar, at Shane's back and ass, arms propped on the counter. He didn't seem the type to spontaneously whisk her off to the tropics for a week, but he'd certainly be happy to take her home and do terrible things to her all night long. And for better or worse, that's what she wanted from a man at this point in her life.

She stood, chair squeaking against the floor. Rifling in her purse, she set a five on the table beside Alex's brochure in an attempt to even out the balance of the entire date. "Thank you, really, for asking me. But this isn't what I'm looking for. I hope I haven't wasted your time too badly, but I'm not ready for what you are."

"It's just a trip."

Natalie could feel him backpedaling and didn't give him a chance to talk her into it. "And I hope it's refundable, because I really can't go. I don't want to go."

"Nat—"

"I should go. Sorry, again. Have a lovely weekend."

He called after her as she headed for the coat rack. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay? Sleep on it."

She turned to shout, "No, I'll call you," knowing she probably wouldn't. She grabbed her coat and Shane's and tugged at his arm. "Come on, drink up. We're leaving."

He aimed a beady look at Alex. "He get out of line with you?"

"No, worse. Let's go."

"You need me to straighten him out?"

She shoved his bottle into his hand. "Here, drink. Drink drink drink."

Shane drained his beer obediently and followed her out, tugging his jacket on. "What happened?"

"He asked me to go to the Caribbean with him."

Shane laughed. "That bastard."

Natalie made an overblown shuddering noise and dug out her keys as they reached the truck. "I seriously could only have been more terrified if he'd come out with a ring."

They climbed inside and she cranked the heat, not caring if it came out frigid for the first couple of minutes.

"Caribbean," Shane said. "What kind of a sicko offers to take you there when you've got all this to enjoy?" She sensed him gesturing at the street scene as she turned them onto the road.

"It's just way too much, way too fast. Plus don't pretend you're taking his side. I saw you just dying to fuck with him when you guys were talking."

"I won't deny that. But I did what you said. I was good. Even excused myself and everything. Model wingman."

"It's not really a wingman I'm looking for tonight, Shane."

A pause. "Oh?"

"I don't know exactly what it is I want...but it's not a one-way ticket to Husbandville."

"Surgeon, though..."

She shook her head. "All I'm looking for at this point in my life is a chance to make all the mistakes I missed out on while I wasted four years on my idiot ex."

"Right. Well, you let me know if I can help with any of that."

Natalie nodded, eyes on the road, adrenaline pumping as though she'd just avoided a deadly collision with a tanker truck. "Will do."

Chapter Three

As they drove, Natalie's initial panic eased, mixing with relief then mingling with Shane's odd energy and sparking. She parked and as their doors slammed in the still winter air, Natalie felt free. Even if Alex hadn't spooked her, she didn't really want to be at the bar with him. She didn't really want to be anywhere with Alex. After just a day's reacquaintance with Shane, Alex felt too tidy and too polite. Too slender. Too logical.

Natalie's body had an aversion—an allergy—to good choices when it came to men. She heard six feet three inches of bad decision crunching on the flagstones behind her, felt two hundred-plus pounds of it thumping up the front steps at her heels.

Once inside, they ditched the shoes and coats. Natalie hung up her scarf with a weary sigh, feeling wrung out as both the adrenaline and alcohol left her system. She turned to Shane. "You want a drink?"

His face was tough to read...part deferential, part smug. "Yeah, sure."

Too wiped to play hostess, she didn't bother asking his preference. She got two glasses and filled them with red wine. When Natalie turned she found him crouched by the fireplace, arranging wood in the hearth.

"Where'd you get all that?" She walked to the couch and set the glasses on the coffee table.

"Grocery store."

"Oh. Thanks."

Shane finished the prep, got the fire started and closed the screen. He stood and tucked his hands into his back pockets. Natalie walked over, keeping a couple feet between them as she joined him in staring into the flames. They stood without speaking for five minutes or more and she felt her body shift again, from exhaustion to curiosity.

Shane broke the silence, clearing his throat. He swallowed before he spoke. "You might feel different tomorrow. 'Bout his offer."

"I won't, but thank you for pretending to want me to make the grown-up choice."

"You deserve somebody good," Shane said softly, glancing at her sideways. "You deserve a surgeon."

The statement made her feel acutely guilty. "Maybe," she muttered. "Just not anytime too soon."

"Somebody who's got their shit together," Shane added, going back to staring into the fireplace.

"You sound like my mom."

He shrugged. "Just some advice from a man who spent the last year wasting his time on his own mistakes."

Huffing out a long breath, she registered the workweek's toll in her brain and body. She stepped to the couch to take a seat and patted the spot beside her, slid one of the glasses over on the coffee table.

Shane walked over and sank onto the cushion, the feeling of his weight another sinful reminder of what Natalie should be trying to keep her mind off of. Was he right? Had she just made a stupid mistake? Her sister would probably think so.

Shane picked up his glass and they clinked. "To the surgeon who got away," he said.

She smirked but kept her lips pursed, staring at her wine.

Shane caught the chill in her mood and bumped her shoulder with his big firm one. "All done talking about it, I take it?"

"It's fine. I'm just tired." She stretched her neck from side to side. "But hey, it's the weekend now. Nothing but sleeping in and being lazy."

"Sounds good. If we don't freeze to death trying to make it to the movies or something."

She shook her head. "Wuss."

"You and me are kinda the same," he said.

Natalie looked up and found Shane wearing an expression she'd never seen on him before – somber regret. "How do you mean?"

"We're lousy at commitment, but when we do manage it, we pick the worst possible people to do it with."

She nodded. "It's just that the lousy ones are so damn good in bed. Maybe the well-adjustedness gene cancels out the decent lay gene..." She trailed off, brain going fuzzy as her body warmed with ill-advised cravings.

They drank in silence, zoning out to the motions of the fire. Natalie wondered if Shane's body was full of questions too, wondering how close they might be to reprising their experience from the previous summer. Without quite meaning to, she let her knee nudge his the next time she leaned forward to set her glass down. Shane glanced over and caught her eye for a second, then looked away. If he wanted something to happen, he was clearly waiting for her to initiate it.

"You know what I always liked about you, Shane?"

"What's that?"

"How pushy you can be when you want something."

"Like last night?"

Natalie nodded. She toyed with the ring on her middle finger, wondering what he was waiting for.

He cleared his throat but didn't speak.

She glanced at him. "What's on your mind?"

"Not sure how I feel about you thinkin' of me as a mistake, I guess."

"I never said that's how I think of you."

"But I know that's what it'd be. Like you cleansing your palate after your doctor left some sour, grown-up, good-decision taste in your mouth."

"And what would I be?" she asked. "I know you came here with something to prove to yourself, about you and women. And I'm fine with that. In fact, I'm honored. I don't want to overthink everything...if we're both looking to use each other, let's just use each other."

"I never used to be the kind of man who overthought things..."

"So don't. Just do what you want."

After a moment's silence, he did. In a flash his hands were on her — holding her jaw, tangling in her hair as his mouth took hers. His aggressive sexual energy knocked reality aside for a minute and she met his pace, kissing him back and devouring everything familiar and foreign about his taste and tongue and the low noises rising from his throat.

She pulled back to take in the mean edge in his expression. "That's better."

"Seein' you flirt with him made my blood boil."

"Good."

"Never did play nice with other guys."

She smirked at him. "Except one."

He leaned into the back of the futon and laced his fingers behind his head. He addressed her knees. "Yeah, 'cept one."

After a moment he looked up, a new fire in his eyes. He ravaged her for another minute, kisses steadily slowing until they seemed to simply be sharing the air between their lips.

"Feels like I'm losing you, Shane."

He flared his nostrils and closed his eyes.

She hunched forward and dropped her head into her hands. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Brought him up like that." She sighed deeply and felt Shane rub her back.

"It's okay. Last thing I want's to be all sensitive about it. I just want to be done with it, finally." He kept his hand circling in firm, steady strokes that didn't match the subdued tone of his voice.

"Feels nice," she muttered. It felt different as well, this show of affection from Shane. After a minute she sat up straight, studying his face in the low light from the kitchen. She watched his jaw flex and his Adam's apple jump as he swallowed.

"You want to just call it a night?" she asked, praying he didn't.

"I just wish all this was as easy as it used to be for me. Being with a woman."

"I don't know exactly what you want from me, but whatever it is, you can have it."

No reply, but she felt his heat a split second before his lips touched hers, broad hands cupping her shoulders. He gave her a brief, polite kiss, one that didn't belong to the man she knew. She opened her eyes as he pulled away.

She offered him a kind smile. "If I wanted to be kissed like that, I'd have skipped off to the Caribbean with Alex. You're pretty hopeless at being gentle, Shane. Just kiss me like the thug you are."

He smiled, eyes crinkling with a silent laugh. "Yes ma'am."

The next kiss came swiftly, sloppy for a moment until Natalie's mouth caught up with the ferocity of his. His tongue plunged deep, accompanied by a hungry growl and the rough press of his fingers along her jaw. He let her up for air after a minute's plundering.

Natalie gulped a breath, feeling drunk as she met his gaze. "Much better."

"Yeah, it is."

"What else have you got for me?"

He pulled her closer by the arm, plastering a hand to her back and holding her tight as his mouth crashed down on hers once more. Natalie felt gravity dissolve, felt the cold, dry air dissipate as a heat wave closed in around them. Her hands found his upper arms, squeezing the hard muscle of his biceps and shoulders through his

sweater. Sweater...that was all wrong. She tugged at the hem and he broke away enough to peel the top over his head. Natalie's palms took in his warmth and energy as his tongue made promises she knew the rest of his body would have no trouble keeping.

So many things were familiar about Shane—his weight and size, the rough hum of his breath, even his smell. Foreign too, without Gabriel between them, figuratively and otherwise, without the heat and sweat, the dim kaleidoscope of the bar's lights getting her as drunk as the beer.

Natalie wasn't normally one to make a man into a piece of meat, but she knew what Shane had to offer between his legs and she wanted it again. Bad. She cupped a palm over the bulge in his jeans and squeezed, his hardness sending a blush from her chest to her cheeks. His mouth released hers as he groaned, eyes shut tight.

"I have to admit, I missed this," she said.

He laughed, the noise sounding choked. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

Shane opened his eyes and grinned wickedly. He sat back to unbuckle his belt and open his fly. He'd never been subtle with his sexuality but Natalie didn't want seduction tonight, she wanted the big, bossy, dominant man she'd met in that intoxicating Southern bar—and she wanted him mean. Wanted him jealous and pushy just like the very moment they'd met.

She stroked his thick erection through his underwear and swore she could smell magnolia and the wood of Shane's old house, the sweat of bodies swaying in the shadows.

"You remember the first time we fucked?" he murmured.

"Of course I do. In your living room, that night you made me watch him dance with other women."

Shane nodded.

Natalie peeled his underwear down to expose every hard, tempting inch he'd punished her with all those months ago.

"Yeah." His eyes closed as she touched him, squeezed his shaft and stroked him from the base to the head.

"You're just as big as I remember," she said.

"I bet you're just as warm and hot and wet."

She let him go, stood and shimmied out of her jeans, shed her top so she was in her underwear. She sat, Shane's hands already on her as she took his cock in her palm again. "Find out," she murmured, wedging one knee in the cushions and the other between Shane's thighs.

He accepted the invitation, sliding a coarse hand up her leg, big fingers slipping under her panties to tease her folds. He groaned from deep in his chest, the sound tightening Natalie's fist around him, tightening her pussy.

"Have you been with any women since me?" she asked.

Shane shook his head.

"Good."

"What about you? You fucked that doctor yet?"

"Yeah, I did."

Shane huffed a contemptuous breath through his nose.

"You want to hear all about how much better you are?" An undiplomatic offer, but Natalie liked that about Shane—he had a tacky competitive streak that suited him like an old pairs of jeans.

"Yeah. You tell me all about it."

"You're bigger, for one." She held his gaze as she ran a greedy hand up and down his cock. "And harder. You fuck deeper."

He shut his eyes and groaned. "Yeah."

“And you look good when you fuck, Shane. You look good when you fuck Gabriel too.”

He groaned again and this time the sound was loaded—loaded with longing and the sting of self-denial, she bet. His free hand pushed hers away and took hold of his erection, not stroking, just holding.

“You have no idea how much I’ve thought about you two when I get off,” she whispered.

“You ever think about it when you were with your doctor?” His fist slid up and down, slowly.

Natalie pursed her lips and made a choice to be both indiscreet and honest. “Yeah, I did. I thought about that time you caught me and Gabriel...how your body looked when you fucked him, right on top of me.” God, that memory had been her ticket to a speedy orgasm on a hundred lonely nights. Shane’s cock pounding his beautiful lover’s ass, the gorgeous, happily helpless man pinned between them, Shane’s hips driving Gabriel deep inside Natalie with each thrust.

But tonight wasn’t about that...it was about the two of them, and to bring in memories that Shane was trying to run from was cruel of her, selfish. She shifted gears, making the fantasy about Shane alone, about getting him all to herself.

“And I’ve thought about when it was just you and me...the things we did on your floor.” She nudged his hand away, squeezed his dick with a greedy fist. “And all the things we didn’t get around to.”

“Before you left without saying goodbye.”

“Yeah. Before I escaped.”

Shane swallowed. “Like what?”

“I always wondered how you’d be, with your mouth.”

Shane laughed, the sound strangled from whatever her touch was doing to him. “I better warn you now, I expect I’m pretty lousy at going down on women.”

"Is that code for you don't want to?" she asked, hand slowing.

"Nope, just a friendly warning. I'm good at all the rough, mean stuff. I never been begged for any repeat oral performances, let's say. Don't think I'm much good at the intricate stuff you ladies need down there."

"Mechanics versus surgeons again," Natalie teased.

The thinly veiled challenge seemed to perk him up. "But I'll give it a damn fine effort." Shane stood, pushed her coffee table back a couple of feet and nearly toppled the glasses. He got to his knees before her, peeling her panties off in a flash.

All she could think to say was, "Shane." She stroked his short hair as he brought his face close, watching his eyes close as he smelled her. Suddenly she wanted this very much. It was a small, weird gift to bestow, but she wanted to make Shane feel good at this. Plus if he was truly lousy at it, she owed it to womankind to offer some helpful redirection.

"Can I give you some constructive criticism?" she asked softly. "If you need any, I mean."

He seemed to consider it a moment, his face retreating an inch, eyes opening to stare at her without focus.

"Oh never mind, Shane. Just do whatever you —"

"It's not my ego. It's just some stupid fucked-up memory started playing in my head."

"Oh," she said again. "About him?"

Shane dipped his chin, the tiniest nod. "This ain't the first time in recent history I been on my knees, taking instructions. It's..."

"Here." She tugged at his arms until he stood, urged him to sit beside her. "Tonight shouldn't be about that. Some other time. Tonight I just want you how you are. Big and rough and mean."

"You sure? We got wine and fire and all that. You got candles beside your bed. I'm on your turf. I'm happy to play by your rules, be the sort of man you...you know. Deserve."

"You're the sort of man who makes a woman like me run screaming from a man like Alex." She turned toward him, running her palm up and down his thigh. "Don't let the romantic candles fool you. I've got awful taste in men, Shane. I like bossy, meatheaded jerks who fuck like they're in heat."

"I can do that."

"I know you can." She moved her fingers to his cock, covered again by his shorts.

He moaned softly. "Stand up a sec."

She met his eyes and obeyed.

Shane stood and kicked off his jeans, took the rumpled spare comforter from beside the futon and spread it out on the floor, a couple of feet from the hearth. She approached with slow steps.

"Promise I'll be nice and mean and dirty," Shane said. "But come on, there's a motherfucking fire going. This is the first time I'll get laid up north, so meet me in the middle. Bit of girly romantic ambiance." He nodded to the fireplace. "Remind me what it's like to be with a woman."

"Sure."

Shane let her push his undershirt up his chest then tugged it off for her. His body was just as she remembered, hard and toned from good old-fashioned sit-ups and free weights and manual labor, no gym membership needed.

"Wow." She muttered it without meaning to, her hands compounding the sentiment as she took him in, the contours of his stomach and sides and arms. She'd seen him naked, just the two of them, but they'd been drunk. She'd also seen all this while one hundred percent sober, but with Gabriel suffusing the room with his crazy charisma, she'd still been effectively intoxicated.

Right now Shane seemed stark and alarmingly real, especially coming on the heels of styled, slender Alex. Her hands kept exploring, eyes hypnotized by the swell and contraction of Shane's belly as he breathed. She put her palm to his heart, feeling its beat, faint and rapid behind his firm flesh. Her gaze jumped to his face, plain but handsome, stern features offset by melancholy eyes.

"You may be the sexiest man I've ever seen," she muttered.

He laughed. "You're forgetting at least one who's got me beat."

She gave his chest a tiny push to feel his solidness. "The sexiest *real* man I've ever seen."

"What d'you mean by 'real'?"

She considered it. "When I'm close to you, I feel like I'm...close to you. With him...I was with him, but it felt like I was just visiting. Or dreaming. You," she said, and stroked his chest and arms, sliding her hands around to feel his strong back. "You feel very tangible. And tomorrow I'll still be feeling it. Sore. He bruises people's psyches. Takes little chips out of people's souls. But you're something else, Shane. Something real." With that, she slid her hand to his cock, felt him go from half-mast to rock-hard in five seconds.

He groaned, hips thrusting softly in time with her strokes. "Fuck, you make me feel big."

"You are big."

"I know. But lately, even when I feel big, I feel weak too. But not just now." He pushed his shorts down for her, both their pairs of eyes glued to her hand on his dick.

"I want you in charge." Her free hand palmed his hip, feeling muscle and bone and the combined heat of Shane's body and the fire warming his skin. "Just be how you are, tonight."

"How I am ain't something I really know anymore."

"Then find it again."

He nodded. "Hang on." He left her to kick away his shorts and go to his bag, rummaging and returning with a box of condoms.

Natalie smiled. "Looks like you had me pegged when you packed."

He mirrored the grin, getting a rubber out and peeling the plastic open. "You taught me the importance of a good rebound."

Her smile tightened at the word, but there was nothing to be offended by. She and Shane were temporary by virtue of logic and geography, by their own fraught history, by her own disinterest in establishing anything serious. And he'd been one half of her epic rebound, a role she'd never designated as cheap in her memories. Nothing dishonorable in being a rebound. She took the condom from him and slid it from the wrapper. Shane gave his cock a couple of rough pulls, getting himself as hard as he was in Natalie's fantasies. She rolled the rubber down his length, bit her lip to hide a self-indulgent grin.

"Why don't you lie down?" he asked. "You need a pillow?"

"Nah." She sat, fire dry and hot on one side, the air cool on the other, floor hard beneath the soft blanket. She reveled in the sight of Shane looming above her in the dramatic lighting for a few seconds before he dropped to his knees between her legs.

He nodded at her bra. "Take that off."

Natalie obeyed, reaching behind to unclasp it. Being a guy, Shane probably hadn't noticed she'd worn matching underwear—not quite lingerie but a pretty, lacey midnight blue set—worn it when her intentions had been to see Alex briefly and fully clothed, then head home to sleep alone. Leave it to Natalie's subconscious to prepare for the inevitable.

Shane lowered to his elbows, hands cupping her bare breasts, mouth taking her nipple. Instantly she felt that elemental harshness. She raked her fingernails across his scalp to reinforce the greedy tone of his touch. With the encouragement, he suckled her, roughly, hands squeezing possessively. Her pussy was begging for him already, tight and hungry and impatient. And he was right there, hard and ready to go.

"I want you, Shane."

"You'll get me."

"Make it selfish."

He kissed her breasts until the heat pooling there made her lightheaded, then all the blood rushed between her legs as he braced himself on hard arms. He shifted his knees and hips, cock brushing her folds.

"You ready?"

She reached a hand between her legs to be sure. "You have no clue how ready."

"Good." He angled his cock and Natalie guided him to her entrance. He slid inside with just a hint of resistance, the tiniest taste of enjoyable pain.

"Fuck," she muttered.

"Tell me I'm the biggest you ever had." He pushed deeper.

"You are."

"Tell me you ain't lyin'."

She laughed. "No way. No contest."

"Good," he said again, so exactly the way she loved him — crass and self-satisfied.

"Fuck me, Shane. Be selfish."

The thrusts started slow and deep, punctuated with a shallow moan from Shane each time their bodies met. Natalie watched his cock, everything about the visual just precisely what she wanted from a man right now. Strong, hard, on top. She stroked his shoulders and arms, groaned as his thrusts sped up.

"Damn, you feel good." His body surged, the impact harsh for a few beats. "So fucking wet."

"So fucking hard," she countered, reaching between them to squeeze the base of his cock between her thumb and first finger. "And thick."

"Take me." Rougher now, the mean slap of his skin against hers mimicking the snap of the firewood. He was taking her order to heart, and as much as Natalie wanted

this to be his chance to be greedy, she wanted to come. She moved her fingers to her clit, and caught the change in Shane as she touched herself. His hips slowed.

"Keep it rough," she said.

"Selfish, huh?" His words were broken by his panting breaths.

"I'm so close." Laughably close, considering how intensely she'd needed to do this to climax with Alex the last time they'd had sex.

"Do it," Shane said. He sat back on his heels, hands on his pumping hips, his gaze and the firelight warming Natalie's belly and breasts. The controlled motions of his body contrasted with the wondrous glint in his eyes, his expression belonging to a man who'd never seen a woman naked before. "Goddamn, you look good."

Nowhere near as good as he did. Easiest orgasm ever. Natalie took one last glance at his face then glued her eyes to Shane's driving cock, teased herself for half a minute and lost it. The climax came fast and intense—a flash, not waves. A punch of pleasure that left her feeling dim-witted and still hungry. If there was another one poised to take her, she didn't have a chance to find out. Shane dropped back down, fucked her so hard and fast it nearly knocked her breath out. His grunts were harsh, almost ugly. Wounded and desperate.

"Shane."

"Say it again."

She uttered his name a half dozen times and he came apart, cock thrust deep deep deep as his hipbones ground into hers. Another strangled noise and a few soft pumps then his muscles went slack, chest and stomach lowering to meet hers.

"Wow."

He made a sound like a laugh or cough, took a couple of steadying breaths and collapsed beside her. Natalie turned onto her hip and elbow and slung her other arm across Shane's ribs. She kissed his collarbone.

"Thanks," he mumbled. "You got no clue how bad I needed that."

"Ditto."

He laughed.

"You want to sleep in my bed tonight?"

He met her gaze, eyes shifting in tiny zigzags between hers. "If that's cool with you."

She nodded. "That's how all the best home wreckers operate," she said, teasing herself. "One night on the couch, then the real impositions begin."

Something shifted in Shane's expression. A flicker of sadness passed over his features, lasting just long enough for Natalie to wonder if that wasn't also how Gabriel's path to sharing Shane's bed had unfurled. Then she blinked and found Shane's smile right where it had been.

"Take me to your lair, Miss Natalie."

Chapter Four

Shane awoke to several exotic discoveries. Long, dark hair was tangled around his fingers, soft, full breasts plastered to his chest, smooth sheets enveloping his naked body and Natalie's quiet snores warming his throat.

"Hey." He freed his hand and touched her face, a bit sad to banish her goofy and undignified mouth-breathing sleep expression.

"Hey," she mumbled. Shane could pinpoint the second she remembered who he was.

"It's the weekend," he said.

"Right you are." She glanced beyond Shane's shoulder at her alarm clock and yawned. "Man, I haven't slept past nine in ages. You must have exhausted me."

He smiled, pleased their flirting was getting off to such an early start. "Can I make you breakfast, for old time's sake?"

"You can try...don't know if I have enough eggs, though."

"I'll just bum some off a neighbor if you don't."

She yawned again, so fucking adorable.

Shane licked his thumb and rubbed at the mascara smudge beneath one of her eyes.

"Oh God, I must look awful," she said, instantly alert.

"You look like a woman who got all her sense fucked out," Shane said. "No prettier sight in the whole world."

"You're in charge of coffee." She slid from his arms and the sheets and stood. Shane admired her body in the dim, pink light leaking in through her red curtains. "I call the shower," she said, grabbing a robe off a hook by the door and spoiling Shane's fun.

He lay in her covers a few minutes longer, feeling calm. And calm was something he hadn't felt in a long time. When the water shut off in the next room he got up, cursed at the cold and hurried to the living room for a fresh change of clothes. Natalie emerged just after he'd figured out how to work a coffee bean grinder.

"What have you done to my kitchen?" She clutched the robe closed between her breasts and eyed the black grounds peppering the counter.

"Your coffee's too complicated. But don't worry, I'll tidy up."

"How much did you put in the machine?"

"Plenty." Shane took a good look at the vee of skin between her lapels and got exactly what he'd hoped for—filthy ideas. "Get dressed before I maul you."

"Yes sir." She patted his shoulder and disappeared into her room.

Shane grinned, watching the drops become a stream as the coffeemaker roused. He hadn't felt this way toward a woman in ages. Fucking relief, too. He hadn't broken his heterosexuality. He'd let Gabriel dick around and rewire it for almost a year, but there was something there to be salvaged.

Shane found what he needed, eggs and butter, bread and frozen sausage patties. He made Natalie the finest breakfast he knew how to, even set the table.

"Wow," she said, coming out of her room in shamrock-patterned pajama bottoms and a button-up sweater.

"You want cream and sugar?" Shane asked from the counter.

"Just cream. Thanks." She took a seat and smiled at him. "We playing house today?"

"Works for me." He got her coffee poured and walked over to set it beside her plate.

"Why thank you." Her smile started out teasing but faded to shyness after a moment. A glimmer of sad in there, even.

Shane's own mood took a dip and he headed to the stove to flip the sausages.

"Oh Jesus, Shane."

He turned to find her with mug in hand, face pinched up as if she'd sucked a lemon. "Too hot?"

"A bit...*strong*," she said.

"Good. It'll put hair on your chest."

"Oh yes, just what every girl wants for herself."

Shane took a sip from his own mug. "That *is* strong. But that's how you like it up here, right? All shitty and burned-tasting like Starbucks?"

She smiled. He liked making her smile. He'd be doing as much of that as possible while he was here. *While* he was here... Then what? Back to the bar, back to his empty bed with no romantic prospects. He'd have to get on one of those online dating sites, like a twelve-step program to keep him from falling back into his old, weak patterns with Gabriel. Maybe Natalie would be willing to help him put a profile together, one that'd appeal to a woman like her.

Shane grabbed the toast when it sprang up then carried the pan over to the table and slid food onto their plates.

She picked up her fork. "Thank you very much. If this is half as good as the sex, I owe you."

"If this is half as good as the sex, the sex wasn't near good enough," Shane said. "Like to think I fuck better than frozen sausages."

She shook her head. "Semantics. You mind if I turn the radio on?"

"Go for it."

She went to the stereo by the TV and turned it on low, a soft drone of monotone voices that made Shane's eyes roll.

"What?" she asked, sitting back down. "I like to hear the news."

"Fucking NPR."

She laughed. "Tell me you wouldn't prefer Rush Limbaugh, please."

“Nah...just don’t think I’m listening to that liberal bull once I convince you to move down south and have my kids.”

She laughed so hard she snorted. “Wow, what a very tempting offer, Mr. Broussard. I’ll leave my shoes here, shall I? Doesn’t sound like I’ll be needing them down there, all barefoot and pregnant.”

Shane enjoyed joking with her, felt only a tiny sting that she clearly found the idea impossible.

They traded regional insults for a few minutes, then a story about Medicare reform came on the radio and Natalie shushed him. He freshened their cups and she shook her head as the segment wrapped, annoyed by whatever the droning had been about.

“Government trying to mess with your precious old people?” he asked, taking his seat.

“Don’t get me going.” Her mood had clearly darkened, lips pursed to a tight line. Silence reigned for a few minutes as they sipped, and Shane knew whatever was going on between her ears wasn’t about health care.

He poked her shin with his bare foot beneath the table. “Hey.”

She met his eyes, smile weak. “Hmmm?”

“I lost you there. What’s on your mind?”

“Oh, I’m just trapped in my own head.”

“Join the club.”

She smiled again, gaze on her mug. “It’s really nice having you here...”

“But?”

“I just want to make sure this is the same for you as it is for me.”

“How do you mean?”

She winced through another sip of coffee then finally looked at him. “You keep teasing me about marrying you, and I know you’re kidding. But I want to make sure

there's not any grains of truth hidden in there. Because I'm not looking to settle down anytime soon."

Shane kept his face neutral, casual, hiding the sting to his ego. "'Course not. This is a rebound."

"Good. I just wanted to make sure we're on the same page."

"You upset you decided to screw up what you had with your surgeon for a few nights of southern comfort?" he asked, nudging her again.

"No, not at all. I wasn't really feeling that, with Alex. He's a good guy but I won't be losing any sleep over him. I just know you've spent the past year not really knowing where you stood with Gabriel, so I want to be the opposite. Crystal clear." She smiled at him. "But this is really lovely, being this way with you for a little while. You're pretty much exactly what I go for in a nutshell, except not all the terrible parts."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're sort of a bully. And an ass. No offense. But you aren't really. Well, you are...but not just for the sake of being that way. Anyhow, you're stubborn and tacky and a bit annoying. All the things I fall for, but I bet you treat women nicely."

"I try. They don't usually stick around very long though."

"What's your longest relationship been?" she asked, and the question chilled Shane's blood.

"With a woman," she amended, but no matter, the truth would still condemn him.

"Maybe six months."

Her face fell. "Oh."

"I know, my track record ain't so hot."

"No, it's not that... I was afraid I just jabbed your bruise there. I didn't know you and him..."

"I don't count that as a relationship," Shane said quickly.

Natalie made a little noise, not exactly a laugh. "You don't?"

"No. I mean, you're practically the only person who knows about it, anyhow. You and a handful of drunk women who've passed through the bar."

"Heh. Well, not to be contrary, Shane, but what you and him were, that's got to be more intense than most people's marriages. I can't believe you wouldn't *count* it."

"He was never just mine," Shane said.

Natalie licked her lip, holding back a thought.

"What?"

She frowned then drained her cup. "Whose fault is that, Shane? That you guys weren't...you know. More?"

He rankled. "He needed more than I could give him."

"Maybe he needed to be with somebody who'd admit what you were to more than just the spare women who passed through your bar."

He didn't reply, not willing to explore that idea.

"Maybe he wanted acknowledgment as much as you wanted fidelity. How did he take it, anyway? You never told me how the breakup went."

Shit, busted. Shane cleared his throat, eyes escaping just as Natalie raised her own to stare at him.

"What?" she asked. "Was it awful? I mean of course it was awful. Was it ugly?"

"It ain't technically happened yet."

"Oh."

"Don't worry, you ain't like, the other woman or anything."

She laughed. "I have been before... Oh great. Now you've both cheated on each other with me."

"It ain't cheating when there's no commitment."

She squinted at him. "What did you do, Shane? Just drive away? Tell him you're going on a road trip?"

"I didn't tell him shit. I just left."

She blinked, dark brows pinched together into a perplexed line. "What about your staff? You told them but not Gabriel? He's going to hear it from them instead of you?"

"He knows. He called me yesterday, actually. Told him where I was. He don't care. Just misses having a place to sleep."

"He doesn't have keys? After a whole year together?" she asked.

"Like I said, it ain't a relationship."

"That is such a load of bullshit. And anyway, he called yesterday and you didn't tell him you're through with him? What did you talk about?"

"Nothin' important. He just wanted to know where I was... But I'll tell him we're done, next time he calls. If he calls."

She shook her head, clearly exasperated. "You better. You owe him that much."

Shane started. "I don't owe that man shit."

"You love him. Or you did. You did when I was with you both."

"I don't know *what* that was anymore."

She huffed out an annoyed breath and leaned back in her chair. Winding her hair in her fingers, she asked, "What do you want for yourself, Shane? How do you want things to be in five years?"

"I want... I want a little bit of what my momma gave me. You know, nothing fancy or anything, just like...closeness. Like family."

"And you can't see Gabriel as a part of that?"

He stared at floor. "No. He's the opposite of that. He's the thing that keeps me from changing and moving forward."

"And you don't think any of the blame for you guys not being more than—"

"Listen. I know where you're going with all this, but come on. What future is there? We can't start a family — that's ridiculous."

She opened her mouth but he cut her off with a raised hand. "Not just 'cause it's two dudes. Because he still does what he did with you, with other women. He still needs more than I can give him. Even if I *was* gay or whatever, we're not ever going to be me-and-him, happy rainbow flag couple with two kids and a lap dog, because there's always going to be some woman sneakin' into our Sears-fucking-family portrait. Like, 'Gee, where's Daddy tonight?' 'Oh, I dunno, Shane Junior, he didn't come home so he's probably busy fucking some random chick someplace. Let's hope he gets bored with her and comes home soon.'"

"That's harsh."

He pushed a laughing breath through his nose. "That wisdom from the woman who fucked him in my bed while I was out fixing to tow her car."

She made a grim face.

"Anyhow, forget it. I love him the way a drunk loves booze, and as long as I act like the habit's doing me any good, the further away my chance at a cozy little family life drifts."

Natalie sighed, sounding as fed up with the topic as Shane was. "Fine."

"I appreciate what you're trying to do though," he added. "I know you're a chick and you think love conquers all and that happy-sappy bull, and like him and me are destined for each other or something."

She laughed. "I'm not that obnoxious, Shane. I just...I dunno. Whatever weird glue holds you two together, it's not just sex. I know you're going to roll your eyes at me for saying it, but it's special, whatever you two have."

Shane did roll his eyes, as hard as he possibly could.

"Fine, forget it. Don't know why I'm trying to talk you out of it when here I've got you all to myself for a couple weeks."

Shane warmed to the change in topic. "See? Flirtin' with you's so much better than free relationship counseling."

"Yeah. Anyway. What do you want to—" A tinkling noise from someplace cut her off and Natalie got up and disappeared into her bedroom. Another tinkle and Shane heard her say, "Hello?"

He tensed, wondering if it was Alex.

"No, Mom. I just had breakfast. What's up?"

Shane relaxed back in his seat.

"Oh crap, seriously? I guess I could... I have a guest visiting. How long will it take?"

Shane stood and gathered the dirty dishes.

"No, I can swing that. Is Dan helping? Oh good. That shouldn't be too bad then. Yup. Yeah, see you over there."

Shane heard a beep then Natalie joined him in loading the dishwasher. "I have to abandon you for a couple hours, to help my mom with her aunt."

"I can help," Shane said.

"That's sweet of you, but it's not the intro you want to my family. My great-aunt's pretty much bedridden and me and my brother-in-law are going to head over to her place and help her bathe and dress, then my mom's taking over for the afternoon. I guess her caregiver got in a minor car accident this morning, had to go to the hospital for an X-ray."

"Bummer."

"Yeah. This sort of drama's never-ending in my family. We all seem to live into our nineties, but we don't do it very gracefully."

Shane nodded. "That how you got into nursing?"

"Yeah, probably. I had two sets of really awesome grandparents, lots of relatives from that generation." She laughed. "I like old people. They tell it like it is."

"You sure I can't help?"

"No, thank you. Dan is man-power enough for the task. And my mom would be mortified if that was how you got jumped into the clan. Let her do it her way, over dinner."

"I won't argue with anybody's momma. I'll just snoop around your apartment while you're gone, make a list of things that need fixing. That'll keep me busy while you're at work next week."

"Oh that'd be good actually...my landlady's sweet, but she's a bit slow about fixing things."

Shane swelled a bit, pleased for the mission. "I'm your man then."

"For the next two weeks, yes. You're my man."

* * * * *

Shane returned from the hardware store, two bags full of boyfriendly assignments dangling off his arm and his toolbox in hand. He shut the door with his hip and dumped the purchases on Natalie's counter, flexed his fingers to banish the stiffness. Distraction might not be the same as actual relief, but it felt pretty damn close. Shane looked around as he ditched his coat, trying to decide which project to tackle first. Her broken burner was a good place to start, that or the slow leak under her bathroom sink —

His pocket buzzed, and, idiot that he was, Shane assumed it'd be her. He smiled as he fished his phone out, prepared to brag about his to-do list.

Two-two-five area code.

"Fuck me." Well, it had to happen sometime. Best that time came when Natalie was out. He pushed the talk button. "Yeah."

"Hello, Shane." Goddamn, that voice like angels fucking.

He wandered into the den. "Hey. Been waiting for you to call again." Shane toyed with a coaster on Natalie's side table.

"Oh yeah?" Practically a purr.

Shane cleared his throat, which did nothing to banish the invisible hand now choking him. "Yeah. I wanted to tell you, you and me, we're done."

A long pause. "Done?"

"I can't have you in my life anymore. I'm sorry. I got to fire you too, and I don't want you comin' round to see me or to have a drink or anything else."

"What I do, Shane?"

Shane sighed. He'd forgotten how hard breakups were even when you weren't in love with someone, and this was the first time he'd attempted one with someone he *did* feel something for. Maybe not love, maybe something far more dismal and obsessive, but it still hurt as though his ribs were being snapped, one by one. He sank into Natalie's recliner.

"Don't make this sound like some kind of regular old breakup," Shane said. "I didn't know what the fuck you and me were when we started, and I still don't know. But I know we ain't growin' old and losin' our teeth together and it has to end sometime. So it may as well be now." He took a deep breath. "Don't...don't think it's not hard. But I gotta move on with my life and we both know that can't happen with you in it."

More silence, then a soft, "I see."

Shane wondered if anybody had ever been the one to try to shake Gabriel first before...he doubted it. Well, Natalie, maybe.

"I'm sorry about the job," Shane said.

A faint laugh, the one Shane was used to feeling warm his neck. "You sorry 'bout the job?"

"And the place to crash," he offered.

Another laugh. "Fuck you too, Shane." An old-school click as Gabriel hung up from six states away.

Shane took a deep, shaky breath to keep from vomiting. "Fuck..." Then suddenly, vomiting was looking pretty desirable. Shane's sinuses stung and he panicked. No fucking way he'd cry. Not over this, over the end of a year of hot, messed-up sex, not over hearing that warm voice go so utterly icy. His nose began to run, tear-making machinery clearly backfiring after months of disuse. "Fuck."

He went to the kitchen for a paper towel and blew his nose, stared at the ceiling and blinked until the sensations faded. Shane took a deep breath, another, a hundred more, gathered his wits and looked around Natalie's apartment.

Item one, broken burner. He flipped the TV on, loud, flipped his toolbox open. Flipped a switch in his head and got down to work.

* * * * *

Natalie returned home later than she'd hoped, not quite one o'clock. Spotting the tools and bits of hardware scattered all over her counter, she was pleased to see Shane hadn't been left at a loose end in her absence.

"Shane?"

His voice came from the bathroom. "Ow."

She walked to the threshold to find him rubbing the back of his head, crouched before the open cupboard beneath her sink.

"Sorry to startle you. Don't tell me you're fixing that drip."

"Yep."

"You're amazing...the mildew's been getting worse by the week."

"All set." He got to his feet and rinsed his hands, checked his handiwork and shut the tap off. "Just a rusted-out washer."

"Well, I'll cook you whatever you want for lunch as payment. Thank you."

"Cook it on the back right burner, if you want. I fixed that too."

She bounced on the balls of her feet and clapped. "What do you want to go back to Louisiana for, anyhow? Just stay here and be my handyman. Just adhere to the no-shirt rule next time." She tugged at the sleeve of his tee.

"Tempting." Shane smiled, but she could sense something off about him, a strain in the gesture.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." He gathered up his tools, the world's worst imitation of blasé.

"I won't pry, but you don't look very fine." She touched his shoulder, studied his deepening frown.

Shane headed back to the main room. "I just talked to him." He kept his back to her as he replaced things in his toolbox.

"Oh. Who called who?"

"He called me."

"Did you...you know. Tell him?"

"I told him." Shane shut the lid, the sound making her jump.

"How'd he take it?"

Shane tidied up the mess of hardware, putting things back in their shopping bags. "He took it. Message received."

"Right. So, if I can ask, how do you feel now?"

Shane seemed to think about it a moment, rubbing his chest, massaging the ache he must be feeling there, the one Natalie had nursed the entire drive north from Louisiana.

"It fuckin' hurts," he said, voice going quavery at the end.

"I'll bet."

He walked to the dining area and sat, dropped his head into his hands and pressed his fingers to his temples.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Nothing to say, really. It's over. He was pissed but he couldn't care less. Didn't ask me to reconsider or offer to change or nothin'. Just a fuck-you and he hung up on me. Probably just called wanting more fucking phone sex, anyhow."

More phone sex? Natalie sighed and pulled a chair up next to Shane's, circling her palm over his back. "Sorry, Shane."

"Yeah."

"Do you feel relieved at all, now that it's done?"

"No."

She slumped in her seat, gave his strong arm a squeeze.

"But I will," Shane went on. "Just feel like my heart's been turned inside out right now, that's all. It'll fade. I'm glad it's done with, anyhow, even if I feel like shit."

"Anything I can do to make it easier?"

Shane sat up straight and blinked at her, eyes bloodshot but no tears in sight. "Nothing special. Just put up with me, I guess. I hope I don't spend the rest of this visit mopin' around all miserable."

"You can if you want," she offered.

"Give me one day, maybe two."

"Two days after the breakup of a year-long...whatever you guys were? You can mope for longer—"

"Two days. Tops. I wasted enough time on that freeloader already."

"If you say so."

Shane stood. "I say so. When the smoke clears I'll feel fucking fantastic, sweetheart. First day of the rest of my life."

And I'll be the first woman who lets you down, first one who won't come anywhere close to replacing him. "Whatever you say, Shane."

Chapter Five

Though it hadn't been the most cheerful weekend in history, Natalie wasn't ready to head back to work on Monday. Even with a cloud of heartache hovering above Shane, it'd been nice relaxing with him for a couple of days. They'd accomplished little aside from watching movies, cooking meals, building fires and zoning out together, but it had been the right prescription. They'd had sex on Saturday night, slow and a bit melancholy, a bit drunken. Sunday they'd tried, but it had dissolved into a long make-out session, pleasant and easy, no pressure... It was strange to see Shane rendered even remotely delicate, though it didn't dampen Natalie's affection for him. She wanted him to feel safe with her, and it seemed a good sign that he was opening up as freely as he was.

Natalie stood up straight at the residence's front desk as her phone vibrated in her pocket. She feared Alex's number but breathed easily at the sight of her older sister's. She flipped it open. "Hey, sis."

"Heya. I'm calling about dinner tonight," Alicia said.

"Is it still on?"

"Yeah, but I asked Mom if we can move it to my place. My hormones are going all psycho-nurture-mode on me and I really want to cook. Does that work for you? Around six?"

"Yeah, no problem." Natalie shuffled some papers on the counter. "I um, I was going to bring a friend along, if Mom didn't say."

"She did. Is this the famous doctor we've been waiting to meet?"

Natalie laughed. "Oh no. That's over, actually."

Alicia offered one of her flustered sighs of amusement, overdone, older-sister false superiority. "Sounds like old ricochet rebound Natalie is back in full effect then."

"It's not quite like that...he's really just a friend. I met him on my road trip home last summer. He came to visit unexpectedly."

"O-kaaaay..."

Natalie wandered to the break room around the corner, finding it mercifully empty. "Well, maybe we're slightly more than friends, but there's nothing technically romantic going on. He just ended this insanely complicated relationship. I'm not looking to try and follow it."

"Sounds very dramatic."

Natalie smirked, trying to think up an analogy her librarian sister would appreciate. "He's got a sort of Humbert Humbert thing going on with his ex."

"Oh... Natalie."

She cringed then laughed. "Sorry, not like that...*nothing* like that. He's just a bit tortured about the whole thing. Anyhow, forget I said any of that. Don't ask him about it, he's here trying to move on."

"Well, he sounds like a baggage salesman, but bring him over. Dan will be happy for some male company for a change. Does this guy like football?"

"I have no idea, actually...but he's very man's mannish. He drinks whiskey and swears a lot. I'm sure they'll find something to talk about while you and me and Mom go on and on about sonograms and baby names. In fact, I might just join them."

"Sounds intriguing. Can't wait to meet him."

"See you at six."

* * * * *

Shane looked up from the newspaper as Natalie's key sounded in the lock. She stepped inside and spotted him, offering a warm smile to offset the pink in her wind-chapped cheeks and nose.

"Hey you." She set her purse on the counter. "How you feeling?"

Like I'm dying. He shrugged. "Just peachy. How was work?"

"Pretty quiet, actually." Natalie unwound her scarf and hung up her coat, glanced around at the droning TV and the lights on in the kitchen and living room. She made an "it's hot" *whew* noise and fanned herself with the mail. "I'm not made of money you know, Broussard. What did you set the thermostat on?"

"Eighty."

"Jesus. Does that pass for room temperature in Louisiana?" She tossed her mail on top of the microwave.

"Well the sun sets here at about noon, best I can tell, and it's so cold my joints ache like I'm some old grandpa. Plus I figured if I made it hot enough you'd just drop your clothes right there on the floor." He stood and wandered to the counter, slapping on an evil grin he hoped would hide how damn much his insides still hurt.

Natalie pursed her lips, disapproval on her face.

"What?"

"You don't have to act all brave around me," she said quietly.

Shane rolled his eyes. "And you don't have to act like my whole family just died. I broke up with him. It sucks. I'll be fine. You gave me my two days of self-pity. Now I suck it up like a big boy."

"If that's what you want me to believe, I'll pretend to."

He bit back a defensive reply, smiled grimly instead. "Thanks."

"So we're heading to my sister's for dinner tonight, if you still want to meet my family. My mom will be there too, and my brother-in-law. Do you like football?"

"I like beer."

"There will likely be beer."

"Then I like football just fine."

Natalie disappeared to shower and change, and Shane toyed with an urge to join her. In the end he decided against it, fearing he might not be able to rise to the occasion.

Shame. He could have used the distraction, and a reminder that Natalie made him happy too. Made him happy and made him dinner, made him welcome. Hell of a lot better than making him lie awake nights, wondering where she was.

Then again, she didn't make his brain and body convulse when she sang or spoke or walked into a room.

"Fucking magic," he muttered, and went back to not paying attention to the TV and paper.

At half past five they shrugged into their coats and Shane insisted they take his truck. Driving on the stupid icy roads would keep his mind off the sour ache in his belly. Natalie navigated them twenty miles east to her sister's place, a duplex among dozens of others in a tidy little personality-free development. Natalie led them up the steps, heading inside without bothering to knock.

"Hello?"

A man's friendly voice came from down a short stretch of hallway. "Heya, Nat. I'm in the den. Girls are in the kitchen."

"Hey, Dan. Thanks." She took Shane's coat and hung it beside her own in a closet. They headed to the den, where Dan was camped out in a recliner watching a pre-game report. Natalie waved.

Dan stood upon noticing a stranger, stepped to Shane and gave him a solid shake. "Hey, I'm Dan. Natalie's brother-in-law."

"Shane. I'm her..." He raised an eyebrow at Natalie.

"Friend. Date. Something," she concluded with a shrug, clearly comfortable not knowing the answer. "Shane's visiting from Louisiana for a couple weeks."

"Wow, did you ever pick the worst time to visit upstate," Dan said. "I grew up in Arizona and I barely made it through my first fall here. Then the first blizzard hit. Jesus."

Shane smirked and nodded, decided Dan was all right. Tall, clean-cut, solid in that previously athletic, now-slowly-going-to-seed fashion.

"Anyhow, intrepid of you to make the trip. You fly?" Dan asked.

"Nope, drove."

"Brave soul."

"I better introduce Shane to the ladies," Natalie said.

"Go to it. If you like football, there's beer in the crisper," he said to Shane, taking his seat again.

"Noted."

Natalie led Shane down the hall and through the dining room.

"Seems like a good guy," Shane said.

"Yeah, they've been together for like eight years now. I heartily approve. Hello?" she called into the kitchen.

"Come on in!"

Two women were at the far side of the counter, matching cups of tea steaming beside a furniture catalog. They looked up at the same time, so clearly mother and daughter, both with practical haircuts, brown eyes, curious smiles.

"Hey guys. This is Shane. Not the doctor," she elaborated. "He's the one who fixed my truck when I broke down last summer on the way back from Florida."

"Oh right," Natalie's sister said, and Shane wondered exactly what kinds of details Natalie may have shared about that trip. She rounded the counter to greet them, bringing her extremely round middle with her.

"Wow," Shane said. "How many months are you?"

She smiled, put a hand to her belly. "Eight and a bit. Nice to meet you, Shane. I'm Alicia." She gave him a handshake, the feminine kind, with her other warm palm set on top of Shane's cold knuckles.

Their mother came next, shaped not unlike Shane's own late mother, slender and plump at the same time. Soft. She too gave Shane's hand a shake. "I probably won't trick you into thinking Natalie's got two sisters, will I?"

"You can try, ma'am."

"Oh, ma'am? It's that bad?" she teased, patting her face.

"It's a Southern thing," Natalie said.

"Anyhow, Sandra will do," she said.

"Miss Sandra," Natalie added with a grin.

Shane smiled. "Miss Sandra, then."

"Much better. You two take a seat. Have some wine," Sandra said, waving at the breakfast bar stools.

"Excuse me, who's hosting this dinner?" Alicia asked. "But yeah, help yourselves. We're just bickering over changing tables." She tapped the catalog.

Natalie took a seat and looked around. "Where's dinner?"

"In the oven."

Natalie flared her nostrils. "It's not pot roast, is it?"

Alicia frowned. "Are you not doing red meat?"

"No, it's fine. I just made it for Shane the other day."

"It's the only thing the women in this family know how to cook," Sandra said.

"Are you guys competitive?" Shane asked, glancing between Natalie and her sister. "Am I going to get the third degree about whose is better?"

"Mine's better," Alicia said.

"I beg to differ," Natalie cut back, faking offense.

Sandra shook her head. "Mine's better, but no matter. Have some wine, you two."

"I'll just have a beer, if that's okay," Shane said, heading to the fridge.

"Whatever you like."

He grabbed a bottle of microbrew from the crisper drawer. Sinking into an easy chair and zoning out to the TV wasn't a bad invitation, but Shane liked the company and the voices of women, especially in conjunction with the smell of roasting meat. Alicia passed him a bottle opener and he popped his cap, took up his seat beside Natalie. He felt instantly if irrationally comfortable here, listening to her relatives argue about beech- versus pine-finished wood. Shane scooted his stool closer to Natalie's, close enough for their thighs to touch. She glanced at him, and Shane felt his stomach unknot itself. He felt his pain lessen before he even took a sip of alcohol.

* * * * *

Dinner was pleasant, Natalie's family all at ease teasing one another. Shane's good mood stayed with him. He didn't say much, just answered all the questions they had about his trip and was then allowed to relax. Alicia's upcoming due date dominated most of the conversation, and Shane was happy for the chance to lean back and simply enjoy the atmosphere.

Alicia looked a lot like Natalie...a sort of future version of Natalie. Alicia's dark hair was shorter and straighter and she had a healthy length of gray in the roots coming in on top, about eight months' worth, Shane imagined. She was Natalie with no frills...a bit frumpy, though Shane figured the woman had bigger concerns than stylishness at this point in her life. He tried to picture Natalie pregnant and practical, but those heels he associated with her wouldn't go away. Neither would her words from a few days ago. *I'm not looking to settle down anytime soon.*

Alicia set her fork aside, leaning forward to eyeball Shane with a smirk. "So come on, Shane. What's your verdict?" She nodded at his plate.

He honestly couldn't say one pot roast was better than the other. The only difference he could find was that Natalie used regular potatoes and Alicia used sweet potatoes, and he liked both equally. "If you're twisting my arm, I have to say Natalie's, since she could poison the next meal she cooks me."

"Good answer," Natalie said.

"But if Miss Sandra wants to have us over before I head back down south, I might have to change my answer."

"Yes, you would," Sandra said, with a teasing squint at her daughter.

Natalie turned to the window as a gust of wind rattled the blinds. "Oh. It wasn't supposed to start snowing again until after midnight."

"Yeah," Dan said. "They said it might change to freezing rain too."

"We should head out before it gets nasty," Natalie said, pushing out her chair and gathering her dirty dishes.

"I'll do that." Alicia stood and hurried to take over hostessing duties.

"No, *I'll* do that," Dan said. He wrested the plates from his wife's hand and got to work cleaning up.

Natalie and Shane and Sandra got their layers on and many good-nights and nice-to-meet-yous were tendered. Shane tailed Natalie's mother through the snowy night until her little sedan turned down a street a few blocks from Natalie's house.

Shane turned to her. "I like your family, Miss Natalie."

"Thanks...I think they liked you too."

He smiled to himself. "I like that you're all girls, right down to the bun in your sister's oven."

"What's Dan? Chopped liver?"

"Anyhow, that was nice, just being around women."

Natalie nodded, eyeing Shane, nibbling her lip. "Your dad wasn't around much, was he?"

Shane shook his head and looked to the road. "They were married until I was ten, but even then I didn't see much of him. He was a world-class shit. Still is."

"So it was just you and your mom, for the most part?"

“And my grandmother and my Aunt Marie, and a heck of a lot of gossip neighbors and clients... My momma worked as a hairdresser, out of our house. I was like one of those feral kids, lost in the woods, raised by wolves. The lone boy raised by a giant pack of Southern women.”

“You still turned out to be a big old macho mechanic. I guess nature’s stronger than nurture.”

Shane laughed. “I think that was necessity —had to pick up the skills my mom and aunt and grandmother wanted me to have. Handy, manly skills they couldn’t be bothered with.”

“Gotcha. And Gabriel,” she began.

Shane hid a flinch and took a deep breath through his nose. Still, it didn’t hurt as much as it had even a few hours ago.

“He was raised by his grandmother too, wasn’t he?”

Shane nodded. “I think ‘raised’ might be a strong word, but yeah. He grew up in her house.”

“What happened to his mom?”

“I don’t really know...he don’t talk about her much. I’ve assumed she’s dead, maybe killed herself.”

He turned to catch Natalie’s eyes widening in the orange glow of the streetlights. “That’s a pretty big assumption to make.”

“Just a feeling I got, from the way he goes all blank when the topic comes up.”

He sensed her nodding in his periphery. “And my folks got divorced when I was four, and me and Alicia only saw my dad a couple times a month... I guess we’re all in the same camp. Raised by women.”

“Okay when you’re a girl, yourself.”

Natalie laughed. "Didn't give me the best instincts when it came to the guys I tend to get mixed up with. But yeah, my mom did a good job. Just like yours. Maybe not so much Gabriel's grandmother."

"Not his fault she's crazy."

"What kind of crazy?" Natalie asked.

"Couldn't tell you for sure, but it sounds like maybe schizophrenic. Some kind of delusions—he said she talked to ghosts like they were right there, in the room. She'd look right through you and talk to someone who wasn't there."

Natalie turned the heater up a notch. "Wow, that's creepy."

Shane nodded. "But she was deep into all sorts of old-school voodoo bullshit, so I think everybody just figured she was eccentric, or like a real-deal witch, if you believe in that crap. He said everyone called her a witch when he was growing up. Anyway."

She made a sound, not quite a laugh. "Jeez, I'm sorry. I keep asking about him and you're here trying to forget."

"Yeah, like that'll ever happen."

She met his eyes at a red light. "Do you regret your decision?"

He shook his head. "It was a necessity, not a decision. But I have to say, I get what everybody means when they talk about heartache. Since I left town it's been fucking hurtin', right here." He rubbed a spot on his chest. "Worse since that last phone call. Feels like some sadistic surgeon snuck in while I was sleepin' and took it out with a dirty scalpel."

"That sucks."

"You got no idea."

"And you're done with him, because being with him precludes you having a family someday?"

"Or getting any fucking sleep at night, wondering what he's up to. We've been over all this before."

"You could have both, maybe."

"Both what?" He slowed the truck and parked in front of her house.

"Well, I'm not sure what the women in Louisiana are like, but there's got to be a few who'd like you, who want a family...and who'd understand and wouldn't mind you still seeing him."

Shane huffed out a breath, incredulous. "What kind of woman would ever put up with that? With her man bangin' some other guy on the side?" He shut the engine off.

Natalie smiled tightly. "Some woman like me, maybe."

"No, you wouldn't."

"Maybe not *me*, but some woman. Maybe. Who'll see you're a good man. You're a hard worker. As bad as you have it for Gabriel, I bet you've never missed work over him, or let your employees down. I mean, I was in your house basically as the enemy and you were still kind to me. In your way."

"You'd put up with your man going behind your back with another man?"

"Going behind my back? No, of course not. But if it somehow was you and me and Gabriel again, it wouldn't be behind my back. What you two have, as sort of obsessive and intense as it is...I think there's a purity about it. I think the fact that you two have been together for a year when you claim the relationship's nothing but lust is really saying something."

Shane gave her skeptical look.

"I'm not suggesting you guys need to become a married couple or anything. I'm just saying there are sane, open-minded women out there, ones who might be cool with being your partner and maybe the mother of your kids, and they'd be okay with you still getting what you need from Gabriel, for as long as it's important to you. I mean, why settle, Shane?"

"That is *the* most retarded idea I've ever heard."

Natalie shrugged. "Fine then. Have a blast going the rest of your life without whatever it is he makes you feel. That, or have a fucking blast going back to him and wallowing in your dirty little secret and never having the family I'm pretty sure you want. And deserve."

He shook his head, utterly unconvinced. Cold air seeped into the cab, making him shiver.

"Or," she went on, "find another woman like me, who not only gets that you need him, but who's felt it too. One who doesn't think you should have to choose, as long as you can keep your priorities straight if there's a kid involved."

"Can't raise a kid in the middle of a years-long threesome, girl."

"Kids have been raised in way worse. Kids grow up in families where their parents can't stand each other. Maybe you'll find the right woman and yours will be raised by three people who're all nuts about each other."

"And get the tar beat out of them in school 'cause everyone knows they got three parents gettin' up to sick shit together."

"There's such a thing as discretion."

Shane frowned, body antsy and agitated. "You know what? I appreciate all this happy, free-love-liberal bullshit you're trying to comfort me with, but I'm all done talkin' about it now. I want my normal life back. Period. Hetero or bust."

"Fine."

He pocketed his keys. They climbed out and slammed their doors in the thin winter air, the noise startling Shane and setting his nerves back on edge. He followed her up the steps, body screaming with its own ideas to mercifully drown out his brain. He waited for Natalie to hang her coat up in the front hall then he grabbed her—a firm hand around her wrist, the other on her shoulder. Probably rougher than was polite, but the look on her face was amusement, not alarm.

"You need some distracting, Shane?"

He narrowed his eyes, cast them down at the gritty floorboards between their feet and let his irritation drift away. He looked back up at her face in the dim light. "You're better than just a distraction."

Her lips pursed to a narrow line and her gaze dropped to his chest. She peeled her gloves off and took his zipper pull, opened his jacket and stroked her knuckles over his sweater, his heart. "You have room left in there for anybody after him?"

The words hit Shane like a sock in the gut, and for once he didn't try to hide the flinch. "I got room. If anybody'd want to be with me...with whatever's left of me now."

"There's plenty, Shane."

He swallowed, studying her smooth, pale skin in the residual streetlight. He leaned in, pressing his cold mouth to hers. Their breaths warmed each other's skin, her hot, wet tongue reminding Shane of a reality beyond the snow and ice and black night, reminding him of other parts of Natalie, someplace he wanted to be, to lose himself in for as long as humanly possible.

"Why don't you go light all them candles you got beside your bed," he said, lips against hers.

She stole the lead from him, kissed him so deep and dirty his cock ached when she let him go. "Fine."

Natalie went inside and disappeared to the bathroom then her bedroom. Aggression was humming in Shane's veins, a need to prove something to her. To himself. Prove he had a sexuality that wasn't hopelessly tangled up in that man. That was the tough thing about Natalie...she was the only one who knew about or understood his hang-ups, which made her a comfort but also a source of worry. But tonight he wanted it to be just the two of them, Shane and Natalie, man and woman, so fucking simple and perfect. No kinks, no baggage, goddamn textbook, All-American, missionary-position screwing.

He met her in the bedroom just as she finished lighting the candles. Shane took her hand. "It's just you and me tonight. No ghosts creeping in, you got it?"

"I won't mention —"

He cut off the name with his mouth, kissing her again, dirty but not too rough. Her cool hands touched his face and neck and he returned the study, enjoying the softness of her body, the differences in their sizes and smells, the pitch of their breathing.

Natalie's fingers tugged at the hem of his sweater and Shane pulled it off. He felt each button as she opened his shirt, moaned when her palms found his bare skin. He returned the exploration, stripping away her top, hands turning clumsy as his cock grew hot and curious. Lust washed over him, banishing fear and hesitation. He yanked her down on the bed with him and two sets of hands went to work fumbling with jeans. As they kicked them to the floor, Shane pulled her hard against him. Her thighs spread to invite one of his, her welcoming body and his hard cock grinding as they devolved to teenagers.

"Shane."

"You feel good, girl."

"Get on top of me."

He spread his knees between hers, lowering his hips to taunt them both with the rough contact. Natalie clawed at his sides with her nails, slid her hands beneath his shorts and kneaded his hips. Shane stared at her breasts in the candlelight, pale skin and cream-colored satin. So feminine and perfect and, *halle-fucking-lujah*, so exactly what Shane's body craved.

"Take your bra off," he whispered.

Easier than he'd even guessed. She flicked her fingers between her breasts and the cups fell away. Shane couldn't get his hands on her fast enough. Soft and warm and just a bit more than a handful, none of it wasted. He dropped to his elbows and brought his mouth to her nipple, breathed in the sweet smell of her sweat as he tasted her skin, teased her flesh, lost himself in her moan. He felt her foot pushing at one side of his briefs. He managed to reach a hand down and shrug them partway off, Natalie's toes doing the rest. The seduction dissolved into frantic grasping as the need clouded his

head, spurred by the glide of his bare dick against the smooth fabric of her panties. He angled himself with his hips and stroked her clit and lips through the satin.

"Jesus," she muttered.

Shane's patience dissolved. He knelt back and lifted her calves, nearly ripped her panties getting them down her legs and off her ankles. Natalie grabbed a condom from the box on the nightstand and he watched her open it and roll it down his cock, mean and slow. The aggression they always found together had him panting and eager, but the second he sank into her warmth, Shane's mood shifted. Someone yanked a rug from under his feet and he fell headlong into new and unfamiliar cravings, warm and strange and intoxicating.

He imagined there being no condom, imagined this as the first step toward a family. A relationship that extended beyond his tiny kingdom, bringing him something real and lasting instead of a series of hangovers. A relationship that lost him sleep over worries that actually mattered. He let his body take over, the possession plain in the hammering rhythm of his hips and the groans tumbling from his throat.

"Shane."

Warmth pulsed through him. "Love when you say that." He stared her down, lost in how good it felt to be here above her, inside her, the only thing on her mind. He thought of it again—no condom—and the distance between sanity and orgasm evaporated. The room melted away and he saw more...his house, finally cleared of his grandparents' old junk, an actual home again, with Natalie there. Natalie on the front porch with a baby on her lap. The scene made Shane's brain skip, but his body stayed steady.

He took her in with his eyes, this beautiful, smart woman who seemed to like the bull he dished out. She could keep him in check, call him on his shit, bring him to his knees with the tiniest smirk. In a quick and graceless motion, Shane flipped them over.

There was surprise in her grin. "Well well."

"Can you come this way?"

"With a little help, sure." She got her legs where she wanted them beside Shane's, lowered down an inch. "Touch my breasts," she whispered.

"Yes ma'am."

Shane drove his own pleasure to the back of his mind and simply watched hers grow and deepen. Then another taste of that fantasy flickered across his brain—the image of her angling her hips back, sliding him out, stripping the condom away. Shane bucked with excitement.

"What're you thinking about?" Natalie murmured, sounding distant.

"Just how good you fucking feel."

"I'm so close."

Shane intensified the teasing of his fingertips, met her body's motions with his own thrusts. "Come on."

She lost it, took his cock all the way inside as her body squeezed him tight, made him feel welcome and wanted and powerful, even on his back.

She sighed and collapsed onto his chest.

"Good." He stroked her hair as her breath slowed, waiting until she was good and relaxed before he took his turn. Good, husbandly manners.

"You now," she said against his neck.

Shane turned them onto their hips, hugging her thigh to his waist as he found a fast, hungry rhythm. "Kiss me."

She offered quick, deep tastes that mimicked the urgency of his thrusts.

Again, that guilty thought of coming inside her, bare. Shane lost control and hammered his way home. He grabbed her ass and pulled her as hard against him as he could, buried himself deep and hoped to die there.

As sanity returned, the fantasy faded. Shane watched her face as she grew sleepy against him. He stroked her cheek. The mother of his children...? She'd told him that wasn't in their cards in no uncertain terms, and it was a mild relief to find the idea lost

potency in the wake of the sex, a taboo fading along with Shane's lust. His heart sank to realize the impulse had been fleeting, a product of the evening's warm atmosphere. Shane saw only her now, only Natalie. Perhaps not the woman he'd spend forever with, but a damn great lover. An even better friend.

A good woman who deserved a lot better than half a man.

Chapter Six

Shane awoke to utter confusion—Gabriel’s body warm but too soft, hair too long, tattoos gone. He jerked to full consciousness, realizing who he had his arms wrapped around.

The mix-up terrified him for a few seconds then he let it go. He’d been with the man for ages. Had to only be natural his body might still expect to find him there.

He squeezed Natalie tighter, trying to recapture what he’d felt with her last night. Some comfort came, along with a shadow of disappointment to remember how his picket-fence-family fantasy had fallen apart as soon as the lust had ebbed. *Like a Christmas tree*, he thought. A pretty idol for its time, but once the season was over, just a sad, brittle symbol of passing wishes. He sighed into her hair and felt her stir. The alarm clock beeped seconds later and Shane faked sleep, let her warm body go to begin its morning.

The day felt different. Calmer. Still melancholy, but not as dismal as the first few. Shane took a long shower after Natalie left, made himself an entire pot of coffee and tackled a dozen more items on his home improvement list. He was running out of projects and wondered if maybe he’d offer his services to the landlady upstairs. Keeping busy felt like the only thing anchoring him to solid ground.

After lunch, Natalie called to ask if he’d meet her downtown for dinner, then drinks. Alicia and Dan joined them at the restaurant, and as much as Shane genuinely liked them, the weird magic of the first meeting was gone. As much as Shane genuinely liked *Natalie*, he couldn’t look at this happy couple and honestly see it as a life he’d truly want. A fluke fantasy for one night, but who was he kidding? He’d been wrecked by his ex-lover, and Natalie deserved way better than a man who’d surely grow bored

or resentful when she couldn't match the attraction he'd found with Gabriel. He just hoped he'd find a woman who could, someday.

Alicia and Dan left early and Shane and Natalie finished their drinks before bundling up for the short trip to the next destination.

"This ain't the same place we went to when you made me meet what's-his-name, is it?" Shane asked as he held the door open for her.

"I didn't *make* you meet anybody," Natalie countered. "And no, it's not. That other place is a bit too slick for me. Tonight I just want to drink a beer, shoot the shit with you, maybe play some darts or pool."

"Sounds good."

"This place is way more laid-back...it's where I learned to drink, back in nursing school. Probably more your speed too."

Shane unlocked her door. "Shadier the better."

"Well this'll be just perfect then." She cranked the heater up and pointed Shane in the right direction. "Thanks for driving. I know the bartender and a bunch of the regulars...it'll be nice to accept the free drink offers for a change."

"Bet you get lots of those."

She smirked and flipped her long hair out from under her scarf. "I do all right."

"I'm sure you do."

"Thanks." They stopped at a red light and she turned to him. "But you and I... Are we like, together, for as long as you're in town? Should I not flirt with anybody else in front of you?"

The question left Shane feeling shifty. They might not be destined for a house full of babies and moonbeams, but seeing her flirt with other guys would burn. Still, the answer he chose felt right, in light of how clear she'd made her strings-free intentions. "You flirt with whoever you like. Just remember who's takin' you home."

"Will do."

"I was thinkin'," Shane said as the light turned green.

"About what?"

"About gettin' a tattoo while I'm here."

"Oh yeah? What of, do you think? Left at this next sign."

"My mom's name. And my aunt's and my grandma's. On my shoulder, maybe?"

"I think that's a very nice idea," she said. "You'll have to explain to any girls you meet that it's not a roster of your finest conquests, but I think it's cool. I approve."

"Good. I always wanted one, but I couldn't think of something I'd *keep* wanting year after year. But those women, they're all gone now, but how I feel about them won't ever change."

"Very logical. And sweet."

"Yeah. Like a tribute. Anyhow, I might go out and set up an appointment this week. Little souvenir of my trip north."

Natalie laughed softly. "The claw marks I left on your back aren't enough? Need something a bit more permanent?"

Shane grinned at her then let the conversation fade to comfortable silence as he drove them to the bar. The word "permanent" lingered in his mind. Was he giving up too quick on the idea of him and Natalie as something real? Would she even want that from him someday? He wasn't sure...but he wasn't sure either if he'd ever find a woman back in Louisiana who understood him as well as she did. In fact, he doubted it mightily.

Shane parked the truck in the bar's front lot, already liking the look of this place. It was no Shivarree, but it'd do. No frills, and no gigantic TV screens glowing from within. No fancy cars in the lot, just cheap sedans and old salt-chewed trucks. Shane nodded to a couple of hypothermic smokers as he trotted up to hold the door for Natalie.

"Thank you kindly."

He followed her inside, relaxing instantly. It wasn't quite a shithole but it was definitely a dive. And a popular one, relatively bustling for a frigid Tuesday night. Living in Rochester must drive folks to drink, Shane decided.

"This okay?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Perfect. What're you havin'?"

"Oooh." They stopped at the bar and she eyed the taps. "Black and tan, please."

"You got it."

The thirty-something bartender wandered over and he and Natalie exchanged a pair of warm greetings. He went to pour their beers and she turned to Shane. "Ray's been my bartender since I was like nineteen and 'acquired' Alicia's driving license." She made quotes with her fingers.

Ray turned. "What was that?"

"Nothing."

Shane eyed the guy, thinking of his staff back home. It took a lot to keep employees in one place that long, and Shane figured he himself must be an okay boss if his two favorite bartenders were still with him after two years. No signs of leaving, either. Zach knew Shane was grooming him as a manager and Jeanne had just settled down close by with her new boyfriend. Shane hoped they'd both stick around as long as the veteran behind this bar. After all, they were the closest thing to family he had these days. The thought warmed him even as he missed his home with a potent pang.

The barman returned with their glasses, told Natalie the first round was on the house.

"Well, thanks very much. Are there any decent darts back there?" she asked.

He dug around beneath the register and came out with a small basket. Natalie fished for the three with the least dull tips and led Shane to the back to a small table closest to the old board.

They nursed their beers, played game after lazy game. Both were decent at darts, though the two times a local cut in to challenge the winner, Shane and Natalie got trounced. Didn't matter. Shane felt happy. Buzzed and relaxed and normal. Not like a man with a debilitating condition for a change. This was what he felt last night at Alicia's place too. Some feeling like family, if not quite. But maybe close enough.

After a couple of hours they took a break from the game to sit and sip their third beers. Light snow was falling outside yet again, but it looked pretty now. Shane stared at Natalie and the dartboard behind her under its little spotlight, trying to memorize the moment. Trying to decide if this could ever be enough for him.

Natalie cocked her head, squinted.

"What?"

Her brows shot up, eyes trained over Shane's shoulder, toward the front of the bar. "Oh my God. Shane, turn around."

"Is it your ex?"

"No. It's yours."

The blood froze in his veins. Shane turned and the sight that greeted him was like a kick in the teeth. They spotted each other at the same moment and Gabriel stopped in his tracks. He looked the same but different—same white collared shirt but rumpled now beneath his old tweed jacket, same ancient hat but with snow dusting the felt brim. Same dark eyes, except now the warm mischief Shane was used to seeing in them was gone, replaced with a stony blankness.

Gabriel removed his hat, whapped the snow off against his hip and put it back atop his messy black hair. He licked his lips and threaded through the small crowd toward Shane, his battered suitcase clutched in a gloved hand. As always, he looked like a man who'd strode straight out of a different century.

Shane's heart hammered. He made it to his feet to face this head-on, determined to appear cold and resolute, stick to his guns. Then a realization slapped him.

He came after me.

Gabriel stopped a few feet away and he looked damn tired, bags under his eyes and even more dark stubble than normal.

Shane heard a stool squeak and then Natalie was at his side. "Hi, Gabriel."

He gave her a glance and a curt nod and looked back to Shane. He set his suitcase beside the wall then peeled his gloves off and shoved them in his pants pocket. He stepped back toward Shane, ran his hands over his lapels – then lunged.

Shane heard Natalie shout at the same moment a fist connected with his chin. He staggered a step but didn't fall, straightening after a pause and putting his hands up on pure instinct. He didn't hit back – didn't have to. Natalie had grabbed one of Gabriel's arms and a nearby man had the other.

"Take it outside!" the bartender shouted. "Take it outside or I call the cops."

Shane dropped his hands. Another staffer, a big, bald, meaty specimen, came over from his post beside the door and took over for Natalie and the patron, grabbing Gabriel by the arm and tugging him toward the exit. Gabriel held his ground a moment, still staring Shane down, then gave in and let himself be led away. Shane followed.

"Go home and sleep it off," the bouncer said as he pushed Gabriel out the door and into the icy air. He turned and spotted Shane. "Oh. Fine. Finish this however you want but do it quick or do it someplace else. If you're still fighting in two minutes I'll call the police." He gave them each a look, a ref leaving a pair of boxers to their own devices.

Shane waited until the door closed again, relieved the smokers were all back inside. "You come to fight?" His breath rose like fog between them.

Gabriel's tongue flirted with his lip, but not in the way Shane was used to. He looked as though he were tasting invisible blood. "I came to hurt you."

"Oh yeah?" It was a stupid reply, but the only words Shane could find to say. "How come?"

Black eyebrows rose and Gabriel blinked, incredulous. "How come?"

"Why're you here?"

"You mean how come I took six buses in the las' three days and spent another bummin' rides all over this fuckin' frozen wasteland looking for your fuckin' truck?"

Shane had never heard Gabriel talk this way before—aggressive and graceless and agitated. He didn't get agitated—he got what he wanted. Well, until that phone call, Shane supposed.

"I didn't ask you to come up here," Shane said evenly.

"You di'n give me no choice, neither. What I was supposed to do, Shane? Shrug and move on?"

"Somethin' like that." Shane narrowed his eyes, confused. "You here for a temper tantrum or some kind of jilted lover's revenge?"

Gabriel crossed his arms over his chest just as Shane felt the cold himself.

"I came 'cause you been the center of my world for the pas' year, then you tell me over the fuckin' phone you're done with me," Gabriel said. "I came to make you look me in the eye and tell me why."

The cold air breached Shane's sweater, made his knuckles ache and his lips sting. "Fucking freezing out here," he mumbled, eyes on the parked cars.

"Tell me why."

"Jesus... Fine. But in my truck."

Shane heard Gabriel's footsteps behind him as he strode to where he'd parked and unlocked the driver's side. He leaned over and tugged the lock on the passenger door, started the engine and kept it in neutral. Gabriel took a seat and Shane nearly laughed—a year they'd been together and he'd never seen this man in a vehicle before.

"Tell me why," Gabriel repeated.

Shane addressed the steering wheel. "I already told you. I got to move on. I might want a family or something someday. You...you're a distraction."

"A distraction."

Shane cranked the heater up as far as it would go, though he knew it wouldn't take the icy edge off his lover's voice. "Yeah."

"You make me sound pretty inconsequential, Shane."

Inconsequential. Easily the longest word he'd ever heard this man utter. He opened his mouth but Gabriel went on.

"Sound like I'm jus' your bad habit, the way you talk about it."

"That's the long and short of it."

A dead laugh.

"What you and me were," Shane said, "it was pure pleasure. I won't deny that. No woman's ever got me hooked like you did. But it *is* like a habit with you...like the best drug imaginable, but it's keeping me from what's real. You and me can do what we have been for another ten years, but I ain't willin' to wake up and be forty-five with no family life in sight, nothing to show for the past decade but a bunch of hot fucking sex."

"You think we're friends, Shane?"

The question hit him hard. He didn't have an answer. Sometimes, on rare, sober nights, he did feel that way. When he was camped out at the kitchen table with his laptop, balancing the bar's books or reading up on something for the shop, Gabriel across the room on the couch, picking his way through some new song or other on his mandolin... Yeah, those nights he felt something else. Companionship. Easiness. Sometimes when they were in public, nursing drinks downstairs at the bar, it felt like what Shane wanted people to think it was—friendship.

"Shane?" His voice was softer now.

"I dunno. Maybe."

"Tha's what it is for me," Gabriel said. "Nothin' else would have kept me with the same man for a whole year. You know I ain' faithful, not with anybody but you at least. You make it easy."

Shane laughed, cold and mean. "Faithful. You're fucking hilarious, boy."

"That was our deal. You came up with it yourself. You give me women because you won't give me you – not in public, anyhow."

"Like you wouldn't go and do that anyway...God fucking knows how many men you've been with since we started out."

Shane could feel Gabriel staring at him but refused to turn and meet his eyes. He took a deep breath, registered the faint, nostalgic scent of clove cigarettes, as undivorceable from his memories of his mother as her eye color or voice. He shoved the thought aside. "Men who smoke, by the smell of it."

"That's me, actually. Congratulations, you drove me to a relapse."

Shane winced at the word, not sure how close he might be to one of those himself.

"You ain't the victim you think you are, Shane. Not only that, you're a fuckin' coward. You blame me for what we got together, what you say I *make* you feel, like you don't have no ownership or control of it. Fuck you. I never put a gun to your head and forced you to fuck my ass every goddamn night for the past year."

On instinct, Shane scanned the parking lot for witnesses.

"I gave you everythin' you wanted," Gabriel said, "even agreed to your little rules about who gets to know, let you think you was the one bein' wronged when I wanted to go with women once in a while. When you wouldn't even acknowledge what we were to anyone? When you were single as far as the rest of the world was allowed to know?"

"I let you cheat," Shane said.

Gabriel touched his chin and grinned. "Yeah, thanks so fucking much. So generous, you are, giving me some freedom in the relationship you refused to admit we had. That's so like you – dishing out rules for the game you won't even stoop to play."

For a minute or more, silence reigned. Between the shushing sounds of cars passing on the main road, Shane listened to their breaths, inhalations growing deeper and slower until the hum of the heater drowned them out. Weariness overtook him and he gave in, looked at Gabriel's face. The most beautiful wreck he'd ever seen – and Shane

had done this to him. Shane had driven him to come here, to come after him. The thought made his sinuses feel gluey. He cleared his throat.

"What d'you want?" Gabriel asked. "What you need that I ain' willin' to give you?"

"Family, I guess. The option for it."

"Kids?"

Shane pondered it. It wasn't kids, not quite. As hot as that idea had gotten him with Natalie in bed, he wasn't entirely sure he wanted children, specifically. "I dunno...just something real. Something permanent and real to come home to, to be a man for."

"And what was I, Shane? Your whore?"

He flinched. "No... You were like...like a year of one-night stands, I guess."

Another empty laugh. "Right. Well then, fuck you. Glad I wasted my time comin' to find you."

Gabriel pushed his door open but Shane grabbed his arm and held him there. Just that bit of contact, Shane's aggressive hand on Gabriel's body, lit him up, just as it always had.

"This is so fuckin' like you," Gabriel said. "Treat me like trash then throw a tantrum when I decide to leave."

"Close the door."

"Lemme go."

"Close the fucking door," Shane repeated, voice raised.

Gabriel's nostrils flared but he obeyed. The cold air hovered between them and Shane released his arm. He wasn't sure what he wanted, or why he'd kept him here.

"You're a coward," Gabriel finally murmured.

Shane opened his mouth, closed it again, cutting off whatever comeback his brain had readily stocked. He took a long, deep breath. "I know."

"You're a coward, and a hypocrite, and I been a fool to stay with you as long as I did," Gabriel said.

Shane shut his eyes.

"But I can't help it," Gabriel muttered. "I always been the least faithful person I know, but with you, it's like I gotta remind myself to stray, so I don't feel like your sucker."

Shane looked up, not sure what to say. Then Natalie emerged from the bar holding his jacket and Gabriel's suitcase, stopping just outside the door and looking in their direction. "Hang on," he said to Gabriel. "Don't go nowhere."

Shane left the truck idling and jogged to Natalie.

"Is everything okay?" She passed him his coat and the case and rubbed her arms. "You've been out here awhile."

"Everything's...weird. I dunno."

"Why don't you guys go back to my place? Ray lives like five blocks from me. I can get a lift home at closing time."

"No, you don't have to do that."

"You two probably need time to talk. That'd give you a couple hours."

"I can't leave you here—"

"It's not an offer, Shane. Now go. See you at home."

He sighed. Natalie clapped him curtly on the shoulder and went back inside.

Shane stared at the suitcase in his hand for a moment then walked to the truck. He put Gabriel's bag in the bed and pulled his jacket on, got in the driver's seat and buckled up. "You too," he said to Gabriel. "This region's a fucking death trap."

He waited for Gabriel's obedient click then drove. Not a word was spoken between them on the way back to Natalie's. As they entered the house, Gabriel looked around, seeming to avoid Shane's face. He set his suitcase by the door and toed his shoes off, more to be polite than to get comfortable, Shane guessed.

"You want a drink?"

Gabriel shook his head. Shane realized he didn't really want one either. Drinking had only ever muddled his grasp of what they were to each other. He cleared his throat. "She'll be back in a couple hours. She wants us to talk or whatever."

"You got anythin' you wan' to say to me?" Gabriel asked, finally meeting Shane's eyes with his black ones. His tone was stiff and challenging.

"Beats the fuck out of me." Shane left him to head to the hearth, getting a fire going, another couple minutes' chance to avoid this conversation.

"This what you two been doin' since you left?" Gabriel asked, and Shane turned. "Cozy little visit while you leave me back there, no idea where you got to?"

"Don't you even start actin' angry about that. How many nights've you disappeared on me to shack up who knows where? Don't pretend like you're allowed to get jealous. And over a woman *you* fucking invited to come between us in the first place."

"I get jealous if I wan' to," Gabriel said quietly.

"Didn't know you were capable of it. Bravo."

"You know who I'm really jealous of, Shane? Each and every damn day?"

Shane shook his head.

Gabriel took a seat on Natalie's futon, clasping his hands between his knees and staring Shane square in the face. "Everyone. Zach and Jeanne. All your customers and your pals from the garage, every fuckin' delivery person who comes through that door. Everyone you joke around with, who you barely know, when you won't even look me in the eyes when we got our clothes on."

Shane's head felt fuzzy and floaty. He'd wanted this forever, to hear Gabriel tell him he was special and different. Worth being faithful to. Now those words had come but Shane didn't feel relief or triumph, just scared. Gabriel was offering everything Shane wanted and he seemed sincere...and that meant the man was right. It was down

to Shane to be brave, if he wanted this as much as he and Gabriel and Natalie all goddamn well knew he did.

The step was too big though. Disbelief was easier. He walked to the couch and took a seat, leaving a couple of feet between them.

"You sure you ain't just pissed to be the one who gets left for a change?" he asked his knees. He glanced at his lover's tired face.

Gabriel blinked at him. "You think I don't know what it feels like to get left? I got left my whole childhood. Why you think I'm so good at makin' myself a guest? Why you think I need to be wanted so fuckin' bad?"

Shane shifted his attention to Gabriel's hands.

"You still want me, Shane?"

He took a deep breath and met those black eyes. "'Course I do."

"Jus' my body?"

Shane shook his head.

"Say my name."

A chill washed over Shane. He never said Gabriel's name to his face, not when they were alone—a rare utterance to get his attention down in the bar, maybe, but even those made Shane nervous. For a year the man had been playing three or more nights a week at the club and crashing in the apartment upstairs, and more often than not, Shane still referred to him as "the mandolin player" to his staff. He swallowed the lump forming in his throat, took another almighty breath.

"Gabriel." The seconds before it left his lips were terrifying, the moments after like a gasp of air after a brush with drowning.

"I been with you for months now, Shane. You know the longest I been with anybody else, romance-wise?"

Shane shook his head.

"Maybe three nights."

Shane laughed, a joyless, sad huff of breath. He wanted so badly to believe what he was being told. He wanted to believe he was something special to this man, more than another weak and willing body in a long line of Gabriel's spellbound admirers.

"I don't know what to tell you," Shane admitted.

"Tell me you wan' me."

He mustered the courage to meet Gabriel's eyes as he muttered, "You know I do."

"You wan' me enough to make it public?"

Fuck, that was the hardest question Shane could conceive of...lose customers, maybe lose staff, lose thirty-six years' worth of his own identity. And if he and Gabriel went public but didn't stay together, and Shane woke up with an actual wife and family in ten years, what shit would that decision put his kids through? Did that kind of scandal have an expiration date once the affair ended?

"You don' even have to admit it to anyone out loud, Shane...but I want people to know. I want them to know we're together, even if it's jus' rumors."

Shane looked back at his knees.

"Deny it all you wan' in words, but I need you to treat me like your lover in the way you talk to me. And touch me. How you are with me when there's other people around. I can' stand how cold you are to me in that bar. It fuckin' hurts."

"I'm scared of that."

"What you think you gon' lose?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe business, or people's respect. Maybe my own damn understanding of who I even am."

"Well tha's the chance you take. You figure out what hurts more, losin' that or losin' me. An' when you figure that out, you tell me." Gabriel stood but Shane grabbed his wrist and pulled him back down. Their eyes locked for a long moment, Gabriel's full of heat and melancholy, exhaustion and hunger.

Shane didn't know his answer, but it was impossible to resist their connection, not with this man's body so close, so familiar and warm, so perfect at giving Shane's what it wanted. So exactly the right fit. And not just his body. Gabriel. All of him.

"C'mere," Shane said.

He'd said it a hundred times in the last year and Gabriel knew what it meant. He swung a leg over Shane's lap, straddled his thighs. Here was where the groping usually began, frantic and rough, but tonight was different. Gabriel rested his forearms on Shane's shoulders; rested his chin at Shane's temple. Shane breathed him in, lovesick. Homesick.

His body had darker agendas but his heart didn't want to be cast aside, drowned out by the lust he always found between them. Shane settled for the middle ground. He put his mouth to Gabriel's neck, took in his scent, kissed his skin. He'd done dozens of sinful acts with this man, but this one, Shane's lips on his throat, was the one guaranteed to make Gabriel lose his mind. Shane kissed his way up his lover's jugular, light sweeps of his lips, a faint scrape of teeth, a tease of tongue. Gabriel pressed his cock to Shane's belly, already hard behind his pants. His mind was clearly on sex, but Shane's was still mired in emotion. He surveyed this familiar, contentious territory with his hands, held Gabriel's ass, squeezed his thighs, rubbed possessive fingertips up his spine.

"You miss me?" Gabriel whispered.

"Yeah."

"Not half as much as I missed you."

Shane doubted that. He didn't think anybody could feel worse or emptier than he had this past week without taking their own life. His heart ached even now, even with the object of his restless nights held tight against his body. He ached from knowing that as perfect as this moment felt, it wouldn't last. Any resolution they might find for the next night or month or ten years, it was just time Shane would lose, and later mourn once the inevitable caught up with him. He could choose Gabriel over a family for a

while, maybe a long while, but he couldn't go to his grave with nothing to show for himself but years of mind-blowing sex, no lasting investment of his heart and energy.

His kisses grew sporadic and distracted and he felt Gabriel's heat cooling right along with his own.

"What you thinkin' 'bout, Shane?" That fucking voice, right in his ear.

"I'm thinkin' about us. How long this'll go on before we have to give it up and face reality."

"This is reality, Shane. It's my reality, anyway... What's it to you?"

Shane swallowed. "This is...this is perfection. But it's all just play. We're physical."

"We're friends."

Shane leaned his head back to meet those black eyes. "Are we?"

"There's no one I'd rather spend time with."

What about all those nights you go missing? "I dunno what we are, I guess."

"You think this is a game to me? That I spent a whole year of my life playin' with you?"

"Feels that way, sometimes."

Gabriel's dark eyes jumped between Shane's. "Sometimes with you...it feels like torture. I feel like I'm givin' you everythin' I got and you're just tossin' it away."

Shane swallowed. "I know that feelin'."

Gabriel's gaze dipped to Shane's chest before returning to hold him captive. "You love me?"

The question eradicated the wall that kept them separated, dissolved their clothes and mutual anger and left Shane feeling as though he were slipping into a shared skin with this man...this man he'd known intimately for months but still considered a stranger sometimes. "I guess I don't know what this is."

Gabriel's lips twitched. "I love *you*, you know."

Shane's heart quickened. "Do you?"

“Course I do. I’m here. I been with you a year.”

“Not every night.”

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed. “I got pride. If I came to you every night, accepted all your cowardly rules and got nothin’ back but sex and a place to sleep... I’m not your toy. I can’ be jus’ yours until you’re willing to admit you’re mine. But tha’s jus’ my body, Shane. This,” he touched a hand to his chest, “this been yours for months.”

Shane fumbled with the top buttons of Gabriel’s shirt, spread his collar and stared at the little band of sheet music tattooed on his chest. Shane’s music. His notes were one set among dozens, perhaps a hundred snatches of songs belonging to any number of people Gabriel had known. Still, there he was. Indelible.

Gabriel dragged his short nails across Shane’s scalp. “You got any clue how long a year is to me, bein’ with one person? It’s you who been breakin’ my heart, keepin’ us a secret.”

“You and me,” Shane began. He mulled the words over in the head and let Gabriel’s shirt go. “I might want a family someday. I can’t have that, and have you. I need to find somebody like Natalie, somebody who can offer that.”

“You willin’ to give me up for the rest of your life?”

Shane shrugged, exhausted. “I don’t have a choice. Or I do. It’s hot sex versus a real family, kids maybe. And no offense to you, really, but I’m not choosing hot sex. I can learn to live with missing that, but not with missing out on a family.”

“So don’ choose, Shane. Why choose?”

“I have to.”

Gabriel put his hands on Shane’s shoulders. “So choose both. We find someone like Natalie. Someone who’ll let you have both. Who’ll give you both. Who’ll be a part of both.”

Shane swallowed, unsure of what was being suggested. “You can’t raise a child with three people all shacking up together.”

"How come?"

"It's fucked."

"Making a choice to be miserable when you could be choosin' to have it all is fucked. People do this, Shane."

"Natalie tried to sell me the same bull... I can't spend the whole rest of my life sneaking around to make that happen."

"Then don' sneak. There's a difference between havin' a dirty little secret and havin' an arrangement. Bein' discreet ain't the same as hidin' some dark, unforgivable sin tha's chewin' away on your insides." He slid a hand between them and rubbed the spot over Shane's heart. "You're lookin' for ways that this can' work. Spend some time wonderin' if maybe it could."

Shane stared at a point on the wall past Gabriel's shoulder, lost.

"You're not your momma," Gabriel said. "You don' have to settle for bein' miserable. And anyhow, you turned into your daddy instead, in the end."

Shane's muscles stiffened. "'Scuse me?"

"You choose to be the asshole at every turn. And to keep your mind closed up." He tapped Shane's temple. "You always sayin' how much you hate him, how you'll never end up like him...but you are. Give yourself another ten years of wantin' two things but only givin' yourself one, or makin' excuses so you don't have to face up to the scary parts of either. Ten more years and you'll be one of them. A mean old drunk or a miserable, done-wrong victim."

"Don't you fuckin' talk like you know either of my parents."

"I do, Shane. 'Cause I know you, and you told me plenty in the las' year."

As much as Shane wanted to push him away, off his lap and onto floor, all the way back to Louisiana or Cuba and out of his life and his memory, he couldn't. He needed Gabriel as he needed air. Just yesterday he'd thought of this as an addiction, something he wanted fiercely despite the damage it did to him. Now he knew better.

He needed this man for nourishment, like light and water and food and sleep, everything that made him whole. Made him thrive. Maybe it was time to admit defeat, give up on the traditional family excuse for holding back and see where he and Gabriel might go, if he'd let this become reality.

"If you and me were...official or whatever," he mumbled. "What would change?"

"Like if you admitted to people what we are to each other?"

Shane shivered at the thought. Never in the last twelve months had he wondered if he was gay. One singular man on the face of the Earth got him hot, hotter than any woman he'd ever known, but still, it was a fluke. He'd never be able to explain that to anybody, not his staff or his patrons or his partners at the auto shop. He loved where he'd grown up, but it wasn't exactly San Francisco. He had no doubt he'd lose customers if it got out he was sleeping with a guy. His businesses could get vandalized and his partners in the shop might be spooked...

But fuck them. He knew now, he couldn't live without this. He'd pay for it in lost income and lost friends and maybe a few fistfights and property damage, but the price was negligible if it meant this man was his. "Yeah," he muttered. "If I told people."

"Then I'd be yours, Shane. Jus' yours. Nobody else's unless you invite them yourself."

"You capable of that?"

Gabriel smiled grimly, a glimmer of injury in his narrowed eyes. "Yeah, I am. You capable of givin' your identity up in exchange for it?"

Shane blew out a loaded breath and nodded slowly.

"You capable of givin' up your dreams for a regular family?"

"I think so. Think I have to."

"You still the only one who thinks that, but okay. If tha's what you want, I won't pretend I don't want it too." He leaned in, kissed Shane soft and deep. As he pulled

away Shane wasn't sure if this face was the most familiar in the entire world or that of a complete stranger.

"I love you, Shane."

There it was, that sting in his sinuses again, heat flooding his throat and cheeks. He wouldn't cry. As scared and happy and confused as he felt, he wouldn't cry. He'd escape into sex again, as they'd done three hundred times before.

Shane drew his tongue down Gabriel's neck then blew cool breath against his damp skin. The contact made him high too—all the chemicals of attraction heating him up from the inside and taking over his hands. He got Gabriel's top layers stripped off as the same was done to him. As always, their touching was part tender and part mean, greedy hands fighting for control of the pleasure-giving. Natalie's futon creaked under their weight.

They kissed for a long minute, hands drifting lower as tongues delved deep. Shane gasped as Gabriel's hand closed over his stiff cock behind his jeans. He never made moves like this without Shane's permission, but it was okay. It was better than okay. Shane didn't need to play the role of the bossy asshole tonight. He didn't want to. He wanted them on par for a change, at least to start. Leaning back against the cushions and armrest, he tugged Gabriel forward, inviting him closer. A bit of the usual, Gabriel in his lap, a bit of the unusual, Shane feeling as if he were on the bottom, if barely. The weight of this other man felt right, felt sinful. Shane held his hips and pulled him closer still, bringing their two hard cocks together. The low moan he earned stole the air from his lungs.

Gabriel moaned again. These familiar sounds and sensations were more thrilling to Shane than any exciting trick a new lover might share. He moved his hand to Gabriel's ass, kneading until his breaths dripped with longing.

"That's my boy."

"I missed you, Shane."

Shane felt heat wash over him, along with the persona he wore most nights with Gabriel, the mean roughneck. He growled an order into his lover's ear. "Tell me what you missed."

"Your cock."

"How d'you want it tonight?"

Gabriel's hips pressed harder, rubbed his erection against Shane's. "Wanna kiss you while we play with each other."

Shane hadn't known it until he heard the words in that scratchy, dark voice, but he wanted that too. No top or bottom, owner and plaything. Just two desperate bodies and mouths, two men giving and receiving equal pleasure, all that eye contact Shane sometimes shied from. But not just now. Right now he'd keep his own eyes wide open, not miss out on a second of the sins they committed together.

He took Gabriel's mouth, deep and rough, his own jaw tender from the punch he'd more than earned. Shane moaned openly to let this man know exactly what he did to him. He let Gabriel kiss back, accepted his tongue's explorations and traded the control back and forth.

"I don't know how you make me this way," Shane mumbled. "I never wanted a man before I met you."

"And now?"

Shane laughed, exasperated. "It's still just you."

"An' why me, Shane?"

He considered the question, and memories—dirty and tender alike—flashed through his skull. It all came down to those eyes, that smile. "I like the way you look at me."

"How do I look at you?"

Shane licked his lips, saw the very gleam right there, inches away. "Like I'm the biggest man in the world."

"You are, to me."

Shane shoved a hand between them to wrestle with the stupid, complicated clasp of Gabriel's dress pants. He tugged the zipper down, rubbing his knuckles against the hard ridge that greeted him through Gabriel's shorts.

"Yeah."

"Take me out," Shane said.

Gabriel shifted, used both hands to open Shane's jeans and tug them down an inch. Shane swore as his underwear was peeled down, his hard cock exposed to the cool, dry air. That familiar, calloused palm closed around him lightly. Gabriel surveyed him with slow, reverent strokes, seeming to weigh him.

"I've missed you," he whispered.

Shane's habit was to issue orders, make this man suck him or stroke him, make him strip and bend over and beg. But not tonight...not after all that'd been said. Shane leaned into Gabriel's shoulder and watched their hands on each other's cocks, listened to his lover's moans.

"I missed you too," Shane muttered. He tightened his grip just to hear Gabriel's breath hitch. Their knuckles bumped as they jerked each other, cock heads touching on the odd stroke. Shane surrendered to a body-racking groan of his own as he gave in and gave up, wallowed in how unbelievable it felt, just being close to this man. He mashed his cheek against Gabriel's and drank in the scent of his breath and skin and hair.

"Fuck."

"Make it tight," Gabriel murmured.

Shane obeyed, fucked Gabriel's cock with a mean fist, didn't give a shit what off-limits fantasy might be running through the man's head.

"Yeah."

"Love when I make you pant, boy."

"Love when I make you mean," Gabriel whispered.

Shane loved that too. He'd kept them equal for long enough now – time to revert to what they did best. Shane released Gabriel's cock and slid his hand down the back of his pants and shorts. He found his asshole, circled it with his middle finger. The groan Gabriel unleashed was wild and disbelieving.

"I need you," Shane said, more threat than plea.

In a flash Gabriel got onto his hands and knees on the cushions.

"No," Shane said. He tugged at Gabriel's hip. "Face-to-face." Fucking this way was rare for them, precisely for the reason Shane needed it now. It made him feel vulnerable, Gabriel watching him and seeing how helpless he must look. Right now he wanted that feeling, and moreover he owed it to the man.

Gabriel turned over and Shane yanked his pants and shorts off, then stood and kicked away his own jeans and underwear. He gazed down at this man in the flickering firelight, skin looking golden, tattooed notes seeming to dance. For a minute or more they watched each other stroke, each second of waiting sharpening the urge. Then an annoying bit of practicality drew Shane out of the trance.

"Hang on."

He headed to Natalie's room for the condoms and lube, praying the reminder that he'd played around in Gabriel's absence wouldn't cool the man's mood. But when he got back to the couch all he saw was desire in those eyes, thirst with a touch of fear. Shane rolled the rubber down his cock.

"I missed seein' that look on your face," Gabriel said.

"I'll let you see a lot tonight," Shane promised. He stepped to the couch, bracing one knee on the cushions between Gabriel's thighs, other foot on the floor. He handed the bottle over. "Get yourself ready."

Shane knew he must look insane now, nostrils flared and lips parted as he watched Gabriel prep himself. He stared at the fingers working their way inside, slow and practiced. "Now me."

Gabriel slicked lube down the length of Shane's cock, the touch worshipful. Shane grabbed the bottle, snapped it closed and tossed it to the floor. Gabriel brought his knees up as Shane leaned in close, angling himself home. He eased in slowly, sinking to the base after a dozen measured thrusts. He held there as they both remembered to breathe.

"Shane."

That little syllable—a deliberate match flicked into a puddle of gasoline. Shane lowered his face to Gabriel's neck as his hips began to pump.

Fuck, he'd been without this only a week and he'd missed it as though it'd been months. Shane liked rough sex, fast and mean, faster and meaner than most women wanted. Not Gabriel. As rough as Shane liked it, Gabriel had him beat. His kinks and fantasies scared Shane sometimes. His honesty scared Shane too. Gabriel wasn't afraid to voice what he wanted, no matter how utterly fucked it was, no matter if he knew he'd never get it. Gabriel's sexuality was like a playground, everything open and on offer, ready to be enjoyed. Shane's felt more like a cage, keeping things in or out, keeping him protected and keeping him prisoner at the same time. Except tonight. Tonight he'd own his desires the way he always pretended to own Gabriel's pleading body.

"Fuck. I'm so in love with you."

"Then show me, Shane. I know I got your body, and I got some dark, self-hatin' corners of your head. But I want it all. And I don't have this." He reached between them to rub the skin above Shane's heart again.

Shane leaned back and took hold of Gabriel's calves. He brought his own body upright, gave the man a perfect view of whatever awe or reverence or fear was plastered across his features.

"Oh, tha's what I wan'," Gabriel muttered, dark eyes darting over Shane's face and chest. He put a possessive hand to Shane's ribs, the other to his own cock.

"I can't believe what you do to me."

"Make it deep. Only you get me now, Shane. Show me how lucky we are."

Lucky. Shane pondered the word, so the opposite of how he'd always thought of their connection. He'd made it out as a curse before, but fuck, he'd been so wrong. It was a goddamn jackpot-winning lottery ticket, two mismatched strangers finding a sexual connection that hadn't faded a jot in an entire year of hysterical screwing.

He pushed in deep, reminding them both what a filthy, sinful fit they were.

"Shane."

Shane bit his tongue, on the verge of ordering him to say it again. Not tonight. "Gabriel," he muttered.

"Yeah."

"Gabriel." He said it again, and again, a dozen times until the letters blurred to a guttural moan. He watched Gabriel's fist pumping, a rhythm he knew so intimately he could track the countdown to his climax like a Swiss clock.

"Good," he murmured.

"Shane..." A few more seconds' thrusting and jerking and Gabriel fell apart. His body tensed tight around Shane's cock, back arching as the come lashed his lean stomach. Shane got lost in the firelit scene and the heat wrapped around his dick but resisted an urge to fold forward and finish this with his face buried in the cushions or Gabriel's shoulder. No. Tonight he'd watch it all and get watched in return. Tonight his fear and vulnerability would be celebrated, not hidden.

"Love you," he muttered. The pleasure spiked, yanked him toward release. "Fuck. I fucking love you."

"Shane."

"Gabriel."

Bliss.

The orgasm roared up his spine like electricity, so hot it must've left blisters. He came down from it to find his fingers dug crushingly hard into Gabriel's knees, head

flung back and lungs wrung out. Probably looked a damn mess, but that was all that mattered—he'd been seen. He'd shown his lover what the man deserved, proof of how helpless their sex made him, no power games or drunken playacting.

"Holy fuck," Shane muttered, eyes on the fire. He looked down at the man panting against Natalie's weary futon. "I fucking love you."

Chapter Seven

Natalie said good night to Ray as he dropped her at her curb. “Best bartender ever,” she reminded him with a tired, tipsy grin.

“That’s why they pay me the big bucks.”

She slammed her car door and turned toward the house, then her breath caught. She could see her two houseguests through the picture window—Shane’s possessive hands on Gabriel’s neck as they kissed deeply. She waved distractedly at the car as it drove off, wondering if Ray had spotted the scene as well. That’d be a challenge to explain next time she stopped by for a drink.

Natalie barely breathed as she mounted the steps and unlocked the front door. Excitement yanked her brain in one direction, fear another. Had Shane merely given in to the sex, or the fact that they needed each other? *Please tell me you used your heart for a change, dummy, not just your dick.*

By the time she made it into the warm kitchen, the men had assembled themselves into an imitation of good behavior. Shane was wearing a tee shirt and jeans, Gabriel just his pants. Shane had his arm draped along the back of the couch behind Gabriel’s shoulders.

Natalie waved dopily at them. “Hey.”

“Glad you got home all right,” Shane said.

She spotted the lube bottle on the floor beside the coffee table then glanced away just as quickly. “Glad to see you two haven’t killed each other.” She bit her lip, looking around at the dying fire and the *lack* of glasses or open wine bottles on the table or counter. That was a good sign. If things had gone well, Shane wouldn’t be able to blame his surrender on alcohol.

“Well, I’m wiped. And I’ve got to be up at six, so...”

"No problem," Shane said. "Sleep tight."

"Oh." She stopped in her tracks. "What a crappy hostess I'm being. I can't let two six-foot-tall houseguests sleep on my foldout."

"I wasn't exactly invited," Gabriel said with a faint smile.

"Nonsense. You guys should take my bed."

"Don't worry about it," Shane said. "I like your futon."

"You sure?"

He nodded. "Away with you."

Natalie bid them a final good night and headed for her bedroom.

* * * * *

Six a.m. arrived all too soon.

"Fuck off." Natalie slapped her alarm clock into silence and sat up, knowing she'd drop off again if she stayed horizontal. Shuffling to the bathroom, she realized she'd slept with her necklace on, its beads leaving a caterpillar-ish brand on her skin.

"Oh, very classy." She took it off, eyeing the matching burgundy bra and panties she'd picked out with Shane in mind. She shook her head at her reflection. "Nice try, Foster."

She got her hair shampooed before she was awake enough to ponder what the heck might actually be happening with Shane...

Dick or heart? Ego or instinct? If it was even his choice. Gabriel had been pissed. Pissed enough to cross six state lines just for a chance to punch him. Natalie didn't know the man well, didn't even know his last name or his age. Until last night she'd never seen him as anything but calm and in control...well, or begging. But even then he'd held total mastery over the situation.

She toweled off and got her hair dried, made up her face a bit more than usual for a workday. She wondered what her role was, now. Until the bar, she'd been Shane's safe

haven and therapist, his rebound. With Gabriel here she felt uneasy about the thing, and not in the same way she had when she'd been Gabriel's little indiscretion instead of Shane's.

Sadly, unless they were light sleepers, she might not have the relief and the luxury of getting a read on the situation until she got home from work. She'd have to call Shane on her lunch break to get an update.

But a different and more uncomfortable opportunity presented itself once she'd dressed and entered the den. Gabriel was awake, sitting on the edge of the futon with his hand on Shane's bare arm. He rose as Natalie headed for the kitchen, sauntered over and leaned his elbows on the opposite side of the counter. She had no sense how to greet him. They'd used each other's bodies in the most intense ways imaginable, yet a hug seemed somehow awkward, even obscene.

She spoke quietly, partly from nerves, partly to keep from waking Shane. "Morning. You two sleep okay?"

"Yeah, jus' fine."

"Oh good."

He held her gaze, not *quite* staring. Gabriel was a hard man to read. It was impossible to tell if those dark, weary eyes were seeing her as his rival in a love triangle, or a guest in a future threesome. If those were the only two options, Natalie knew which she'd pick...but she'd happily put aside her own selfish pleasure in deference to whatever tenuous affection the two men had discovered last night.

"You look well," he finally said.

"I am, thank you. You look..." She searched her vocabulary for a flattering alternative to —

"I been a wreck."

She smiled tightly. "Yeah. I bet. And I'm afraid you look it."

He nodded.

Natalie grabbed half a bagel from the cupboard and popped it in the toaster. "I'm not sure how it's happened," she said, turning to meet his stare, "but I've gone from being *your* other woman to Shane's. When he got here, I thought he and you were officially over already. He didn't lie to me about it, but...well, anyway. I'm sorry if I've come between you two for a second time."

"I'm not angry." Gabriel's gaze drifted over her shoulders, taking some idle inventory of her kitchen. "And I don't think you came between us. I think you're good for him. He said you been treatin' him real fine."

"I told him I didn't think he should have given up on you guys the way he did."

"Shane can't be told anythin'."

She smiled. "True. But I tried."

"Thanks. He said you met a doctor...?"

She made a guilty face. "Yeah. That didn't work out so well. Do you want anything for breakfast? I have to head out soon but I've got—"

"No. I'm good." He glanced back at Shane's sleeping form. "Right now I got everythin' I need."

* * * * *

Shane woke late—the weak northern sun was already halfway up the sky beyond the picture window, which made it at least ten. Gabriel was lying behind him, arm draped over his ribs. Shane didn't know if he was awake, but when he reached down to squeeze Gabriel's hand, it squeezed back. Shane smiled, almost pleased by the anxiety his own optimism stirred. He needed to get used to that feeling, stop letting it make his decisions for him.

He lay still for ten minutes, drifting in a thoughtful half-sleep. They'd never be a normal couple...not just because of the two-men thing, but because of Gabriel. He simply wasn't *normal*. Shane couldn't imagine what activities they might go out and partake of together like some regular twosome, and that was okay. As long as he had

that voice and warmth and welcoming body to come home to, to find comfort and excitement in, Shane would be content.

He'd never really enjoyed the dating part of dating, anyhow. With women, he'd liked the companionship, the fucking, the chance to do things for someone, practical things that held merit for Shane. He liked someone he could put an arm around down at the bar, someone he could make filthy promises to with a pointed glance. He never let himself indulge in those sorts of secret signals with Gabriel... Could he ever? He didn't need to flaunt what they were or anything, but to be able to acknowledge it. Heck, to flirt. Shane sighed.

He slipped out from Gabriel's warm hold, pulled on his jeans and tee shirt and a sweater to block the godforsaken Rochester cold. He strolled into the kitchen and turned the radio on low. He flipped the channel off of Natalie's liberal propaganda NPR nonsense and onto something with actual news and voices that didn't put Shane to sleep.

He inventoried the fridge and found he'd already cleaned her out of the good breakfast fixings. He heard a deep sigh and a groan of beleaguered springs. He looked to where Gabriel was tucking his shirt into his slacks.

"Hey."

Gabriel looked up.

"You wanna go out and find a diner?"

Gabriel blinked and it was clear he was pondering what this was as much as Shane. A date, basically. The first time Shane had invited his lover someplace aside from the bar's stage or his bed.

"Yeah. Sounds good."

Frigid or not, something about the air and the silvery winter sunshine perked Shane up. He stole a glance at Gabriel as he slid into his passenger seat. For the second time in two days, they were sharing a vehicle. The second time ever, after an entire goddamn year of the best sex of Shane's life. He always thought this man would look odd camped

out here in such a mundane and familiar place, but he'd been wrong. Just as his presence changed the atmosphere of Shane's bar, Gabriel did something to this space as well. He made places shinier. Instant Christmas.

"Like the way you look," Shane said, and started the engine.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. This truck might be my favorite thing in the whole world," he said, aiming the vehicle toward downtown. "And I like the way you look in it."

Gabriel didn't reply, just watched the streets passing by outside his window.

Shane swallowed. He was trying his damndest to make an effort, be a nice guy. To prove to both of them that last night hadn't been a momentary loss of control, but a wall falling down between them, one Shane had been fortifying diligently for the past twelve months. He guessed it'd take more than one weird compliment to demolish the thing.

Finding a diner was easier than Shane had expected. Parking was a bit more of a challenge, but after a couple blocks of brisk walking the door jingled open to envelop them in warmth and good smells. Shane followed Gabriel to the counter and took a seat on one of the red vinyl stools. They ordered coffees, a full fried breakfast for Shane and an omelet for Gabriel. They made just the barest of small talk as they drank and ate, a handful of bland comments about the meal and the city.

Shane had never put much stock in his own intuition, but he knew a few things for sure in this moment. He knew Gabriel was waiting. He was waiting to find out if last night had been yet one more instance of Shane giving in to the sex, and if his tiny gestures of affection were just that—gestures. Empty ones. He knew Gabriel was scared too. His eyes usually held Shane's like magnets, but this morning he kept them focused on the food, the windows, the other patrons. Until now it had always been Shane who'd harbored the distrust. It hurt seeing it reflected back at him now, seeing Gabriel doubting his intentions just as the man had surely hated seeing it written all over Shane's face these past twelve months.

Get your balls together and do it, he ordered himself. Shane fidgeted in his seat, folded his napkin into tidy triangles.

"Check," Gabriel said as the waitress passed them.

Fuck. Now. Do it now. To his own astonishment, Shane did.

He swiveled on his seat and leaned in, smelled the faint and pleasant scent of that familiar breath, the peculiar scent of those clothes, the scent of the skin he'd tasted so many times. He took Gabriel's hat off and set it on the counter, cupped the back of his head. As he brought his face down, Shane strained for any noises of protest he might hear from other patrons...then the moment their mouths made contact, he melted. He blocked out the rest of the universe and just felt those lips for a few seconds, lost himself to the simple, brief, closed-mouth kiss.

When he sat up straight again everything felt very...unremarkable. The diner made all its usual sounds. No jeers. So stares. No slurs or threats. But as Gabriel's lips pursed then broke into a shy smile, it all changed. The restaurant seemed suddenly vibrant and alive. Not from love, nothing so stupid and gooey as that. Adrenaline, probably. Or endorphins. Who cared? Shane grinned, knowing he'd just done the thing that scared him the most, and he'd lived to stare his lover in the face.

After a full year of grasping, paranoid cowardice, he'd finally found his manhood again, conjured it out of the most unlikely gesture imaginable.

He wrapped his palm around the back of Gabriel's neck once more, pulled him close so their foreheads touched. He said it quietly, the barest whisper against Gabriel's lips. "I love you."

A tiny laugh warmed his skin. "I know you do, Shane."

* * * * *

Shane honestly couldn't remember ever feeling so damn comfortable with himself. Not the outcome he'd expected following his first public acknowledgment of his modified heterosexuality, but no complaints. They hadn't passed the rest of the day

strolling hand-in-hand or picking out china patterns, just headed back to Natalie's and lost a couple hours to kissing.

Shane never would have guessed that exposing himself could feel so fucking perfect. His entire life he'd been fighting to keep from turning into his shithead father, thirty-six years spent trying to *not* be a certain way. And he'd pretty much failed, in the end. Until that morning. That morning Shane had sacrificed a hunk of the self-image he normally clutched so tightly, and it felt amazing, choosing to let people think whatever they damn well wanted to. Toward every person they'd passed on the sidewalk heading back to the truck he'd thought, "Fuck you," in the lightest and happiest way possible. He imagined others finding fault with him and his new philosophy on the subject. *Don't like that I'm a straight guy banging another man? Well fuck you too. Have a great day.*

Straight...he might have to amend that label. Straight with an asterisk. Or whatever. Like trying to fit in ever did anybody any good. Shane eyed Gabriel where he sat at the dining room table, flipping through a photo album of Natalie's. That man didn't fit in anyplace, but it didn't bother him a bit. Raised in a crazy city by a crazier woman. Probably had God-knew-what done to him, pretty as he was, and came out kinky on the other side, near-crazy himself. There was a lifetime's worth of details Shane still needed to learn about this man. He'd start collecting them on the drive south.

The door rattled and Natalie appeared with a bag of groceries, cheeks as pink as her hat and scarf.

"Hey, kids."

"Hey, Miss Natalie." Shane stood to take the bag from her. "How was work?"

She pulled her gloves off. "Bit hectic. How was vacation?" She looked at each of them in turn.

"Lazy," Shane said. "Our biggest accomplishment was venturing out for breakfast."

"Sounds lovely."

He nodded.

"Well, if you're looking for more excitement this evening, you'll have to find it without me, I'm afraid. I'm wiped. I need a nap, and then I'll start dinner if you two think you're sticking around."

Shane looked to Gabriel and shrugged.

"I'll cook," Gabriel said.

Shane started. He'd never seen his lover so much as boil a kettle of water.

"Oh yeah?" Natalie looked intrigued. "Cajun or Cuban?"

"I'll see what you got to work with."

"Well, I won't stop you. Help yourself to whatever. I just need to collapse for a couple hours then I'll be fresh as a daisy. Well, closer to it, anyhow."

Shane waited until Natalie used the bathroom and disappeared into her room before he went knocking.

"Come in."

He entered and closed the door behind him. "Hey."

"What's up?" She looked tired, maybe a touch nervous.

"I wanted to ask how you're doing. Like because of how we were until last night and everything. I didn't know if you felt ditched or anything..."

She smiled. "I can't pretend I won't miss borrowing your body, Shane, but I couldn't be happier that you guys are back together. Honestly. Is it going as well as it seems like it is?"

He nodded. "It's different too."

She took a seat on her bed. "How so?"

"Usually it's like I'm giving in to the sex, but now...I dunno. I'm giving in to myself or something. I just decided to not give a shit anymore, about what people think. About what *I* think."

"Good for you."

"I kissed him," Shane added. "In public."

Her eyes widened. "Really? That soon?"

"Yeah. I did it like as proof, because I don't want to lose him...but it was pretty weird. It like, freed me or whatever."

"That's great."

He nodded and took a seat beside her. "So me and him are back together. We're a couple, like I guess we always were even though I refused to admit it."

"Yeah."

"But it's still him and me. And we're still pigs."

She laughed. "Where are you going with this, Shane?"

"I don't suppose I could talk you into maybe joining us again? In bed?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "I don't know... I mean, my body would certainly like that, but if things feel cautious between you, I wouldn't want to complicate it."

"You and me have got close these last few days, right?"

"Sure."

Shane leaned in and spoke privately, as though they weren't the only ones in the room. "There's somethin' I want to happen tonight, and I need your help with it. I trust you, and I want you there with me. Woman's touch and all that bull."

"What?" she asked.

"The one filthy, scary thing left that I ain't ever done for that man."

She stared at his shoulder for a moment then her eyebrows rose. "Oh."

"What d'you say? You wanna help me finally demolish the old Shane?"

* * * * *

Shane watched Gabriel in Natalie's kitchen, those fingers so adept with an instrument looking just as talented with a knife and a shelf full of spices. It intrigued the

hell out of Shane. He'd happily learn to grocery shop if it meant he might get the odd home-cooked meal from his lover.

He turned words over and over in his head, trying to figure out how to frame his plans for the evening. When Gabriel seemed done with his marinating, Shane sidled up to him at the counter.

"So tonight," he said.

"Mmm?"

"I know today and last night...this has been all about you and me. And me being straight with you. And myself."

Gabriel washed and dried his hands then met Shane's eyes, curious.

"But I want to invite Natalie along tonight. You know, sex-wise."

"Right." So impossible to decipher, that squint.

"But it ain't about us not being enough, or me trying to hide behind a distraction or cling to my...whatever the hell my sexuality is anymore."

Gabriel's shoulders seemed to relax.

"But me and her...we're close now. She gets stuff about me that nobody else does. Not even you. And I want her there tonight, like as support."

"And she agreed already?"

Shane nodded.

Gabriel made a face, a playful frown that said he was intrigued.

"So that okay with you?"

"Sure," Gabriel said.

"Okay. Long as you don't think I'm just trying to take the edge off how intense it's been between you and me."

Gabriel grinned. "Don' think I ever heard you soun' so considerate before, Shane."

He shrugged.

"Hope it ain' permanent," Gabriel added. "I love you mean." He gave Shane's cheek a gentle slap then went to work prepping a rice dish.

Shane smirked to himself and he headed back to the couch. Good. He liked *being* mean, just as much as he liked all this newfound self-acceptance and warm-fuzzy bullshit.

He surfed channels as Gabriel puttered and Natalie napped, growing steadily more anxious as the evening settled in. In three or four hours he might be on his knees, doing that thing that scared him so much. He watched the news. In two hours, it might be happening. Natalie emerged from her room looking more rested and Gabriel slid a dish into the oven. One hour, Shane guessed. His throat tightened.

He missed his chance to find out if Gabriel cooked as well as he played music—Shane barely tasted a bite of dinner, barely heard a word the other two exchanged.

He could do this... He didn't have to like it, he just had to get through it for the sake of Gabriel's pleasure. He'd made that same plunge when he'd first dropped to his knees sucked cock, and fuck if he hadn't grown to love that. Didn't have much to do with the act itself, just the perfection of hearing and seeing Gabriel turn helpless with what Shane could do to him. He hoped tonight would be the same. More pain to endure to get the payoff, but a price he'd pony up for a chance to blow that man's mind. A chance to prove he'd finally given up protecting that last scrap of his precious hetero identity.

The sound of forks and knives and plates clinking snapped him from his thoughts and he found Natalie gathering up the dirty dishes. He muscled her out of the way to take over the cleanup. "You wanna open a bottle of wine?" he asked her.

She nodded, meeting his eyes meaningfully. "Sure."

Soon the three of them were loitering around the counter. Natalie and Gabriel were talking about plantains, Shane sipping his wine and feeling it release some of the tension in his muscles. Red wine had come to taste like sex to him after a year of mental conditioning, and tonight it seemed as dark and exotic as the places he was determined

to get taken with the help of his two lovers. The thought put him in an odd mood...seductive. That was Gabriel's department, normally, but Shane decided to explore it, the first of a few role-reversals he had planned.

He rounded the counter and took Natalie's glass, setting it aside so he could slide his hand up her arm to her neck. He paused to appreciate the difference in their heights before he leaned in and kissed her. He felt Gabriel's eyes on them, a flashback to Shane's bedroom the previous summer. Shane broke away to speak to Natalie.

"You want to get all those candles lit again?"

"Sure." She offered a mischievous smile and touched his arm on her way to her room.

Gabriel licked his lower lip. "What you got planned, Shane? We gon' give her a hell of a thank-you present for her hospitality?"

"Tonight's more about you and me."

"Oh?"

Shane stole a glance at the bedroom door. "Yeah. You'll see." He drained his glass then took an extra swig straight from the bottle. He handed it to Gabriel and watched his throat contract as he did the same, an unspoken toast to a year of fraught and filthy sexual discovery.

Shane took Gabriel by the hand and led him to Natalie's candlelit room. She smiled as they entered. "I think there's something by the couch we'll be needing," she said to Shane.

He nodded and left them to grab the lube and condoms. Setting them by the bed, he drew Gabriel close by the arms. Then Shane kissed him the way he loved to, rough and deep and pushy. He slid his hands to Gabriel's hips and tugged him closer so their cocks brushed through two pairs of pants. When he felt the tension and impatience building in his lover's touch, he let go and moved to Natalie. He kissed her lightly and put his lips to her ear.

"I'm gonna fuck you," he whispered, "then you're gonna do to me exactly what you did to him when I caught you two together. If you remember it."

"Of course I do."

Shane undressed her slowly then did the same to himself. He looked to Gabriel. "You just watch."

Gabriel nodded.

Natalie lay down in the middle of the bed and Shane followed. This alone felt a little scary—Gabriel standing with a view of Shane's naked body from above, still safe in his clothes. Then Natalie's warm hand closed around Shane's dick and the fear faded.

"Good. Make me hard."

Her strokes had him panting in a minute flat.

Shane grabbed a condom and rolled it on as Natalie slicked lube across her pussy. As he sank inside he pondered the act—penetration. As a man, he only knew what it felt like to do the fucking...cock sucking aside. But with that, he'd always been the one in charge. Tonight would be the first time he handed the top duties over, invited Gabriel to use his body the way Shane had been enjoying his for months and months. Natalie touched his face and he realized his thrusts had slowed as his nervous thoughts crept in.

"You don't have to do this," she whispered.

"I want to." He needed to. Not duty or sacrifice—something stronger. Proof, evidence that he was brave, that Gabriel was worth putting his identity and fears on the line for.

He focused on the pleasure at hand, tried to keep his mind off the vulnerability. This decision—this surrender—had taken on mythical status in his mind in the past year, always something he worried he might one night be coerced into. He took a final calming breath and looked to Gabriel. The man's gaze was on Shane's pumping hips,

patient but hungry. His eyes snapped to Shane's and stayed there until Shane turned to stare down at Natalie, praying he didn't look as scared as he felt.

"Do it," he whispered.

Her hands slid from his waist to his back, slow slow slow down to his ass. Shane adjusted, brought his body forward a bit to give her access. Small, smooth palms kneaded him, squeezed and urged in time with his thrusts. One finger ran along his crack and Shane shut his eyes tight, from nerves far more than the actual sensation. She teased his cleft, shallow tracing gestures that gave Shane time to relax and adjust.

"More?" she asked him.

He nodded, eyes still shut.

Her fingers delved deeper, parting his cheeks, the faintest graze across his asshole tensing Shane's entire body.

"Open your eyes, Shane."

He did, looked down at Natalie's face and felt so naked it terrified him.

"You tell me if you change your mind and want me to stop," she said softly.

"No. Keep going."

Shane held his breath as the pads of her fingers rubbed his entrance. Entrance, fuck—not before this moment it wasn't. The taboo was so distracting, Shane couldn't actually tell if he was enjoying this or not. His erection had waned and he wasn't sure when he'd stopped pumping her.

"Scoot forward a little more," Natalie whispered, hands going still.

Shane withdrew and moved up a couple inches, shifting his legs to straddle her hips, soft cock resting on her navel. He felt spread-open and exposed, no longer as if he were on top at all. Natalie's fingertips found his asshole again, rubbing him in a tight circle. To his left, he heard Gabriel make a noise—a shallow sigh, not quite a moan. Shane turned his head, afraid of what he might see on that gorgeous face.

What he found surprised him. Gabriel didn't look predatory or cocky or poised to pounce—he looked helpless. He looked just how he did when Shane had him bent over the arm of a couch or on his hands and knees on the carpet. Needy and excited with a streak of fear running through it.

That expression upended Shane's own fears. He didn't feel like the one about to be used, the powerless one. He felt in control, the one granting wishes and pleasure, the one holding the other under his spell. How Gabriel must feel when he had Shane hot and impatient, dying to use his lover's body. Shane realized he'd begun to move, shifting his hips faintly in time with Natalie's touch. His cock was growing stiff—not totally there yet, but on its way.

"Ready for more?" Natalie asked.

Shane looked down at her and nodded.

She reached for the lube bottle, snapped it open behind Shane's back before setting it beside them on the bed. One dry hand returned, kneading his cheek then spreading him wider. Then, two slick fingertips, cool with lube, slid across his asshole.

Shane lowered his face to her shoulder and moaned, still more fear than pleasure, though his cock didn't wilt.

She pressed her fingers harder against him, one tip teasing his entrance more explicitly, threatening. No, promising.

"Shane." Gabriel's raspy voice tightened Shane's body and relaxed it at the same time.

"Yeah?" Shane murmured.

"I can come closer?"

He swallowed, considering. "Yeah, fine."

Gabriel sat beside Shane and Natalie at the edge of the bed, turned toward the pillows. Shane was glad of where Gabriel had positioned himself—not behind, as if waiting in line for the turn Shane had been denying him all these months. Beside him,

as though he cared about Shane's face and not just his ass, as though he cared about *Shane*.

"I can touch you?" Gabriel whispered. He set a hand lightly on Shane's hip to illustrate his intention.

"Yeah, okay."

He felt those musician's calluses, strong palm possessive and hungry.

"Do it," Shane said to Natalie.

She reached for the lube again, snapped it open and closed. Her slippery fingertips found Shane once more, teasing for a moment before the pressure came. Shane sucked in his breath as one of her slender fingers penetrated the first half inch. Not pain, not pleasure, just pure weirdness.

"Relax," she whispered. "Breathe."

He did his best to obey, to force his tightening body to open again. It was one finger, after all. Shane had been on the giving end of anal plenty of times – with Gabriel of course, and with a few women too, a couple of them fairly small, and they'd managed to take Shane's considerable cock. He could handle a fucking finger. It felt odd though. Part violation, part...just...strange. It didn't feel sexual, not yet anyway. It felt clinical, as if he were being probed. Still, it didn't feel *bad*. He'd focus on that.

"More."

His body let her in deeper, each millimeter explicit and tight.

"Breathe," she said again.

Shane obeyed this time and her fingers paused while he steadied himself. The next time she pushed he felt her break through, past the next tight barrier. Weirdest fucking thing he'd ever felt, but goddamn, he'd go through with it. He imagined for a minute that he was Gabriel, getting this from himself. Must hurt like hell. Must be one fuck of a head trip too.

"Shane."

He opened his eyes and craned his neck to meet Gabriel's stare.

"You tellin' me what I think you are?"

Shane nodded and faced forward again, eyes shut.

"How's it feel?"

"Fuckin' weird."

"You sure you want to?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." Shane gasped as Natalie pushed deeper. She paused while he got control of his breath again, then she slid out slowly and slicked more lube across him and her fingers.

"Start...you know," he said.

"Sure." Her finger drove in, slow but insistent, and when she got it in as deep as it went, she started to ease it in and out. Shane wondered how he must look to Gabriel...three-course meal, probably. Well, fuck it. That's how he'd feel then.

"More," he muttered to Natalie.

She worked two fingers inside him, the discomfort not too much worse.

"Good. Keep it coming."

Beyond the more dramatic sensations, he felt Gabriel's hand on his ass. Again he opened his eyes to see what the man's face had to say. Gabriel's lips were parted and his lids heavy, eyes glued to Natalie's hand.

Shane mustered the balls to ask, "You want a turn?"

Gabriel's gaze jumped to Shane's face. "Only if you wan' me to."

"Yeah. Do it."

Natalie eased her fingers out and passed Gabriel the lube. As he waited, Shane stared at the weave of the red bedspread beside her dark hair. The rough pads of two familiar fingertips pushed between his cheeks, found his asshole. He sucked in a breath.

"You tell me when you ready."

Shane nodded. He let Gabriel tease him for a minute before he gave the word. "Fine. Just slow."

"Course." One finger again to start. When Gabriel added the second the men moaned in tandem. Gabriel kept his hand slowly working and relocated himself, straddling Shane's calves. The position was unnerving but inevitable.

A warm palm kneaded Shane's ass. *Just don't spank me.* Submission was fine, just nothing demeaning. Fucking hypocritical, but oh well. Natalie grazed his ribs with her hands, a little calming taste of that safety he felt with her.

"You feel good," Gabriel murmured. Shane felt him twist his hand the next time he drew his fingers out.

"Bet you been waiting forever for this," Shane mumbled.

"Waited a long time for the things you said to me las' night an' this mornin'," Gabriel said. "If you wan' this too, it's jus' a bonus. I already got what I wanted most from you."

Holy shit, if that wasn't the most perfect answer Shane could conceive of...though he hadn't conceived of it. Hadn't even considered such a proclamation.

"Yeah," he said. "I want this. Wanna give this to you."

"What you tryin' to prove?" Gabriel asked, no challenge in his tone.

"I want—" Shane gasped as a third finger joined the exploration. "Oh fuck. I want to show you I'm done protecting my stupid fragile ego."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Just wanna give in to you."

"You ready?"

Shane took a few long, deep breaths and nodded.

"Like this? Or can I see your face?"

"Like this to start," Shane said. "I'll tell you if I change my mind."

Shane kept his eyes closed, felt Gabriel fingers leave him. There was a crinkle of plastic, another snap of the lube bottle.

"Fuck, you look good." Gabriel finally sounded the way Shane had expected—devious. It didn't scare him though. He liked that meanness, that hungry edge in his lover's voice. Then Shane felt the sweep of slick, smooth cock head against his asshole and the pleasure dissolved.

"I'll go real slow," Gabriel promised, already pushing.

"Ah fuck."

"Tell me to stop."

"Don't stop," Shane said, eyes clenched shut, hands balled into fists under Natalie's pillow. The burning sensation grew, more painful than the fingers by tenfold. Gabriel pulled out and the bottle snapped again.

"Ready for more?"

"Yeah," Shane muttered.

The penetration stung a bit less this time, the friction smoother. Shane gasped as Gabriel got deeper, past that second point of resistance. His own ragged breath was drowned out by Gabriel's long, raspy moan.

"You okay?" Natalie whispered.

He nodded. "I'm all right." He got control of his breathing as Gabriel tested their limits, pushing in farther then backing off, adding more lube, taking Shane deeper.

"I'm in, Shane. All the way."

He blinked, surprised. "Yeah?"

"Yeah...you doin' good. It feel okay?"

"Sure. Don't feel good or anything, but I can take it."

"You wanna maybe turn over for me?"

He pondered it a moment, decided the chance to see Gabriel looking all flushed and needy outweighed the embarrassment of letting the man watch him flinch. "Yeah, sure."

He felt tender beyond words as Gabriel slid out and Natalie moved to the side. Shane lay on his back and peeled the condom from his dick. As he spread his legs, Gabriel knelt before him. Shane let his thighs be coaxed wider, goddamn humbling position.

"You look so good," Gabriel whispered, and his eyes were on Shane's face.

"Do it."

One last smear of lube and Gabriel angled his cock, slid inside halfway. Out again, then back in, until the friction seemed to warm Shane's protesting body from the inside and relax his edgy muscles. He kept his eyes on Gabriel's face above him, an angle he wasn't used to seeing. Beautiful as any other, though.

"You good?" Gabriel asked, barely a whisper.

"Fuck me." Shane spat the words out, as gruff as he might've told Gabriel to drop to his knees and suck Shane's cock. Gabriel began to thrust, slow and considerate.

"Harder."

Gabriel's hips pushed a little deeper, slightly faster.

"Harder. I wanna see you lose your goddamn mind."

Shane watched it happening, heard it in Gabriel's strangled groan, saw it in the way he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Fuck me. I know you've thought about this."

"Yeah."

"Now I'm letting you have it, so fuck me right. Fuck me like I fuck you. Tear me up."

Gabriel's eyes opened, locked on Shane's throat. His hips sped, cock driving deeper. The sensations weren't quite pain now, not pleasure either. Felt like that mean,

aggressive burn again, and Shane kept reminding himself it was the feeling of finally toppling the barrier that stood between them. Better than that, it was the feeling of his lover going utterly insane from what Shane could offer. He felt his cock stirring again as he studied Gabriel's face and its perfect mix of helpless and horny. Needy.

"How's it feel?" Shane murmured.

Gabriel slowed, pushing a bit deeper, clearly savoring. "So tight."

"How long since you fucked a guy?"

"Since before I met you, Shane."

Dark self-satisfaction warmed Shane's blood. "And you know I never done this before, ever."

"Yeah." Something hot flashed in Gabriel's expression. "Only with me."

"That's right. Only you."

Gabriel shut his eyes again, a low, rapturous *Mmmmm* rising from his throat. "Feels so good."

Shane realized it felt good to him too. As his arousal grew the rest of his body abandoned its suspicion. The deeper he let Gabriel inside, the better it felt. His lover's cock was hitting some buried trigger, intensifying Shane's excitement. It wasn't enough to make him come or erase the intimidation of the act, but he could admit it felt good.

What felt extraordinary, however, was watching Gabriel, seeing him as what he was. A man. The only man Shane had ever lusted after or loved; the only one he let get close to him. If that wasn't magic, he didn't know what was.

"Fuck me deep," he said, keeping the mean bark in his voice as he issued the order.

Gabriel obeyed, pushed in another inch.

"That's it," Shane muttered. "Keep going."

"Does it hurt?"

"Does it hurt when I fuck you?" Shane asked.

"Yeah, but I like it."

"Well it don't hurt. Just feels weird."

Gabriel licked his lips. "I wanna make you feel good."

Shane palmed his own erection, the contact lighting him up, tensing his body around Gabriel's cock. "Fuck. More lube."

Gabriel slid out, soaked himself in another palmful of gel and squeezed back inside. Shane winced through the initial sting, let his hand stroke as Gabriel drove in.

"That's right," Shane murmured. He gave himself slow, tight pulls to match the thrusts.

"Jus' wait 'til I'm deep, Shane. You won' know what fuckin' hit you. Wait 'til you come with my cock fuckin' you. You gon' think you went to heaven."

Shane watched his lover's body, those trim muscles and tattoos, tan skin and gorgeous face, every inch of him strained with excitement. He could feel it happening—he could come from this. He *would* come from this. Before today that would have felt like a defeat, a hunk of his dominance being ripped away. Now he craved it. He wanted to be everything for this man.

Gabriel's eyes were glued on Shane's stroking hand. "You're so big."

"Yeah. And I'm gonna come. Gonna come with your cock inside me, boy."

Gabriel was lost to a sound, a moan wrapped in a gasp.

"Deeper," Shane ordered. "Deep and fast, like I fuck you."

Gabriel's hands slid from Shane's thighs to his knees and pushed him open wider. Shane felt his strength in that moment, something he forgot about when he was busy being the dominant male in their twosome. Shane groaned as Gabriel forced himself so deep his hips touched Shane's ass. Pain spiked then faded, replaced with filthy excitement. Gabriel slid out, then back in to the hilt.

"Good. Fuck me."

"Wanna see you come," Gabriel said.

"Do what I say and you will. Now fuck me." Shane tightened his fist around his cock, sped its strokes to match Gabriel's hips.

"God, Shane."

"This how you fantasized it'd be?"

"Better," Gabriel muttered. "Never thought you'd lemme see your face."

Shane never thought he'd want to see Gabriel's face at this moment either, but here they were, and his lover's wild expression was the thing that made this submission possible for Shane.

"Gabriel."

"Yeah." His eyes were glassy, face flushed. His gaze darted from Shane's face to his ass, to Natalie, to Shane's cock. "Can't believe I'm inside you."

"Yeah, you are. You're the only one who'll ever get this. You're the only one who could ever make me want it."

"So you do? You want it?"

"I want to watch you lose your mind, gettin' this from me," Shane said. "Yeah, I wanna give this to you."

"Come for me."

Shane stared at Gabriel's sweat-gleaming bare body in the warm light and knew he could obey. He stroked himself fast and rough. "God, fuck me. Fuck my ass."

"Shane."

"That's right. Keep sayin' it."

Without warning, he was there. He shut his eyes and gave in. It was unlike anything he'd ever felt, an orgasm that started deep and erupted hot and violent, wrung him out to the sound of his name on his lover's breath. He felt the come hit his stomach, then more. More than he ever knew he could give. He opened his eyes to find Gabriel staring down at him, eyes wide, chest rising and falling fast.

"You," Shane said.

Gabriel withdrew, slowly, leaving a sore ache in his absence. He surprised Shane by stripping away the condom and lying down between him and Natalie, body turned to Shane's.

"Touch me," he mumbled.

Shane fisted Gabriel's cock, more swollen and stiff than he'd ever felt it. Gabriel interrupted him to collect Shane's come and slick it down his own length. Taking over once more, Shane knew the man was close. He stroked him tight and listened to him whimper.

"Kiss me," Shane ordered.

Gabriel brought his face close, tasted Shane's mouth with distracted sweeps of his tongue. Shane grasped Gabriel's jaw with his free hand and kissed him back, deep and dirty. He was flooded with relief and gratitude—Gabriel could've come as the aggressor but he hadn't. He wanted what Shane was so natural at, taunting domination.

Shane spoke right into his mouth. "Come on, Gabriel."

A deep groan warmed Shane's lips.

"Think about how you fucked me tonight and come right here." He angled Gabriel's cock so the head brushed Shane's stomach with each pull.

"I fucked you," Gabriel muttered.

"Yeah, you did. I'm all yours now. Nobody else'll ever get that from me."

That did it. Gabriel surrendered to a body-racking shudder as his hips hammered his dick into Shane's fist. Shane felt wet heat burst against his belly and knuckles and slowed his pulls, coaxing every last warm drop.

As the high subsided, Shane remembered the restless body on Gabriel's other side. A pang of guilt hit him and he wondered if Natalie felt left out...but she'd dissolved for Shane, at the height of this evening's explorations. It'd just been him and Gabriel, Natalie a near-invisible figment helping to orchestrate it. Shane propped himself on his elbow and caught her eyes.

"Hi," she said quietly. Her cheeks and lips were flushed.

"Hi yourself." His gaze dropped to her breasts and legs, then back up to her face. Beautiful face, and the only one he could ever imagine wanting here, witnessing the two of them. With the high of challenging his own self-image still warming his body, Shane knew what he wanted to give her. He climbed over Gabriel to kneel between her calves.

"Think we owe you a thank-you," he said.

She pursed her lips. "I thought tonight was all about you two."

"And this is about me thanking you for making it happen...or trying to." He scooted back and lowered to his elbows as Natalie opened up for him. He slid his palms under her butt and leaned in close, breathed her in. Gabriel knelt beside them, his hand resting on Shane's shoulder.

Shane gave her clit the faintest flick of his tongue, rewarded with a twitch of her thighs.

"Good." All his usual anxiety about this act was gone, replaced with excitement. He lapped her again, firmer, earning a rough scrape of her fingernails across his scalp.

"Don't be gentle," she murmured.

Excellent—Shane's specialty. He tasted her with slow, explicit strokes that had her hips begging for more. He freed his mouth to speak to Gabriel. "You owe her too."

He nodded and Shane saw him lean in to kiss her. For the first time he could remember, sharing this man felt like a gift he was giving, not a theft. As he teased Natalie's clit he stole glances at the two of them, watching as they found their way together after six months' estrangement. Gabriel moved his mouth to her breasts, letting Shane hear her sounds, all the little assurances that told him he was doing just fine.

"Your fingers," she muttered.

Shane obeyed happily, sliding two digits inside her, tongue still torturing. He smiled to himself as she swore, nails raking him harder. He reached up to grasp Gabriel's wrist, drawing his hand to her clit. She'd been treated to both of their cocks

before, now Shane wanted to give her this—his tongue and Gabriel’s talented fingers, two men once again sharing the honor of blowing her mind.

Shane could hear Gabriel whispering low words as he pleased her breasts and Shane shared the thrill with her, a shiver from what that voice alone could do. His tongue teased Gabriel’s fingers as they ravaged her together, his own hand turning aggressive, deepening their motions as her moans became harsh. He hoped the rough thrusts had her fantasizing about everything they’d given her back in his bed, what must surely have been a lifetime ago.

Against his tongue and around his fingers, Shane felt Natalie coming apart. For a final minute he fucked her hard with his hand, tasted and smelled her and got consumed by a wave of bone-deep gratitude as he felt her come for both of them. When Gabriel took his hand away, Shane followed suit. He scooted up the mattress to plant a messy kiss on her neck.

He exhaled against her skin and smiled. “Thanks.”

She laughed, exhaustion in her voice. “No, thank you.”

Shane flopped down on the blankets. Natalie slung an arm across his chest and as Gabriel nestled his face against Shane’s shoulder, Shane felt consciousness instantly fading. Good thing, too. After a year of overthinking every tiny thing that happened between his body and Gabriel’s, careless oblivion sounded damn good. Sounded as good as the deep male breaths heating his throat. Sounded like perfection.

* * * * *

Shane awoke in a pile of warm limbs the next morning, feeling sore and content. He felt alert as well, full of impulsive ideas. The clock said it was only four thirty, but he eased his arm from under Gabriel’s back and stood at the side of the bed. He nudged the curtains aside to let in a bit of streetlight. He stared at the two people responsible for how damn happy he felt. He studied Natalie’s placid face a long time then padded to the bathroom.

Why settle, Shane? Her voice echoed in his head as he showered. Why indeed...not that Gabriel wasn't enough. Shane knew now that the man was plenty, but if Natalie had meant that advice another way...

He turned the idea over and over in his head as he crept out of the house, driving to the first open convenience store he could find to buy eggs and bacon.

Natalie was up when he got back. She emerged from the bathroom with one towel wound around her hair, another her trunk. "Shane." Her eyes were wide.

"Mornin'."

"Oh Jesus, I thought you'd, like, freaked out in the night and run off." She laughed, clearly relieved. "I spent my whole shower worrying you'd had a breakdown."

"Nope, just had to replace your eggs. I'm making you breakfast before you take off for work."

"You don't have —"

"It's tradition," he said, heading to the stove to get things set up.

Natalie disappeared then returned in her work clothes a short while later, damp hair twisted into a bun. Shane set a mug of his patented too-strong coffee in front of her and went to flip the eggs. He returned with two loaded plates and what he hoped was an irresistible offer.

"So me and him—Gabriel," he corrected forcefully. "We'll probably head back down south soon. Maybe one more dinner with you?"

"Whenever you like. If you're sure you're ready."

Shane nodded. "I came here to run away...now the thing I was runnin' from is here. And I ain't afraid of it anymore. Or not as much, at least. You know what I mean."

"Yeah."

"Plus I'll admit, I'm damn homesick. But listen..."

Natalie took a bite of her toast, waiting patiently as Shane assembled his thoughts.

"I got an invitation for you."

Her pale eyes jumped between his. "Oh? What's that?"

"I know you don't love your job here."

She moved her eggs around with her fork and made a face at them. "No, not especially."

"If you ever want a change of scenery, you should feel free to come back down to Shiloh. I'll fix you up a room of your own in the house. Free room and board 'til you find a job, maybe in Baton Rouge?"

She set her fork aside and nibbled her lip, thinking.

"Free beer, even."

"I dunno, Shane."

"Two men who work well with their hands, ready to do appalling things to you any night of the week you please?"

She smirked.

"Doesn't have to be a be-all, end-all thing. Maybe you give it a try for six months, a year... Give *me* a try." Saying it made Shane feel naked, melted away the usual tough expression on his face and must have left him looking like a pleading man, armor chipped and rusty.

Finally Natalie laughed, just a soft breath passed through a smile. "Mosquitoes."

"Yeah, so much worse than the Russian roulette you play here just stepping on the sidewalk," he countered.

"Hot summers."

"Fuckin' hot-ass sex, girl."

She sighed, eyes roaming her living room as she pondered. Shane looked around too—fireplace, front window, couch. God, couches. That's what Shane should get a tattoo of. Fucking furniture wouldn't leave him alone. "Nice man?" he tried, poking her shin with his toe. "Who'll treat you as good as you like in public, as rough as you want in bed?"

Natalie smiled and reached over and squeezed his thigh. "I won't pretend that's not a tempting offer, Shane..."

"But?"

"But no." She leaned back in her chair and held his eyes. "I'm like you, I think. I could handle being the guest for a little while, but I wouldn't be happy sharing you. I want a man of my own. One who's a heck of a lot like you, but..."

"But just not me?"

She shook her head. "Maybe in some parallel, simpler universe, where you live in Rochester and you and he had never met. But not in this life. Not when I know how much you two need each other."

He nodded, disappointed but not entirely surprised. It would have been a lot to ask of anyone.

She touched his arm. "Thank you though. That's the most flattering invitation a greedy girl like me could hope for."

"I had to try."

They finished their food in silence and Natalie dried her hair, got her boots and coat on. "So I'll see you guys for one more night?" she asked Shane by the door.

"Yeah, I'd say so."

"Cool. I'll call you before I leave work to figure out where to meet, if we decide to go out."

Shane nodded. When she reached for the doorknob he grabbed her wrist and stared right into her eyes. "Thanks. For last night. For this whole week too. I, um... I came here pretty fucked up in the head, and you took me in and set me straight."

"What happened last night was all you, Shane. It was very brave."

"Yeah, maybe... But anyhow, thanks. You gave me a heck of a lot more than the couch and the rebound you owed me."

She shrugged, a bit of pink in her cheeks.

"You're a good woman. If you don't come to your senses and join us down in Louisiana, I hope you find yourself a deserving man."

"Me too. Just not too soon, I hope."

He let her wrist go. "Anyhow, I'll see you tonight."

"See you later, Shane." She opened the door to the front hall, icy air seeping in. "You treat him good."

Six Months Later

In the end, Shane hadn't explained himself to anybody once he got back to Shiloh. Step by tiny, brave step, he'd set out instead to simply confuse people. When he sat beside Gabriel at the bar, Shane let their knees touch. At moments when he'd normally kiss the man, had they been alone, he'd begun putting his hand to the base of Gabriel's neck, giving it a gentle, possessive squeeze. It earned him funny looks from his customers and staff, but no one came out and directly questioned him for weeks.

Jeanne, Shane's favorite bartender, had cracked from the curiosity one warm spring evening. Gabriel had sidled up beside Shane at the bar, brushing casually but openly against him as he accepted a glass of wine between sets. He'd left with the now customary heated glance, headed back into the fray to resume musician duties. Jeanne had slapped her bar towel down on the counter in front of Shane.

"Yeah, Miss Jeanne?"

"Seriously, Shane. What's up?" She jerked her head in Gabriel's direction.

He'd just chuckled, took a swig of beer and smiled at her, obnoxiously innocent. "No clue what you mean, sweetheart."

"Oh yes you do."

"I really don't."

She'd sighed then left it at that as a drink order called her away.

Shane smiled at the memory. It was August now, the summer humidity and heat tossed over the Shivarree like a wet sheet. Shane swiveled on his stool as a blues song came to a close, clapped politely along with the rest of the drinkers. The band left the stage for a smoke break, Gabriel making a beeline for Shane. Shane loved the look of his skin on sticky nights like this. Loved his smell. There were no empty stools so Shane stood as Gabriel approached, handing him his glass of wine.

"Thanks."

"Good set," Shane said. "I like the new trombone guy."

Gabriel nodded and took a sip of his wine. Shane longed to lean in and taste that mouth, but he held back, as always. Not so much to protect himself anymore, but to keep from embarrassing the patrons. By now most everybody suspected what Jeanne did, but Shane didn't see any reason to flaunt it. Rumors were enough to make it real for him. He gave Gabriel's shoulder a firm squeeze, a tiny promise to make good on later when —

Shane flinched at the pointed sound of a throat being cleared behind his back. He'd lived in worry over the moment some drunk would catch him cozying up to Gabriel and want to make an issue of it. Hand still clamped firmly where it liked to be, Shane turned to glare at —

"Natalie." He laughed.

She smiled at each of them. "Hey boys."

"Well, holy shit." Relief gave way to pleasure and Shane let Gabriel go and hugged her. "Don't tell me you've got vehicle troubles again."

"No, just here for a drink with the boss-man," she said, then nodded to Gabriel. "Maybe a dance with the resident musician later?"

"My pleasure," Gabriel said.

"Plus I flew this time, so I'm living the lush life with a shiny new rental car instead of my faithful '98 Chevy shitbox."

The band began reassembling onstage. "'Scuse me," Gabriel said with a tip of his hat. "I'll find you later for that dance, eh?"

"Please do." She watched him walk away then smiled at Shane. "I see you've gone public. How's it been? Any major trouble?"

"None yet. We ain't bein' too in-people's-faces about it."

"And I can't imagine anybody would really want to take *you* on in a fight."

"Maybe not. But anyhow, it's gone pretty smooth. I've been real nice, just like you told me to be. He's got keys and his own room and everything," Shane said, nodding up to indicate the apartment above the bar.

"I'm glad to hear it. That means there's a couch free for me to crash on tonight."

"Always." A strange possibility fluttered in his middle. "You ain't here to finally accept that old offer I made you, are you?"

She smiled, eyes traveling all over the bar then back to Shane's face. "No, sorry."

He let his shoulders slump, petulant. "Well, a visit'll do. Though you coulda called first."

"I didn't actually come to see you two. Well, I mean I did tonight, obviously, but I'm in Louisiana for work."

"Oh? Permanently?"

"No, no. I just took a new job in Rochester, at a cancer treatment facility. Really nice place. It's sort of a promotion, and I got sent down for corporate management training tomorrow and Tuesday in Shreveport, of all places. Couldn't resist showing up here unannounced. Tradition and all."

"Anything else you were looking for?" Shane asked, voice low.

She shook her head. "Very tempting, but no. I'm seeing someone, actually."

"Oh yeah?"

She nodded, and the way she bit her lip and looked to her shoes told Shane she had it bad. "Yeah. His name's Eric. And you won't believe it, but we met when he was fixing my truck."

"Mechanic?" Shane asked.

"Yeah. And a good one, I promise. He drives an old Mustang he rebuilt himself."

"He a jerk, just how you like 'em?"

"Yeah. But only in the good ways."

Shane smiled at that. "Sounds like a real dreamboat."

She shrugged. "Time will tell...but yeah. Right now I'm very happy indeed."

"So I can see. How's your sister's new addition?"

"So adorable that I won't attempt to bore you with the endless auntie details. How about you? Are you happy, Shane?"

He cleared his throat. "Yeah. I am."

"Doing okay without the old traditional family thing?"

He nodded and his hand moved to his opposite shoulder, to the names he'd gotten tattooed there a few months earlier. "I sort of realized, after I got back and me and Gabriel quit being all secretive... I already got that. Or enough of that to make me happy." He dropped his hand and looked to where Jeanne and Zach were arguing behind the bar, swept his eyes over his regulars. Over his home. He looked back to Natalie. "You were right. Both of you. The only thing keeping me miserable was me, not letting myself just want what I did. It still don't make any sense to me...but I'm happy. Can't honestly think of a single thing that's missing."

"Random woman to spice up your cozy little picture of domestic bliss?" Natalie pointed her eyes upward, to where she'd once been such a bonus female.

Shane grinned, felt a blush warm his cheeks. He kept his voice low. "Yeah, sometime maybe. Not too soon...we're still sorta workshopping the whole post-blood-test trust scene."

"Ah."

"But it's goin' fine. Sure you ain't lookin' to reprise your role?"

"No, thanks. One man's plenty for me these days. Especially the keeper I've got waiting back home."

"Well that's quite the change of tune. Lemme get you a drink and we'll toast," Shane said. He squeezed in between the folks at the bar, leaning over the counter to pour her a pint.

"There you go."

"Thank you kindly, Shane."

He tapped his bottle to her glass and took a deep drink.

They both stared out at the milling patrons under the spangled lights for a couple of minutes. Shane's attention settled on Gabriel, just as it always did...those magic fingers and black eyes and deadly smile, all his.

Natalie laughed and Shane turned to her.

"What?"

She shook her head as if banishing drunkenness. "I'd forgotten what this place does to a person's brain."

"And other body parts."

She rolled her eyes and nodded. "Those too."

"Shit, I better get upstairs and tidy up, now I've got a guest."

"After another drink," Natalie said, facing the band as a new song began.

"As you wish." Shane got lost in the music, mind feeling hazy and airborne in the sultry summer air. He shut his eyes and breathed in magnolia, heard the fond bickering of his staff and the subtle play of fingers over bass strings. He opened them again and saw Gabriel, the warm, beating heart of Shane's weird little kingdom. He saw his home.

About the Author

Cara McKenna writes smart erotica: a little dark, a little funny, definitely sexy and always emotional. She lives north of Boston with her extremely good-natured and permissive husband. When she's not trapped inside her own head, Cara can usually be found in the kitchen, the coffee shop or the nearest duck-filled pond.

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