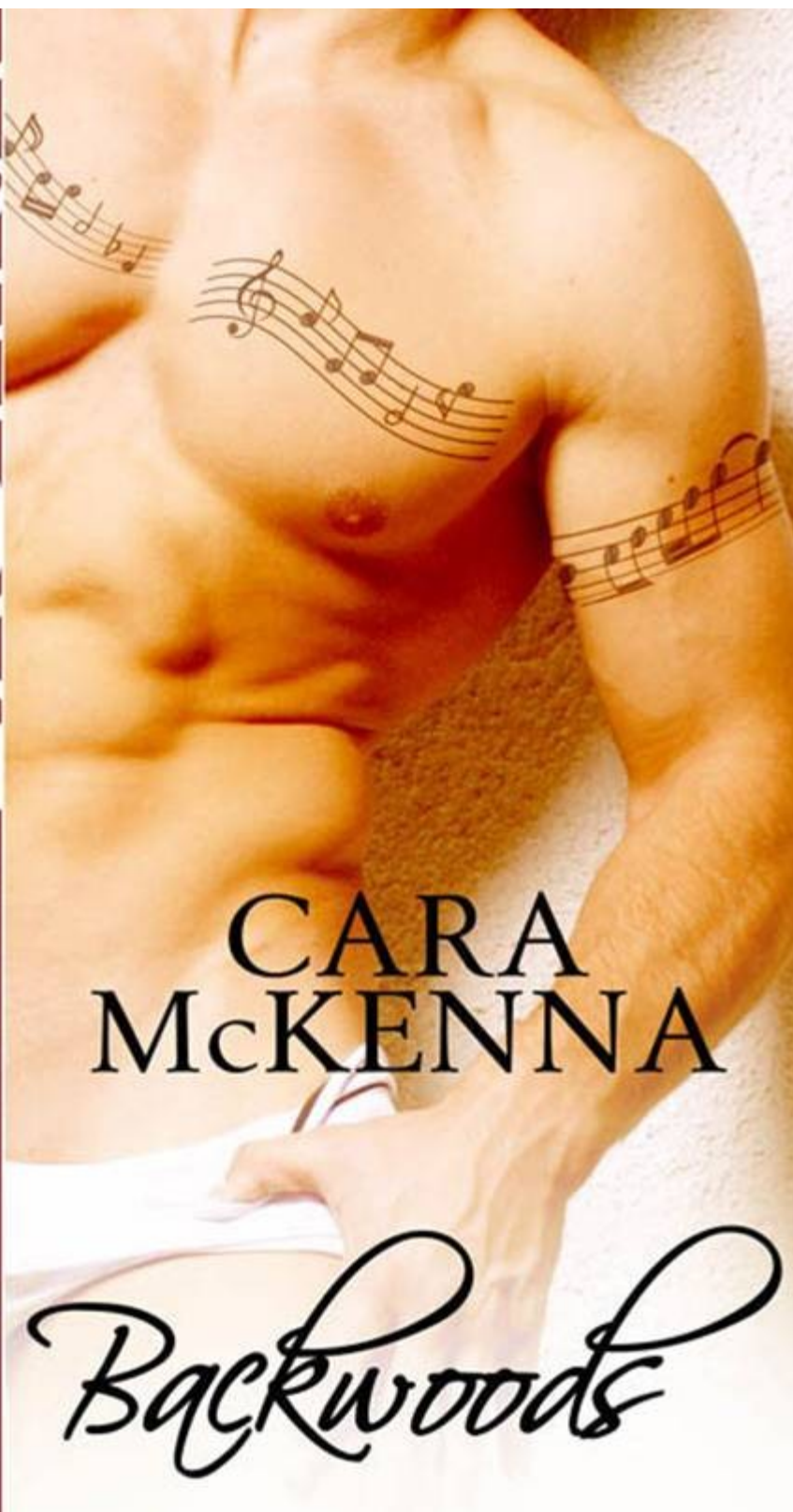


ELLORA'S CAVE EXOTIKA

CARA
McKENNA

Backwoods



Backwoods

Cara McKenna

A standalone prequel to Shivaree.

Shane thinks he's simply auditioning a new musician for his bar, but when Gabriel saunters into the Shivaree it becomes clear the man has more to offer than just his talent. Gabriel's got sexual charisma potent enough to make a straight man such as Shane lose his senses, lose sleep, lose himself to dark desires and not want to find his way back to reality.

What follows is not a love story. This is a story about an unforeseen attraction that brings a strong, sane man to his knees, and about lovers tangled up in each other too deep to know who's in control and who's helpless.

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Backwoods

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BACKWOODS

Cara McKenna

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Chapter One

"Evenin', boss."

Shane raised a hand in reply to Jeanne, the afternoon bartender stationed across the way. The door slapped shut behind him and he wandered through the screened-in porch, past empty couches and up a step to the main lounge area. He glanced at the scuffed wood of the dance floor, those same boards he'd played on when this room had been his memaw's front parlor, before his aunt inherited the old plantation-style monstrosity and turned the ground floor into a club.

He headed to the bar, waving at the lone, early drinker camped out by the front windows. Shane tossed a pile of mail on the counter. "You mind sortin' out the junk and tossin' the bills on my desk?"

"You got it, boss." Jeanne started flipping through the envelopes.

He smiled at her. Cute gal. A little heavy, though Shane didn't mind that one bit. Warm smile, shiny brown hair. If he wasn't ten years her senior and signing her paychecks, he'd have asked the girl out by now.

She set a catalogue from Baton Rouge Bar Supply in the junk pile. Shane picked it up, thinking the place could stand some new furniture, some stools that didn't wobble or have stuffing creeping from under the vinyl.

"We got a new musician coming in tonight," Jeanne said.

Shane made a face as the bills stacked up. "What kind of musician?"

It was Lovers' Night, as his Aunt Marie had rechristened Fridays years ago. Shane hated that girlie name but he'd kept it after he took over running the place, just as he'd kept nearly everything his aunt had established. It brought the customers in and he wasn't about to argue with that.

"It's Valentine's week," he added. "I don't want some amateur stinking up my club when folks are looking for foreplay."

"Every night's foreplay around here," Jeanne said.

True. It might be worse for wear, but something about the Shivarree drew amorous folks like a siren song.

"Plus Zach said this guy's good," she said. "Real good. Think he said he's from New Orleans."

"What's he play?"

"Mandolin, I think he said."

Shane made a face. "I don't even know what a mandolin looks like."

"It's like...it looks like a ukulele and violin, put together," Jeanne said. "Sort of."

"Don't sound real sexy to me."

"Well, you'll have to just come down later and decide for yourself then." Jeanne disappeared around the corner to the bar's office with the mail. She returned and leaned on the counter, flared her nostrils. "You stink, boss."

Shane put his nose to the shoulder of his work shirt, breathing in motor oil and grease. "You're nuts. I fuckin' love that smell." He pinched the front of his shirt and tugged at the fabric, pretending to waft a cloud of his questionable fragrance in Jeanne's direction.

"You should wring that shirt into a bottle and sell it to Calvin Klein," Jeanne teased. "Eau du Shane Broussard. Eau du Sweaty Auto Mechanique."

"Maybe I should," Shane said, snotty. "Give folks a cologne that actually smells like a man, not all that sporty shit, citrus or sandalwood or whatever."

"You lemme know how that goes, boss. Why don't you go get yourself cleaned up before you scare the customer away?"

Shane knocked twice on the bar and turned, heading back through the porch to the side steps that led to the second-floor balcony. He unlocked the door to his apartment

and kicked off his muddy boots, shed his clothes as he made his way through the living room and kitchen to the bathroom, turned the shower on as hot as it went. Forty might not seem bad to folks from places colder than Louisiana, but Shane couldn't stand anything below seventy-five. Heatstroke over frostbite, any day of the week.

He soaped up, washed away the grease and grit, thought about Jeanne's breasts and jerked off, professionalism be damned. Hell, maybe he *should* ask her out. He owned the place. What was he going to do, fire himself?

He stepped out of the tub and toweled off, wiped the steam off the mirror and stared at himself in the yellowy bathroom lights. Not bad. Thirty-five was still young these days. He had another decade or two before his height went from asset to liability and left him with a bad back like his old man and his uncles. He kept himself fit, lifted weights and did sit-ups and chin-ups to stave off the seemingly hereditary paunch overdue to him from the Broussard side.

Dragging an electric razor over his face, Shane considered his hair. It was at the end of this month's cycle, ready for another buzz. He thought about doing it himself but he liked an excuse to go into Baton Rouge and flirt with the girl who ran clippers over his head for half a minute and charged him fifteen bucks for the honor. Another woman he ought to ask out.

He glanced around the counter and scanned the medicine cabinet, found a hair clip and tube of lip gloss, evidence of bygone one-night stands he'd prefer to not advertise to future one-night stands. He buried them in the trash can under a spent toilet paper roll. Best to be safe, in case he got brave enough or drunk enough to make a move on Jeanne or some other willing woman on motherfucking Lovers' Night.

* * * * *

Shane passed the early evening in the bar's office, paying bills, ordering stock, fumbling through the computer program that balanced the club's books. Eight hours spent crouched under various cars and trying to drill the most basic information into

his thick-skulled new apprentice had left him with a sore neck and head. He wished he could just trot upstairs, crack a beer and fall asleep watching the news. But he had a musician to weigh in on and a barmaid to flirt with for as long as it took him to realize he was on the age cusp where that sort of thing went from friendly to creepy.

He flipped through catalogues, wondering why the fact that it was the weekend didn't feel like something to be relieved about. Two days spent rattling around this house, keeping himself busy. At night, drinking three beers too many and waking up the next morning with a semi-familiar girl wrapped around him, or maybe just his own right hand. Excuses for why Shane ought to head into the garage tomorrow and get ahead on next week's work flowed easily and loosened the knot in his chest. His seventeen-year-old self would've had a field day with that one – avoiding drunken one-night stands by working overtime. Seventeen, shit. That was over half a lifetime ago.

He glanced up at a knock on the door. "C'min."

Jeanne poked her head through, the recorded pop music playing out in the bar leaking in behind her. "The mandolin guy's here. You want to brief him on what sorts of stuff to play?"

"Just tell him to keep it sexy. No lyrics with cussing if he sings. I'll be out in a few."

"You all right?"

"Just a headache. And I gotta work tomorrow," he added.

"Bummer." Jeanne offered a sympathetic frown and closed the door quietly behind her.

Nice girl... Too nice to get hit on by her boss. Plus she'd be moving on sooner or later. She'd get snapped up by some decent young man or realize she was bound for better things, head off to school someplace. Like everybody else around here she'd move on, leave Shane behind to tend to his little territory and await the slow but steady arrival of unremarkable middle-age.

He rubbed his face and temples and when he lowered his hands the clock on the computer told him it was seven fifteen.

Beyond the office, the soft bass thump of the canned music faded away. Shane pushed his chair out and hit the lights, locked the office and walked into the Shivaree's heady, amorous fog. Even in February it felt like July. Even at suppertime it felt like three a.m. This place made folks sweat, made them itchy to find a warm, willing body to pair off with. His aunt had designed it that way, a place with no pretension where people could be themselves, dress up or down and drink cheap drinks and listen to free music, get out of their heads for an evening. Old, young, pretty, homely—the differences all faded away under the canopy of colored Christmas lights and crystals strung like vines from the ceiling.

The bar had started filling up in the last couple hours, bustling now with a few dozen patrons. Shane slid behind the counter, filled a handful of drink orders alongside Jeanne before he popped a beer bottle open and took a seat on a stool across from her.

He got his wallet out and laid a twenty on the wood. "Order yourself and Zach some food."

"And you?" Jeanne asked.

"Yeah. Whatever you guys have." Shane glanced to the stage, where the new musician was setting up, his back to the bar.

Zach appeared from the hall, hugging a half dozen liquor bottles to his chest.

"Burgers or pizza?" Jeanne asked him.

He set the bottles along the back bar and nodded a greeting to Shane. "Burgers."

Jeanne called the nearest delivery joint and placed their orders.

Shane took a deep pull off his bottle. "How's school, Zach?"

"Waste of time and money." Zach was twenty-two or -three, baby-faced but handsome, torn alternately between half-assed dreams of rock stardom—talentless—and signing up for the army—no discipline. Big on ambition but lacking on the follow-through. Too damn eager to get himself landed in the middle of some kind of drama, anything with a uniform that girls might shed their panties over.

Shane gave him a cursory glare. "Well, drop out now and you might find yourself in my shoes in ten years."

"Don't sound too bad."

Shane laughed. "Runnin' your auntie's bar and breathing diesel fumes all day?"

Zach shrugged. "You own one place and you're a partner in another. Gotta be better than studying fucking business management with half the same rednecks I went to high school with. Lucky if I can run a fucking fried chicken franchise when I'm done."

"Watch your fucking mouth in front of Miss Jeanne, son."

Jeanne rolled her eyes at Shane.

Zach jumped on the next drink order, clearly ready to escape the lecture.

The speakers buzzed—the sound of the system switching to the microphone from the stereo. Shane swiveled his stool to watch the stage, held his beer in his mouth for half a minute before he remembered to swallow.

He felt as if he knew the musician... He didn't. Hadn't ever seen him or anyone like him in his whole life, but something about him rang in Shane's head like recognition, like some instant pang of familiarity despite how relatively exotic the guy was.

The man dressed odd—odd for this region and odd for this century. You could plunk him down in a photo taken in the thirties in some classy European city and he'd blend right in. White dress shirt tucked into dark slacks, shined shoes, one of those old-timey brimmed hats only ancient black jazz musicians and fashionable pop stars wore these days. A watch- or wallet-chain dangled at his hip.

He flicked the mic on and leaned into it. He held his instrument at his chest, a strange little curly guitar, plucked a few quiet notes before he spoke.

"Evenin'."

A couple people clapped politely and the man took a seat on the stage's stool, eased the mic stand down, close to the instrument. He strummed a couple chords and then his fingers began to dance.

The music sounded Spanish, fast and moody and damn sexy in an urgent kind of way. Shane knew jack-squat about mandolins but he suspected this guy was phenomenal. Too good to waste his time playing for seventy-five bucks and free drinks in a backwoods nowhere-club like the Shivaree. Shane took another deep gulp of his beer, thinking this would do nicely for Lovers' Night. Goddamn nicely indeed, if everybody was feeling even half as crazy as Shane suddenly was.

It was as if he'd lost control of his own heartbeat, as though it'd been reconfigured to match the rhythm of this stranger's hands. He drained his bottle and slid it across the wood, spoke to Jeanne without turning. "Whiskey."

A glass clacked beside him and he took a sip, let the alcohol burn down his throat as he stared at the musician. Couples formed in his periphery, taking over the dance floor, giving their bodies the physical outlet Shane himself craved as he listened to this song. He wished he could see the guy's face better, get a good look at the man responsible for this eerie atmospheric change in his bar and his head.

The song slowed and faded, came to a close amid enthusiastic clapping and a few whistles. The musician leaned in to the mic and murmured, "Thank you," in a voice that made the hairs on Shane's arms prick up. The man slid the mic higher and started another song, a bit slower and sadder, still sexy enough to fuck with the course of Shane's bloodstream. The guy was placid, as if under his own trance. After a minute of skillful picking, he sang.

A low, awed moan rose in Shane's throat but he sucked it back down, doused it with the last of his shot. The man's voice was pure audio sex, a raspy baritone singing Spanish lyrics Shane couldn't understand and didn't want to. He felt weird and high, hypnotized and hungry and on edge, all at once. There was a reality somewhere outside of this man's words and the deft movement of his fingers across the strings, but Shane

didn't know what it might be. Couldn't give a shit as long this man was singing. It took a physical intrusion to snap him back into his body and land his butt firmly on the stool, rematerialize the shot glass in his fist. Jeanne had tapped his shoulder again and he turned to her, setting the glass between them.

She pointed to the stage as she poured a customer's beer. "So that's him."

"I gathered."

"He's awful good, huh?"

Shane felt compelled territorially to find fault with the stranger holding court in his little kingdom. "Not the usual sound for Fridays."

"Yeah, but look around, boss. Who cares?"

Shane took stock of the crowd. Friday always attracted its share of horny couples, set a mood conducive to folks retreating into the Shivarée's darker corners to get as close to having sex as they could manage with their clothes still on. On Saturday afternoons Shane often had to send some poor junior staffer out into the backyard with a pair of barbeque tongs and a trash bag to clear the lawn of jettisoned condoms. Lovers' Night meant make-out music, sultry jazz, mostly. One year they'd scored a major coup when a voluptuous black lady from Biloxi came and sang torch songs every week, but this man topped even her.

Shane couldn't be surprised by the friskiness happening out on the wood—the Shivarée did that to folks—but he'd been immune for a long time. Until tonight. Tonight he felt it himself, as though he'd been drugged. Some drug that made his skin warm and antsy with sexual energy.

"Yeah," he muttered, willing his eyes toward Jeanne, away from the stage. "He's good. Long as people keep buying drinks."

"He's real sexy," Jeanne said.

Shane cocked an eyebrow at her, protectiveness raising his hackles.

Jeanne laughed. "Is that look telling me I can't fraternize with the hired help?"

"Just don't get yourself mixed up with a musician. They'll break your heart and give you syphilis."

Jeanne made a sputtering noise. "Listen to you, soundin' all jealous. There something you're not telling me?"

Her flirtation was harmless, a ploy to get Shane to admit he might like her himself. He wished that was what his sudden foul mood was all about, but he didn't think it was.

"Just don't want to see you getting mixed up with some stranger on my watch."

"Ha! Wish I could, but that guy's like light-years out of my league."

"Who told you that?" Shane asked, making his voice stern.

"Just a fact, boss. Look at him."

Shane aimed his eyes at the stage again. He was too far away to really see the guy's face in the spangled lights, but he had a good body—tallish, slender, dripping with some kind of grace Shane didn't have a fancy enough word for...all the things women craved once they got bored with a grease-stinking bruiser like Shane Broussard.

He shrugged and Jeanne turned to pour a beer.

The musician finished his song, easing the hot tension in Shane's body by a couple degrees, but not much. He stood from the stool and set his mandolin down, offered the appreciative crowd another thank-you and flicked the mic off. He stepped off the low platform and headed toward the bar. Sauntered—that was the only word for it. He eased himself between the two empty stools to Shane's right and leaned on the wood.

Jeanne turned back from loading dirties in the washer and he smiled at her, the gesture carving deep lines beside his lips and flashing white teeth. He pulled a cigarette case out of his pants pocket, opened it to reveal a small wad of bills and a square paper packet with a picture of a mandolin on it, a smaller plastic square behind that. "Can I get a glass of red, please?"

"Course."

Shane swiveled his legs to the side and stood. "Entertainment drinks on the house," he said, to Jeanne more than the musician.

The man straightened up to look at Shane, eyes shaded from the lights by the brim of his old hat.

He was taller than Shane had guessed, over six feet, if barely. Good thing too—Shane hated being level with anybody's eyes, and he had him beat by two or three inches. The guy's build was more substantial than he'd guessed as well, a buck-seventy maybe, none of it fat. He had a dark patch beneath each arm, a gleam to the tan skin of his neck, and tattoos of some kind, snatches of ink peeking from behind his crisp white collar. He was a pretty kind of handsome, but not polished or prissy. Five o'clock shadow, messy black hair curling from beneath the hat. Smelled like cedar and grass and something else—something dark.

"Evenin'," he said in that voice that set pulses humming.

Shane set aside his scrutiny, pulled himself together. "I'm Shane Broussard. I own this bar. See you're our new musician."

"If you want me."

"Heard you grew up in town."

The man nodded again, accepted a glass from Jeanne and took a sip. He tilted his chin up, drawing the shadow off his face to reveal dark eyes, as black as Shane took his coffee.

He set his wine down and offered his hand for brief, warm shake. "Gabriel," he said. "I like your place." His eyes drifted up, traveling across the sea of colored Christmas lights to the billowy white drapes hung from the tall windows, made from old wedding dresses. "There something about it, here," Gabriel said.

He had a weird-ass accent, as heavy as any Shane had heard in the most backwater corners of the region, but different too. Shane wouldn't ever say it around any of his militantly Cajun friends or family, but Gabriel's accent was so thick he sounded damn near brain-damaged. Looked like every woman's wet dream, though—all the best genes

from a big bubbling cauldron of mismatched DNA. High cheekbones and black eyebrows and sideburns, thick lashes, perfect skin. A hundred things Shane wished he weren't noticing. If anybody caught him staring, he hoped it came off as suspicion.

"Gabriel what?" Shane asked.

"Marino-Doucet."

"That's a heck of name."

"My father's Cuban," Gabriel said with a strange, mischievous smile. "They love their hyphens."

"Right. Well, you keep playing like that and you can have the mic 'til we close up at two. Free drinks, just don't get yourself sloppy while you're on my clock."

Gabriel nodded, took his glass back to the stage. He clicked the microphone on and leaned in to address the crowd. "Good news. The boss-man says I can stay."

People clapped and someone shouted, "You better, Shane!"

Shane rolled his eyes. "'Nother beer please, Jeanne."

He tossed a five in the tip jar and took his bottle to the other side of the lounge, sinking into a spring-shot couch by the front windows. Gabriel played a sensual, mournful song and a few couples slow-danced, drifting in lazy circles and obscuring Shane's view of the stage. He shifted in his seat, uneasy. He'd put on a sweater after his shower but he felt strangled by it now, too warm and confined. He pulled it over his head and shoved it between his leg and the arm of the couch. The colored lights made the whole damn world seem drunk.

Gabriel sang, more Spanish lyrics that made Shane's throat tight, his skin hot. He'd never been affected by music this way before. It had to be the music, since Shane had never felt the first inkling of attraction to a man in his life, and what he was feeling now...it'd be laughable to pretend it wasn't sexual. Maybe he'd stumbled upon his first real kink at thirty-five, the world's first and only mandolin fetish. But he stared at those strings and his eyes saw only fingers. He tried to listen to the notes but he only heard

that man's voice, memory conjuring his mouth and face and eyes, his smell. Just the thought of those lips and hands drained the blood from Shane's head and sent it rushing south, making his cock heavy and warm. He tore his eyes off the stage and directed them at the various women dancing and laughing and drinking, but his attention passed over them as if they were furniture, mannequins. His eyes floated back to the stage, to the half-Cuban, half-everything-else spell-caster and damn if it didn't feel good, watching. Fuck if it didn't feel as though a phantom hand were sliding down the front of his jeans to palm his dick.

Jeanne appeared at Shane's side two songs later, leaning her plump hip on the arm of the couch, holding a beer bottle. "You were starin', boss."

"You're too young for me, girl."

She laughed. "Not at me, at him." She nodded to the back of the room. "At Gabriel."

He winced, feeling slapped. "No I wasn't."

"Yeah you were. You looked like..." She turned to the stage.

Shane swallowed, panic rising in his chest. "Like what?"

"Like you caught him with your little sister or something."

Shane melted into the cushions with relief. "Just wonderin' who I've invited into my bar."

"Well, he's amazing—everybody's saying so when they come up for a refill. Don't go scaring him away." She swapped his empty bottle for the full one.

"Keep 'em comin', Jeanne."

She grabbed a couple dirty glasses off the adjacent tables. "Only if you promise not to get drunk and punch the guy's lights out."

Shane imagined the start of such a confrontation, his hands fisted around Gabriel's open collar. The fantasy didn't end in a punch though, and he felt his face burn, glad it was dim. "Another whiskey'd be appreciated, next time you're in my neighborhood."

"You're the boss."

Yeah. So why'd he feel so goddamn powerless right now?

Chapter Two

"Thank you. Good night."

Shane woke from his trance as Gabriel switched the mic off to furious clapping and set his mandolin in its case, snapped it closed. Shane squinted at the clock behind the bar. One forty-five? When the fuck had that happened?

He stood and felt the clumsiness the last few hours' many drinks had lent him. Customers swarmed the counter, settling tabs and getting final orders in. Shane tucked his sweater under his arm and carried a bunch of empties to the bar, slid in behind Zach and loaded the washer before getting out of the way. He wandered around the porch, tapping the more inebriated-looking folks on the shoulder and doing his nightly designated driver matchmaking shtick. After the crowd thinned he went back to the bar, reached over to pop open the register and counted out five twenties. He glanced around for Gabriel only to find the man standing just to his left. Gabriel took off his hat and fanned his face a few times, sending his smell drifting toward Shane.

Shane held the bills out. "Here you go."

"The ad said seventy-five," Gabriel said, but he folded the twenties and tucked them inside his cigarette case.

"You're damn good, and the crowd liked what you do. Hoped I might bribe you into coming back, regular as you want."

Gabriel grinned, maybe drunk, maybe supremely relaxed. "Sounds good."

Shane swallowed and did his level-best to keep their eye contact to a minimum. "You live close?"

Gabriel shook his head. "But I'm lookin' for someplace to stay 'round here. Temporary. You know anybody with a couch to let?"

Shane took a deep drink before he replied. "For how long?"

Gabriel raised his shoulders, too graceful to be called a shrug.

"What's that mean? A night? A week? Six months?"

"Maybe a week," Gabriel said.

"I dunno about a week, but I got a couch upstairs. For the night at least."

"You live here?"

Shane nodded. "I'm heading up now. Take it or leave it."

Gabriel left him to go back to the stage, returning with a small, ancient suitcase in one hand, instrument in the other.

Shane shouted over the din to Jeanne and Zach. "You kids good down here?"

"We're fine, boss. See you tomorrow," Jeanne said.

"See you Sunday," Zach added.

Shane glanced at Gabriel and blamed his shiver on the dispersing crowd. He heard and felt the man behind him as he walked through the sunken porch area to the side exit, up the wooden steps to the second floor. He unlocked the door and flipped on the living room lights, actually missing the cold air as they went inside. He'd cranked the heat up and now he regretted it, the apartment feeling oppressive.

"That's the couch," Shane said, pointing. "Bathroom's past the kitchen. Don't steal nothin'."

He turned to find Gabriel smiling, looking around the room—his late grandmother's taste, deep yellow walls and old, handsome furniture that was wasted on Shane's nonexistent design-eye and bachelor housekeeping habits. He grabbed the work shirt and grease-smeared jeans he'd left on the floor that afternoon and took them to his room, snatching his shorts off the kitchen linoleum as he went. He poured himself a glass of water and downed it at the sink.

He addressed Gabriel over the counter that separated the kitchen and living room. "What d'you drink? Wine?"

"Sure."

Shane grabbed a bottle from the cabinet above the fridge, one of the three reds the bar carried. He uncorked it and opened the cupboard, eyeballing the wineglasses he'd inherited with the rest of his memaw's classy stuff. The stemware screamed romance to him and he shut the door on it. He strolled to the living room and plunked the open bottle on the side table between the couch and the easy chair and took a seat in the latter. Gabriel took a drink from the bottle and held it out for Shane. Shane only ever drank wine at weddings and family holiday meals and he bet he'd wake up the next day and remember why that was. But it tasted good, tasted like everything about this night. Warm and dark, different than all the things he considered normal.

They passed the bottle back forth and shot the shit for a while, trading stories about growing up in Louisiana—about Shane's childhood outside Baton Rouge, Gabriel's early life with his crazy, superstitious grandmother in New Orleans, and his late teen years and twenties spent with his father in Havana.

"Explains that fucked-up accent," Shane said, taking the bottle back. "You speak fluent Spanish, then? Or just sing it?"

Gabriel rattled off something Shane didn't understand past "*Sí*."

"Guess so. Hope it's twice as comprehensible as your English... So that's where you learned mandolin? Is it a Cuban thing?"

"Not really." Gabriel gave the case by his foot a gentle kick. "Found this in my maw-maw's attic when I was tiny. She di'n know where it came from. Let me have it. Taught myself from a book I stole from a music shop."

Shane nodded. "I don't know how to play any instruments."

"I play lots. Saw you got a bluegrass night, and folk and blues. You ever need something down there—fiddle or bass or any kind of guitar—you tell me."

"Sure," Shane said. "Pays even worse than a solo gig though."

"I don' care. I jus' like to play."

Shane took a drink, cleared his throat, feeling shifty inside his clothes. "Fuckin' hot in here." As he shrugged his shirt off he realized what it must look like. He wondered if that wasn't why he'd done it. He had an undershirt on beneath his button-up, but Gabriel didn't. Gabriel slid his dress shirt off his tan shoulders and it was just bare, damp tattooed flesh with no barriers.

"Notes," Shane said dimly, eyes darting across the black and blue ink that etched sheet music all over Gabriel's chest and neck and biceps. "What song is it?"

"All sorts," Gabriel said, predatory eyes narrowing for a fraction of a second. "You have any? Tattoos?"

He shook his head. "Always wanted one, but I don't commit well. Can't ever think of something I guess I'd still want in forty years."

"Mine help me remember," Gabriel said.

"Songs?"

He shook his head. "People."

Shane didn't ask him to elaborate. "So...what brings you to Shiloh, anyhow? Why ain't you back in New Orleans, playing there? Cashing in on some of that Carnivale crowd?"

"I don't like going back there anymore."

"So why're you here?" Shane took a drink. "Why not Baton Rouge, at least?"

"I went... A club owner there, he sent me here. Said your place is somethin' special."

Shane snorted. "'Special' meaning it's the only place with a liquor license for twenty bog-stinking miles."

"No, it's special." Gabriel held his eyes a moment. "You know it, jus' like everybody else down there."

Shane shrugged. "My Aunt Marie opened this place after she inherited the house. She worked for thirty years making weddin' dresses and then her hands started hurting

too much to keep going.” He told Gabriel about how she’d intended it to be a fun venue for receptions, over-the-top bridal themed. Turned out it wasn’t high-class enough for most brides, but regular old thirsty folks loved it—all the antique framed wedding photos she’d picked up at estate sales, the neon signs from drive-thru chapels, the garters nailed into the window frames to hold the sequin- and pearl-encrusted curtains open. It started out a novelty and evolved into more—into an experience. “I bartended down there from when it opened in ’02 ’til I became the owner, two years ago.”

“You inherit this place, then?” Gabriel asked.

Shane shook his head. “I bought it from her for a couple thousand dollars. She wanted to give it to me outright but I wouldn’t let her. Just paid her what I had.”

“Why she decide to leave?”

“Got married, actually. Moved to Plano with her new husband.”

“Very romantic.” Gabriel smiled at that and they passed the bottle between them for a couple silent minutes.

Shane was finding it harder and harder to remember not to stare at Gabriel. He wanted to blame the wine for what he was feeling, though it’d started when he was totally sober. That man...he was seductive, without making a single flirtatious remark and crossing any physical boundaries. It was in the way he accepted or offered the bottle, how he narrowed his eyes when he smiled, pursed his lips at some comment or other of Shane’s. He was more beautiful than any woman Shane had ever been with—hell, than any Shane had ever *seen*—and it made his body ache. Any minute now, Shane would find his sense and turn all this carnal curiosity into male insecurity, quit with the friendliness and get back to good old-fashioned defensive bigotry. Not that he was a bigot. That was the one thing he hadn’t inherited from his old man. But he sure as hell wished he could muster a taste of it right now...might give him the scare he needed to beat it the fuck out of this room and get a purchase on his manhood.

Gabriel set the bottle on the table with a distinctly empty-sounding clank.

"Les watch something," he half-slurred. He fixed Shane with a long, devious look then crawled to the cabinet beneath the TV, flung the doors open and began rummaging. Shane knew damn well what he was looking for. Only one thing drunk men went looking for with that kind of gusto—unless they were *Star Wars* fans, and he bet Gabriel didn't know an Ewok from his asshole.

"If you're looking for porn you'll have no luck there."

Gabriel turned and cocked an eyebrow at him. "Where, then?"

Shane got to standing, found his wobbly land legs and walked to one of the disused rooms in the back, still piled with his grandfather's things. He heard Gabriel's footsteps behind him. He reached into a paper shopping bag by the overflowing closet and lifted out the stack of ancient fishing magazines that concealed his modest stash.

"Ah," Gabriel said.

"My last girlfriend was kind of a basket case about that stuff." Most of Shane's girlfriends over the years had been...except for a couple who'd been into it, but both of them turned out to be total psychos in other respects. Always one thing or another with the women Shane seemed to attract. He grabbed a few DVDs and handed them to Gabriel. "You pick. I need a piss."

He hid in the bathroom for a few minutes, staring blearily at himself in the mirror. Knowing what was going to happen. He tried to picture any one of those psycho girlfriends' faces, but all he could see were black eyes, black hair, tan skin, lips that made his dick stiffen with thoughts he didn't want. His heart was pounding as he emerged. He opened another bottle and held on to the neck for dear life as he returned to the living room. Gabriel had plugged in the string of Christmas lights that had been hanging around the window since long before Shane moved in. Surely his grandmother had been planning on taking them down after the holidays, but Shane never got around to stuff like that.

He downed three swigs and took a seat on the floor, back against the couch. Gabriel was fucking around hopelessly with the remotes. He didn't even belong in the same century with a DVD player.

"Gimme that." Shane put his hand out. He got the disc playing in seconds flat and Gabriel took the wine from him, settling a couple feet to his left on the carpet, way too close. Way too far away.

They traded the bottle back and forth for ten minutes, Shane barely processing the images flashing by on the TV, none of them having the first thing to do with the ache between his legs. He took a final, deep slug of wine and took them where he damn well knew Gabriel wanted to go.

"I gotta jerk," Shane said.

He didn't wait for permission, just unbuckled his belt and unzipped his fly, shoved his shorts down enough to take his cock out. His periphery told him Gabriel was following suit. He glued his eyes on the screen, as if an arrow might shoot out of a hidden trap in the wall and thwack into his heart if he even thought about glancing to the left.

He watched the movie, an idiotic scene he'd sat through a few times before. He wanted to find the woman attractive, blame her for his arousal, but she registered in his brain as an abstract pile of fake breasts and collagen lips and bleached hair, too-smooth hairless pussy. He was relieved the sight of the male porn star did even less for him. So why were his eyes so fucking hungry, dying to watch the man sitting next to him?

He heard Gabriel moan, a soft, rhythmic sound. He couldn't help himself—he looked. Just a glance, enough to register a nest of curly black hair, those talented, slender fingers wrapped around a long cock. Long, but not huge. Not near as big as Shane. He smiled to himself, smug, then felt immediately drunk and stupid. *You want to fuck the guy. Having a bigger dick's a pretty pathetic attempt at bolstering your manhood, jackass.*

And he did want to fuck him. And he knew Gabriel wanted that. To fuck or to get fucked. Better be the latter, since Shane wasn't taking anything up the ass, no matter how shit-faced or horny he let himself get, no matter how hot the guy was.

Spurred by a million hot chemicals racing through his dick, Shane glanced to his left again and didn't look away. Gabriel's eyes slid from the screen to Shane's face, then down to his stroking hand. He licked his lips, the gesture looking more reflexive than seductive. He looked to Shane's face again.

Shane had no clue what to do. He'd gotten into this deeper than his sober self would have ever wanted. Panic made his mouth dry but he let his darting eyes settle on Gabriel's steady black ones, knowing he must look like a pleading man.

Save me, he thought. *Decide for me, so it's not my fault*. He could almost swear the man nodded. Gabriel looked back to the screen and Shane did the same.

The blonde was going down on a cop—actually, a criminal dressed as a cop, if Shane remembered the so-called plot correctly. The blowjob looked painful. Too fast and rough, no subtlety, fake nails glinting like a liability. If a woman ever blew Shane like that he'd say, "Baby, I gotta fuck you right now," just to get away from that scary mouth.

"I suck cock way better than that," Gabriel murmured.

"I'll bet," Shane said, then registered Gabriel's words. He snapped his head to the left. "You actually sucked cock before?"

Gabriel paused a second before saying, "Yeah."

Shane's hand froze. His brain was unable to coordinate multiple parts of his body at once and it was his mouth's turn now. A dark, defensive part of him wanted to use a slur, but his momma had raised him better than that. Plus it'd take one big fucking hypocritical nerve and he knew it. "You gay?" he finally asked.

"Not for everybody."

"You bi?" Shane had never really believed people were bi—he'd figured it was just something gay guys said until they got themselves figured out.

Gabriel nodded. Shane had seen Gabriel work his magic on women downstairs and he believed him. Girls had approached him during breaks between songs, and he'd had an easy grace with them, nothing fake about the sexual interest he'd communicated with his body language.

They both turned back to the movie again and Shane felt more naked than he had in his entire life. He fisted his cock but didn't stroke. He wanted this man, just as he wanted a beautiful woman. More. And Gabriel's charisma...it had a feminine undertone to it. Shane wasn't attracted to men. He was attracted to *one* man. This one. And this one was beautiful, and Shane wanted to fuck him the way he'd fuck a woman. He repeated the thought a few times, let his fist begin to pump again.

Gabriel cleared his throat, the noise sounding tight. "I suck cock better than that," he repeated, mischief in his voice. "Even big, thick ones like yours."

"That what you like?" Shane asked, eyes aimed straight ahead.

"Yeah."

His grip tightened as his fist sped up. "You askin' me?"

"You invitin' me?"

Fuck you, man, just say yes. "I dunno."

Gabriel moved. Shane turned to watch him get to his knees, letting his underwear ride up to half-hide his cock. He faced Shane, dug one elbow in the couch cushions and propped his jaw on his hand, so casual it was cruel. "I'd love to suck your cock, Shane."

Shane's heart raced. He shut his eyes, kept jerking until he felt Gabriel's knees nudging his calves open. He groaned as two hands ran up his legs from the ankle to the thigh, squeezing.

"Lemme see," Gabriel whispered.

Shane let him grasp his wrist, pull his hand away and set it to the side. He swallowed deep and almost choked when a warm, unfamiliar fist closed around his base, slender, string-calloused fingers measuring him with slow, appraising strokes.

“Sit on the couch, Shane.”

Fuck, that voice. It should dampen the urge, hearing a man speak, feeling a big hand wrapped around him this way, but it only made Shane ache worse. He opened his eyes, wincing, feeling helpless. He braced his hands on the cushions and pushed himself up onto the sofa. Gabriel shuffled forward on his knees, tugged Shane’s jeans a few inches farther down his thighs. Shane watched his face, the filthy concentration in his dark eyes, mouth opening, tongue wetting his lips. Those slow strokes kept Shane burning, kept his entire body hot and hurting. He heard a groan and it took him a moment to realize it was his own.

“Do it,” he whispered. He closed his eyes, leaned his head back and fisted the upholstery at his sides. He tried to conjure the woman from the movie, the one still grunting in the background. His eyes opened to stare at the screen but the images felt like an assault and he shut them tighter. Gabriel’s hand slowed and his other palm slid up Shane’s thigh. Any second now. He swore he felt hot breath steaming against his dick. Then, wet heat.

He bucked against the cushions, from surprise and pleasure and panic. Lips, firm and tight, slid halfway down his cock then back up, again and again. The hard, slick, expert pressure of the man’s tongue pressed the ridge along the underside of his erection. Shane tried again to replace him with a woman. Any woman. Or nothingness, pure sensation. Fat fucking chance.

The heat took him deeper, adding suction—just the right amount. This man knew what a blowjob was about, how to make it equal parts worship and service. Shane realized something in a flash, something so obvious and so frightening it stripped away all his pointless attempts at denial.

He was getting sucked by a man. And who was he trying to kid? He wanted it.

He opened his eyes, pointed them right where they ached to be, on Gabriel's beautiful face. He reached both hands down and pushed the wavy black hair back from his stubbly cheeks, tucked it behind his ears so it wouldn't obscure Shane's view. He kept one palm on the back of Gabriel's head, stroked his own belly with the other.

"That's good. That's so fucking good, boy."

He felt Gabriel moan around his dick, a hungry, needy noise.

"Suck me. Suck my cock."

Gabriel's pumping hand sped up, eager. He was getting hot, losing some of his grace, but Shane didn't give a good goddamn. He'd never seen a woman look so hypnotized, doing this to him. Gabriel's skin was flushed, perspiration beading on his forehead. He took more, another inch, another, until he had nearly all of Shane buried in his mouth and throat, until Shane could hear and feel him gagging. It only seemed to excite the man more.

"That's so hot," Shane muttered.

Gabriel paused a moment then pulled back, giving Shane's cock the faintest graze on his teeth as he slid it out. He turned his attention to the head, lapping and sucking, tonguing Shane's slit and stroking the length of his dick with a tight, steady fist.

"Yeah. Don't you dare stop."

Gabriel's brows knitted, a moment of deep, even painful arousal. He freed his mouth, met Shane's eyes and held them. "I'm thirsty, Shane."

The words tightened Shane's body, shot down his spine like electricity and knocked his wind out. That mouth, that voice. Those fucking pitch-black eyes, locked on his.

Gabriel looked away, put his mouth back to work and let Shane catch his breath. Shane tangled his fingers in that messy hair, held Gabriel's head, wanting to possess him and control him, or to cling to such an illusion even as his man had him near to pleading.

"Don't you stop. Keep sucking that cock. Keep sucking me."

Gabriel did as he was told, kept the pleasure coming, kept Shane on the brink longer than anybody'd ever done before. His mouth eased as he took Shane to the edge, holding release just out of his grasp.

"Come on, motherfucker. Make me come." He pulled Gabriel's head close, forced his cock deeper between those sucking lips. The smug, dirty noise Gabriel made threw Shane overboard. The heat and excitement and need pooled and boiled between his legs and he came, pulling his hips back, slipping his head from Gabriel's mouth so he could watch the come shoot between his lips and across his tongue until Shane had nothing left to give.

Sobriety punched him in the head, rearranging reality. He heard himself muttering, "yeah, yeah, yeah," under his breath, felt two mismatched male hands gripping his dick, saw the beautiful, strange musician from the bar kneeling on the rug before him, swallowing Shane's come. The scrap of rational thought left in his brain told Shane he was supposed to be disgusted and pissed to high heaven, but his instincts had only one agenda.

He shoved a hand under each of Gabriel's armpits and hauled him awkwardly to his feet. "C'mere," Shane ordered.

Gabriel got a knee beside either of Shane's thighs, straddling his lap. Shane pulled Gabriel's open pants halfway down his ass, yanked at the waistband of his shorts to expose his cock. He'd never touched another man before and Gabriel felt foreign and exotic—smooth skin, stiff and pulsing and blazing hot. Shane felt the exact opposite of how he'd guessed with his hand wrapped around this stranger's dick. He felt powerful, big and insanely masculine. Gabriel moaned at the touch, setting a hand on each of Shane's shoulders and leaning in, making him feel all that weight, smell everything similar and different about their skin and bodies. Shane listened to Gabriel's rasping breaths, wanting more.

"Talk to me, boy." He squeezed his hand tight, drew it up and down Gabriel's cock in long, mean strokes. "Tell me what you're thinkin'."

"Since I first saw you," Gabriel said through his panting, "all I been able to think about is how I can get my mouth 'round your dick."

"Guess you got what you wanted then."

Gabriel moaned his agreement as Shane sped up his pulls. He tugged at Shane's undershirt and Shane let him peel it up and off his body. Warm, damp hands appraised Shane's chest and arms, just as countless women had but so utterly different.

"D'you fuck or get fucked?" Shane held his breath, fearing one answer, fearing the pleasure he knew he'd get from the other.

"With men?" Gabriel asked through a moan. "Get fucked."

Shane's spent cock twitched as he fought to keep from imagining it, to keep from groaning from the dark excitement coursing in his veins.

"I like it rough," Gabriel whispered. "Bet you fuck nice an' rough."

Shane kept silent, bit back every animal promise his body was dying for him to make to this man. He kept pumping Gabriel's cock, squeezing his hard thigh with the other hand. He rubbed his hip and felt the eager flex of bone and muscle under Gabriel's skin. His palm crept back, back, until his fingers dug into the firm, ripe flesh of his ass. Shane felt the man in his lap burning hotter and felt himself coming apart too, ripping into pieces from the power and helplessness and fear and want. He stared at Gabriel's tattoos and lost himself in those hundreds of black and blue notes, dozens of snatches of music he couldn't translate.

He stroked Gabriel's hard cock, palmed his ass cheek. His fingers slid into his crack, holding steady for a moment as he drank in the guttural moan Gabriel rewarded him with. Behind it was cheesy synthesizer, strangers' grunts and dirty murmurings, the movie's pathetic attempts at eroticism impossibly paled by what was happening in Shane's drunken reality.

Gabriel's hips were eager, thrusting his cock into Shane's fist, clenching the cleft of his ass around Shane's fingertips. Shane didn't think he'd ever seen anybody get so fucking riled up. The man looked crazy, panting and trembling and moaning, and he

looked beautiful. Shane wanted to take him to the edge and hold him there, watch him fall, see him wrecked by what Shane could do to him. He wanted to be better than any other guy Gabriel had ever had, wanted him hooked, wanting him fucking *faithful*. Who the fuck's thoughts were these?

Shane edged the tip of his middle finger deep between Gabriel's cheeks. The hands gripping his shoulders squeezed tight, short nails digging, maybe breaking skin—Shane didn't give a shit.

"I know what you want, boy." He took a breath and pressed his fingertip to the puckered skin of Gabriel's asshole.

Gabriel's hips bucked, bringing his body closer to Shane's. One of his hands moved to the back of Shane's head.

"Say my name," Shane said, rubbing the entrance. "Say my name and I'll give you what you want."

"Shane," he gasped. "Shane. Shane."

"Say please."

"Please. Please, Shane."

Dizziness clouded Shane's mind but he had what he needed—the illusion of power. With Gabriel begging, Shane was in control. He drew his hand away and spat across his fingers, brought them back to Gabriel's ass.

"Yeah. Please, Shane. Now."

He rubbed the wetness across the hole, slow and mean.

"Tell me about me fucking you," Shane said.

Gabriel moaned. "On the floor. My hand and knees."

Shane slid his finger in to the first knuckle and Gabriel gasped.

"Keep talking," Shane ordered.

Gabriel's hand went to Shane's dick, half recovered already, half hard. "Your big cock."

"What about it?" Shane forced another finger in, shallow, massaging the tight ring of muscle.

Gabriel's eyes closed, mouth frozen in a silent moan.

Shane squeezed Gabriel's throbbing dick even harder. "Tell me about my big cock."

"You fuck me," Gabriel choked out. "On your floor with your big cock. You're so deep. An' fast, like you want it to hurt."

Shane drove his fingers deeper, not caring if they were slick enough or not. Gabriel cried out in surprise or excitement or pain.

"You come," Gabriel stammered. "You pull out and come on my ass then you lick me clean."

Shane tensed but kept his hands working. "I don't drink come. Not mine or yours or the goddamn pope's."

Gabriel's eyes looked vacant, lost deep in his own pleasure and fantasies. "An' you turn me over and hold me down, and suck me 'til I shoot."

Fear and revulsion churned acid in Shane's gut but he didn't stop. He wasn't about to be the powerless one in this intimate battle. "You keep wishin' that," he said, staring Gabriel down. "'Cause you'll never get it from me."

"I wan' you to own me," Gabriel whispered.

A chill trickled down Shane's body, cooling his fevered skin like ice water. There were things he'd never do for this man, but he *did* want that. He wanted to own him.

He penetrated Gabriel deeper with his fingers, twisted and curled them, coaxing the most beautiful moans he'd ever heard, ten times more mesmerizing than the man's singing. He watched his other hand, the dark skin of Gabriel's swollen head in his fist. He imagined bringing it to his mouth, tasting him. Rubbing the smooth skin over his lips and wetting them with this man's pre-come. He clenched his eyes shut, wanting to drive the thought away. Gabriel's groans were impossible to block out. Shane plunged his fingers deep, aching at the thought of that tight heat wrapped around his cock.

"Shane."

He opened his eyes, gave up and gave in, watched this man coming undone from his touch and wallowed in it.

"Come for me, boy."

Gabriel leaned closer, a sweat-slick hand gripping the back of Shane's neck, the other on his arm. He rested his chin at Shane's cheek, his hot, wine-sweetened breath warming his temple. His body trembled, hips pumping in tight, greedy motions in time with Shane's fist.

"Come on. Come on."

Shane drunkenly imagined someone showing up, some faceless acquaintance coming through his door and finding him with his fingers jammed to the third knuckle up this beautiful man's ass. It should have scared him, but it didn't. The only thing that mattered was making Gabriel moan and buck, making him feel so good he'd never look at another guy, never want anything he couldn't get from Shane. His fist tightened at the idea and he felt Gabriel stiffen against him with a harsh gasp. Hot wetness lashed Shane's stomach and he slowed his hands, still jacking, just as he would if this had been his own cock.

Gabriel's groan tapered off to a low, satisfied chuckle, pure contentedness. He leaned back and Shane took in his flushed face and heaving chest, damp hair plastered to his cheeks, heavy lids hiding those deadly eyes. Shane took his hands back, wiped them on the undershirt beside him on the couch. He pushed Gabriel's hair from his face and did the only thing his body wanted – he kissed him.

It felt sinful, darker and dirtier than any other act that evening. This strange man's stubble scraped Shane's chin as he deepened the kiss, plunged his tongue into Gabriel's mouth to taste him. He pressed his palms tight over Gabriel's jaw, tilted his head, forced his way farther inside. He wanted to bite him – leave him marked and bleeding, branded. He wanted to hurt him and scare him, make him run away so Shane wouldn't find himself in this position again.

Warm fingers rubbed the come into Shane's skin, an act of possession if he'd ever felt one. He broke his mouth from Gabriel's and yanked his head back. He mopped his stomach with the undershirt, wadded it into a ball. He shifted Gabriel, pushed him onto the next cushion and stood. He tucked his hard cock behind his underwear and zipped up his jeans.

Shane's heart raced as he wandered down the hall to the big parlor he'd made into his bedroom. He shoved the undershirt deep inside his hamper, grabbed a pillow off his bed and a couple blankets from the linen closet, went back to the living room. Gabriel had got his pants back up but he still had that look of lazy seduction plastered all over his gorgeous face.

"Here." Shane tossed him the bedding as gruffly as he could manage, went to the TV and clicked it off. "I have to go in to work at ten tomorrow, so be prepared to leave then."

Gabriel smiled. "Sure. And thank you. For the wine and the couch."

Shane didn't want to think about or acknowledge wine or couches anymore. "It's not a problem. I'll see you tomorrow if you're still around."

That pretty-ass grin again. "Sweet dreams, Shane."

Chapter Three

Shane peeled his eyes open to find his room lit by streaming sunlight. It deepened the ache in his temples and sinuses, exacerbated the drum-pounding force of the blood pulsing in his ears.

"Fuck *me*."

He squinted at the clock—ten fourteen. So much for getting to the garage early. His mouth tasted like old wine and dried phlegm and he made himself yet another promise to never drink so much again. He looked down at his legs and found he still had his jeans on, belt unbuckled. Then the fear and recollection hit him hard as a kick in the balls.

He lay still, stared at the ceiling, at the motionless blades of the fan. His heart thumped, sending tremors echoing through his body. He didn't need confirmation that he hadn't dreamt last night. It'd been real. That man had been real and so had Shane's pleasure, as real as the panic gripping him now. That man was probably on his couch. Shane entertained a strange, hopeful thought. *Maybe he robbed me blind and disappeared forever.* That'd sure as hell be better than having to face the guy.

He listened to the old house, straining for sounds of a stirring guest. None. He rolled off the bed and his bruised brain flopped to the other side of his skull. He dragged his ass to the bathroom, relieved by the fan's white noise, the murmur of the water as he turned on the shower. Brushing his teeth while the water heated, Shane felt a little calmer. He swallowed six aspirin and leaned on the sink a long time, counting his breaths.

He felt better after the shower, better once he changed into clean clothes and adjusted to the challenge of walking. He lingered in his room, tidying things or at least

moving them around. He got his sac together and ventured into the kitchen, took a deep breath and looked across the tall counter that separated it from the living room.

Gabriel was stretched on his couch, facing away – black hair against Shane’s white pillowcase, bare foot and bare, tattooed arm peeking from under the blanket.

Shane didn’t feel as he’d expected. He didn’t hate the guy or feel scared. Not even embarrassed. He didn’t particularly want him here, but he wasn’t all that bothered. He filled the coffeemaker and switched it on, went to the living room. He passed Gabriel and gathered the two empty wine bottles from the floor beside the couch, let them clank together. Gabriel moved, a small, sleepy shifting of his body. Shane opened the screen door, thanked God for the cool winter air for the second time in his life. He filled his lungs with it as he trotted down the steps, tossed the bottles in the huge recycling bin behind the bar’s back entrance.

As Shane closed the door behind him, he found Gabriel unmoved. He gave that profile a good long study. Just as handsome as he’d thought last night, not diminished by sobriety or regret. Still, Shane fled back to the kitchen.

He didn’t know what he expected to see on that man’s face when they inevitably made eye contact. Cockiness, maybe. Triumph, if Gabriel was one of those guys Shane had heard about, the kind who lived to corrupt straight men. Or maybe nothing at all – no sign that anything had gone on between them. And that scared Shane worse than he wanted to admit.

But when Shane rounded the corner from his room to the hallway and came face-to-face with him, Gabriel didn’t look like any of those things. His lips curled into a smile, mischievous but not smug. Fond and a touch shy. He was wearing pants but nothing else and carrying a small leather shaving bag.

“Mornin’,” Shane said, determined to act as if he were fine with all this.

“Mornin’. You min’ if I shower?”

Shane shook his head. “There’s towels in the cupboard by the door.”

“Thanks.”

Shane poured a cup of coffee and emptied the dishwasher, hands and brain desperate for things to do. He decided to go ahead and make breakfast, just as he would if it were a girl in his bathroom, if only for the activity and the charade of normalcy.

He was peeling strips of bacon from the package when Gabriel emerged, towel knotted around his waist, pants tucked under his arm. His wet hair was slicked back, all his breathtaking features on full display.

Shane poured him a mug of coffee and slid it across the center island between them with what he hoped was a bored face.

Gabriel's smile conveyed his thanks and he took a sip, setting his pants and bag on the counter. Shane looked to his stomach, tan skin draped over lean muscle, the northernmost point of the soft black hair peeking from behind the low-riding towel... that rose-patterned, ancient bath towel Shane associated with his grandmother sunbathing. He turned his attention back to the bacon, hangover and confusion redoubled.

"Thanks for the couch," Gabriel said. His voice slid down Shane's spine like a warm finger.

"Sure." Shane kept his eyes on the frying pan, laying the strips perfectly parallel, making a distraction out of it.

"An' the gig."

Shane nodded.

"I heard tonight is Latin dance night."

Shane looked over his shoulder. "Yeah. Not sure if the band's got any openings though."

"I was more interested in the dancin'."

"Oh. That another thing you picked up in Cuba?"

Gabriel nodded.

Shane went to the fridge to pull out a carton of eggs and a stick of butter. "Well, dance all you want. It's a free country."

"Are you 'round tonight?"

Unseen to Gabriel, Shane shut his eyes and tried to unravel what that question made him feel...a twisted cocktail of dread and excitement and hope. "Might be. I usually drop in to check everything's okay with the staff, hang around for a drink." *Or three.*

"Maybe I see you 'round then?"

"Maybe." Shane cleared his throat. "You as hungover as I am?" He looked over his shoulder again.

Gabriel shook his head.

Shane laughed to himself. "'Course you ain't." He cracked five eggs into a bowl and scrambled them, turned the bacon over. "I'm not leavin' at ten," he said. "Obviously, since it's pushin' eleven. And I ain't cookin' for one here. Feel free to join me." He kept the invitation casual.

"I'd like that. Smells good."

Shane wiped his fingers on a dish towel and turned. Goddamn if the previous night's feelings weren't still there. Just looking at the length of this stranger's raw, lean body, Shane felt his cock rousing. He'd had this man last night. Had his mouth and hands, had him pleading and desperate, needing what Shane could give him. Heat and tension fisted his heart and he took a few steps, rounded the island to stand in front of Gabriel, remind both of them who was bigger, taller, whose house this was and whose rules it followed. He stared at Gabriel's beautiful face—all that black stubble, those dark irises, molasses brown in the daylight. That mouth and all the pleasure it could give.

"How old are you, anyway?" Shane asked.

"Thirty next month."

Shane nodded.

"I 'preciate everything you done for me," Gabriel said, eyes on Shane's throat. "If there's somethin' I can do to show you how grateful I am, you tell me, Shane."

He reached his hands out, slow, gave Shane plenty of time to knock them away. His fingers traced the slit between the top two snaps of Shane's work shirt. His eyes locked on Shane's and he popped the top snap open then the second, all the way down his belly.

Shane put his hands to Gabriel's face, dug his thumbs into his cheeks and held his jaw. He studied his eyes for a good long moment before he brought his lips down and settled them against Gabriel's. Not a kiss—just two open mouths touching, uneven breath warming the miniscule space between them. Gabriel's exotic scent was gone, replaced by Shane's too-familiar soap and toothpaste and coffee, the bacon smell permeating the kitchen. Shane missed others scents now, sweat and red wine and sex. He cocked his head a few degrees, drew the tip of his tongue along Gabriel's lower lip. Both their pairs of eyes were half-open and Gabriel's dark irises snapped back and forth between Shane's.

Satisfaction loosened Shane's muscles as he realized this man would never kiss him first. Shane was in charge, calling the shots, the one with the control...or so he decided to believe.

He moved his hand, brushed his thumb over Gabriel's parted lips a few times then pushed it in. That wet, hot mouth closed around his knuckle, sucking gently, tongue teasing. Shane pushed it deeper, made Gabriel suckle for a minute before he took it away and replaced it with his mouth.

Shane kissed him how he'd never kiss a woman—bossy and graceless and filthy, ramming his tongue deep, fucking those hungry lips with it. He reached between them, tugged the towel open and pulled Gabriel hard against him, wanting him to feel Shane's clothes, the bite of his belt buckle against bare skin. He ground his crotch against Gabriel's ready cock, pinned him against the edge of the counter.

Shane let Gabriel unbuckle his belt, open his fly. He let him push his jeans and underwear down and press his body close, their stiff cocks touching and setting Shane on fire. Strong, calloused hands massaged Shane's hips then slid to his ass. He held his breath, let it go, let Gabriel explore his flesh with hungry hands, kneading his muscle.

"So strong," Gabriel murmured.

Shane rubbed his cock against Gabriel's, got a hand between the man's back and the counter and palmed his ass a minute before sliding his fingers into the cleft to tease his asshole. Gabriel made two noises—a soft, awed gasp, then a happy *mmmm* as Shane stroked the puckered skin.

"I loved sucking you last night," Gabriel whispered, mouth at Shane's neck.

"I know you did."

Slow hands continued to knead Shane's ass then one came down with a light smack.

Shane rankled. "Don't forget who's in charge."

He heard a smile in Gabriel's voice as his fingers curled into claws. "Never."

They rubbed their cocks together, touched each other's bodies until the smell of burning meat snapped Shane out of the trance. "Fuck." He pushed back from the counter and hiked his pants up, jogged to the stove and tossed the smoking pan into the empty sink, flipped the burner off.

He turned to find Gabriel gone. He swore again, flipped the fan on above the stove and prayed the smoke detectors wouldn't go off.

He found Gabriel in his bedroom, running a hand along the back of the couch that helped fill the massive space. Shane watched his naked body in the warm sunlight, forgot the smoke and remembered only the sensation of pressing himself against this man.

"What d'you want?" Shane asked, taking a step closer.

Gabriel met his eyes, held the stare a long moment before speaking. "I wanna watch you."

They studied each other awhile longer, then Shane shrugged his shirt off, let his pants and shorts drop and kicked them aside. He ran his hand down his chest and stomach and gripped his cock, gave it slow strokes and watched Gabriel's reaction. He loved that look—utter worship. If the boy wanted a show then Shane would give him one.

"Lie on the bed," he said.

Gabriel went to stretch across the rumpled covers and Shane followed, feeling domineering and mean and unafraid. He slung a leg over Gabriel's waist and straddled him, took hold of his own dick again, gave it slow pulls designed to torture them both. He stared down at the beautiful man on his bed.

"This what you wanted to see?"

Gabriel's lips parted but he didn't speak. He rubbed his palms over Shane's thighs, in thrall.

Shane reached his free hand out and swept his fingertips across Gabriel's lips before sliding two fingers between them. Gabriel grasped Shane's wrist and sucked hard, that same face as when he'd taken his cock.

"Good... You always take what I give you." He took his hand back, fondling his balls as he masturbated himself, loving the look on Gabriel's face. He let Gabriel touch his thighs again, his stomach and side, his ass.

"You're so big," Gabriel murmured. "All of you." He kept squeezing Shane's backside, eyes on his cock. The hungry touch made Shane nervous and he moved, shuffled back and shoved his knees between Gabriel's thighs to spread them wide open.

"Touch yourself," he ordered.

Gabriel fisted his dick, pleased himself with slow, masterful strokes. "I had to do this 'fore I went to sleep las' night," he mumbled.

"What'd you think about?"

Gabriel moaned. His free hand ran down his belly to between his legs, giving his balls a couple tugs before two fingers rubbed his asshole. "'Bout you, Shane. 'Bout you fucking me." He penetrated himself, fingertips disappearing along with Shane's composure. Shane imagined his cock in their place, imagined squeezing himself into Gabriel's tight body and riding him right here, on this bed. But not on his back. From behind, so Gabriel wouldn't see how helpless Shane would surely look as he came.

"Fuck yourself," Shane said. "Fuck yourself and watch my cock."

He stroked himself faster and rougher, excited beyond belief by Gabriel's rapt expression. Excited by other things...by the soft-looking dark hair on Gabriel's forearms and the tendons twitching beneath his tan skin. By those fingers, the ones sliding in and out of his asshole and the ones rubbing pre-come over the crown of his cock.

"You're so big," Gabriel said again.

"You think you can handle me?"

"I wanna try. Fuck me now."

"Beg me."

"Fuck me, Shane. Please."

Shane grinned down at him, feeling cruel, high on the power. "Spread those legs wider. Open right up for me."

Gabriel brought his knees closer to his chest.

"Lemme see."

The hand pleasuring Gabriel's ass moved away, giving Shane the filthy, tempting view he wanted. He reached his own hand down and teased the hole, listened to the harsh sound of Gabriel's gasp.

"Reach over your head," Shane said. "In my bedside table drawer—there's lube in there."

Gabriel craned his torso and rummaged, finding the bottle in record time. Shane took it and snapped the cap up. He smeared the cool gel across his palm and smoothed it over his cock, then got more, brought his fingers to Gabriel's ass, easing one in, then two.

"Yeah."

"Get your hand back on your dick," Shane barked. "And keep your eyes on me."

He stroked his slick cock, slow and tight, taunting. He pushed his fingers farther into Gabriel's ass, twisted them, drew them out, forced them deeper.

"More."

Shane added his ring finger and Gabriel's groan made his pulse rocket. "You feel good, boy. Nice and tight. You're makin' me want things I never even thought about before." Things he wouldn't be doing today – maybe not ever – though they still excited him. He slid his fingers out and angled his rock-hard dick, stroked his swollen head over Gabriel's pink, puckered asshole.

"Yeah. Give it to me, Shane."

"You're forgetting who issues the orders around here." He kept his voice cool even as he was fighting his body's every instinct, willing his hips to stay still and not make him do something he'd regret.

"Please. Don' tease me, Shane."

"Me? Tease you?" Shane took his cock away and fucked Gabriel hard with his hand, rough and fast until the man stopped begging and simply moaned. Shane saw lust in every one of his features, in his swollen lips and his glazed eyes and his flushed ears and cheeks. And it was surely just like looking into a mirror.

"Come on," he whispered. "Come. Come all over yourself."

A dozen more strokes and Gabriel obeyed, every muscle tensing, ass clenching around Shane's fingers as his dick erupted, jets of come shooting across his stomach and chest. Shane waited until his body relaxed then eased his fingers out.

“Good boy.” He felt powerful and horny beyond belief, staring down at Gabriel’s panting, spent form. Then he did something he wouldn’t have if he’d bothered thinking about it even for a second. He reached down and touched Gabriel’s warm come, gathered it on his palm and smeared it over the length of his own dick, stroked himself until the friction turned sticky. He sat back and spread his legs. “C’mere.”

Gabriel got to his knees, came forward and sank to his elbows between Shane’s thighs. His mouth was working before Shane could even give the order, sliding down his shaft to take him deep, greedy hand stroking as he sucked.

“You’re so fucking dirty.” Shane wiped his hands on the comforter and cupped the back of Gabriel’s head, tangling his fingers in his wet hair. “I saw how bad you wanted me to fuck you.”

Gabriel moaned around Shane’s cock, sucked harder, hungrier.

“God, keep that up. Just like that.” Shane closed his eyes and gave in to the sensations, wondered how he’d ever be able to live without this. Then he opened them again, wanting to see that face just as he had last night. “You are fucking beautiful.”

Gabriel kept up his motions, catching Shane’s eyes with his dark ones from time to time. And Shane didn’t care. He wasn’t afraid to acknowledge what was happening anymore. All he wanted was this experience, all of this foreign and intimidating pleasure right here in his bed. This man had real and palpable power—in his beauty and his charisma and his talent—and to be able to dictate orders to him, to make him beg, made Shane feel bigger than he had in his entire life.

He kept his palm on the back of Gabriel’s head, told him who was in charge. “Good... Now do that thing you did to my head last night.”

Gabriel slid Shane’s cock nearly all the way from his mouth, locked his lips tight around the crown, sucking, teasing with his tongue. Shane moaned, clamped his hand around his base and stroked. He felt Gabriel’s rough fingers close around his fist and something about that intimacy launched him straight over the edge in an instant.

"Fuck." The orgasm rattled through his body like an earthquake, made his legs twitch as he released in Gabriel's greedy mouth, shooting for a gorgeous eternity.

He worked hard to find his breath and focus his eyes. "Holy fuck."

Shane made it to kneeling then collapsed, flopping down against the pillows. He looked at Gabriel's face and he wanted him again but different. He grabbed his arm and pulled him close, not giving a good goddamn where his mouth had just been. He kissed him, a seduction in reverse—starting out fierce and possessive then fading to a light sweeping of his lips over Gabriel's. He pushed his face against Gabriel's neck, buried himself in that smell and warmth and circled his arms tight around the man's waist.

"I don't know what you're doing to me," he said, probably just a string of muffled grunts to Gabriel.

A hand stroked his hair and ear and back, something protective in the gesture.

Shane waited for reality to sink in. He had his naked body twined around another man, the smell of their sex heavy in the air, strong as the lingering smoke from the kitchen. He was supposed to feel something different from how he was, but how he felt was perfect. Satisfied and spent and content.

"You late for work yet?" Gabriel asked, a whisper floating past Shane's ear.

He pulled his mouth from Gabriel's damp throat. "No. I don't even have to go in. I just figured I might. Something to fill a few hours."

"What d'you do?"

"I'm a mechanic."

"You take a day off," Gabriel said, stroking Shane's hair again. "You stay in bed with me 'til we too hungry to sleep. Later we go down for a drink and listen to the music."

"No more drinking for me, not for a couple days at least."

Gabriel pulled his face back a few inches and smiled at Shane. "Fine. How 'bout the rest?"

"I dunno. I'm already hungry," Shane lied. He was uncomfortable with how damn comfortable he felt right now.

"You ever been with a man before me?" Gabriel asked.

Shane felt a strong urge to haul back and hit him, revenge for how hard it stung to hear the truth laid out so bare. He swallowed. "No."

Gabriel ran his tongue over his lower lip for the briefest second, smirked, a tiny show of self-satisfaction. "You ever wanted one before?"

"No... I think I better head in to the garage." He shrugged Gabriel's arms off and rolled over, swung his feet to the floor.

Gabriel propped himself up on his hip and elbow, smiling wickedness in Shane's direction.

Shane yanked his shorts and jeans back on, buckled his belt. "What's that shit-eating grin for?"

"I jus' like lookin' at you."

"You love this, don't you? Gettin' the better of straight guys."

"You make it sound like a game, Shane."

"Yeah, well. You make it look like one, sometimes. Like right now. You look real pleased with yourself."

"I'm more interested in pleasin' you," Gabriel said.

Shane narrowed his eyes a moment, found his shirt and tugged it on. "Good. Just you remember that. And don't start forgettin' whose house this is. Who's the guest."

That evil smile again. "'Course not."

"And who's in charge."

"Never."

"Good." Good, since Shane was having a harder and harder time remembering it himself.

"Shane?"

He buttoned his shirt all the way up before he met Gabriel's eyes. "What?"

"I can use your couch again tonight?"

Shane batted a few replies around in his head before settling on cruelty. "We'll see. Now get your ass up. This ain't a halfway house."

Shane made himself busy, pulling on socks at the couch, keeping his eyes off Gabriel's naked body as the man rose and strolled from the room. Shane inhaled, deep, and blew the air out, propped his elbows on his knees and hung his head. It was easier to breathe when that man wasn't close—he was like a fire, sucking all the oxygen out of a room. Shane stood and headed for the kitchen, praying to God he'd get through the day without suffocating.

Chapter Four

Two weeks passed by in a haze—endless days full of waiting, nights drenched in wine, mornings when Shane woke up with a dry mouth and his arms wrapped around a naked male body.

Somehow it was Saturday again and nearly March. Shane didn't know what he'd managed to accomplish in the past two weeks aside from keeping the barest distance between himself and that one act he wanted and feared so deeply. But every night he managed to resist, managed to corral their encounters into a relatively safe routine—drink like fishes, fool around like teenagers, sleep like a goddamn married couple.

Shane was alone in the garage for the afternoon, free to overthink things to his heart's discontent...which was all he really knew how to do anymore. The emotional pattern had become sickeningly predictable. First, a cold feeling in his gut, shame or fear or a mix of the two. Then something warmer, curiosity and a dark thrill trickling through his veins. Then fear again. Twice in the past two weeks Gabriel hadn't turned up. Shane had busied himself helping out in the bar until last call, stayed up late watching shit TV, left the door unlocked when he eventually gave up and went to bed. Those nights gave him restless sleep, had him waking early, anxiety burning a pit in his stomach.

"Fuck," he muttered, tossed a wrench on the floor and chipped the painted cement, rubbed his temples with greasy fingers. "Shut the fuck up," he ordered his brain, knocking his fist against the side of his head.

He wasn't a man who obsessed. He didn't know how people could live this way, with a constant loop of nonsense running in their skulls like a maddening radio frequency with no tuner or volume control.

He worked harder, poured all his attention into the details. Still, at least twice a minute that face snuck through the mechanical distractions, making his heart and cock throb.

At six he threw in the towel, scribbled some notes in the work log and locked the shop. On the twenty-five-minute drive back to the Shivarree, every bump in the dirt road made Shane's hungover head pulsate with a new vengeance. And still, all he thought about was Gabriel.

Shane had never been in love, but he suspected this wasn't it. This was something worse, hot little flashes of pleasure and excitement amid a cloud of confusion and lust. Obsession. Ugly and uncontrollable. Then the next minute, a spark of joy at the ridiculous thought that maybe it wasn't one-sided. Then —

"Jesus." He angled the rearview and frowned at himself. "Shut the fuck up in there."

He parked his truck on the patchy front lawn close to the house, where it would soon be trapped as the makeshift parking lot filled up with patrons. Nobody lived close to the Shivarree except Shane and the mosquitoes. He still marveled how it attracted the brisk business it did.

"Fucking magic," he murmured and slammed his door.

The screened-in porch was already abuzz with early customers and Shane greeted the ones he knew by name, raised a hand at the ones he didn't. Jeanne was behind the bar reading a fashion magazine between refills.

She smiled at him. "That's an interesting look, boss." She gestured at her temples and Shane put his fingers to the grease smeared there. He accepted a bar towel and did a half-assed clean-up job.

He scanned the club, looking for that hat, that face, those hands. Nothing. A few of the band members who played on Latin night were setting up for the seven o'clock kick-off and Shane shivered. He both hated and loved watching that man dance.

"Everything under control here?" he asked Jeanne.

"Yup. Should be a good one."

"Where's the new guy? Brian or Ryan or whoever?"

"Ryan," Jeanne said. "He just took an empty keg out back." She smiled tightly.

Shane raised his eyebrows. "What's that look telling me?"

"I haven't got a look."

"Yeah you do. You sweet on him?"

She shrugged.

"Don't date a bartender, Miss Jeanne. 'Specially not one I hired."

"You were a bartender like, forever," she said.

"Yeah, and I wouldn't advise any woman to date me, neither."

"Whatever, Shane." She never called him Shane unless she was on the defensive.

"Anyhow, he's cute."

"Thought you said the mandolin player was cute," Shane said.

"No, I said Gabriel's *sexy*. Too sexy. I'm sticking to guys who're less pretty than me, thanks."

"That'd be every guy, Miss Jeanne. And all the girls."

She rolled her eyes at him. Then the man who was more beautiful than any woman Shane had ever seen strolled through the door, making his heart jackhammer.

"Speak of the devil," Jeanne said.

Shane thought it was an appropriate choice of words, considering how blazing hot the room suddenly felt. Gabriel headed for the bar, offering them both a grin and a dip of his brim as he slid onto a stool, provocatively close to Shane.

"Hey, Gabriel," Jeanne said. "You playin' tonight or just dancin'?"

"Dancin'," Gabriel said. "'Less you need me."

"Don't think so. Glass of red for you?"

He nodded. "Please, sha."

"You got it."

Shane aimed a look at Gabriel as Jeanne turned to open a bottle. "You watch yourself, cuttin' in the way you do."

Gabriel offered an amused, too-innocent smile.

"Just watch it," Shane said. "One of these weeks you're gonna step on the wrong man's toes. This place makes people hot-blooded." Even as he said it, Shane felt his own pulse shift, sending warmth southward.

Gabriel smiled again, kept his voice low. "I'm not afraid of hot-blooded men, Shane."

Shane didn't think he'd ever heard a syllable half as explicit as his own name coming out of this man's mouth. And he'd heard it a lot in the last two weeks, mostly when one of them had a fist wrapped around the other's cock on Shane's living room floor.

"I gotta get cleaned up." With that Shane pushed from the bar, defying his body's every instinct and moving away from that man's gravity. As he headed across the porch and up the side steps, he imagined Gabriel following. He imagined him joining Shane as he shed his clothes, as he stepped into the hot shower. Shane imagined their two tall bodies pressed together, slippery with lather, Gabriel's black hair slicked back to expose every sinful feature on that face. Shane thought about kissing him, rubbing their hard, wet cocks together, turning him around and soaping him up and making the most beautiful mistake of his life. He jacked himself with a tight fist, half disappointed when he came and opened his eyes and didn't find Gabriel there at the edge of the curtain, watching.

He toweled off, shaved, stared at his reflection and half-recognized the man staring back. He dressed in fresh clothes and got downstairs around seven thirty, the energetic music hitting him like a heat wave. Couples were already dancing, a dozen frenetic bodies twirling and dipping and in some cases practically dry humping out on the dance floor.

Shane took a seat at the bar, waved to the new guy. Okay kid, though he had a kind of self-conscious swagger that grated on Shane...acting as if he were tending bar at some fancy Manhattan place, slinging twenty-dollar martinis instead of two-buck longnecks.

"What'll it be, old man?" Ryan or Brian slapped a bar towel over his shoulder as though he'd rehearsed it—probably had—his wide-ass cocky grin rubbing Shane all sorts of wrong ways.

"I'm the most regular regular you got, kid. If you don't know my drink order by now I ain't got high hopes for your future in this business."

Brian-Ryan's face sank and Jeanne muscled by him to plunk a beer and a whiskey down at Shane's elbow. "Don't be a bully."

Shane grinned at her and downed the shot, chased it with a slip of beer. Brian-Ryan made his way to the other end of the bar and Shane bid him a mental good riddance.

As soon as the distraction of the banter faded, Shane's body turned itchy again. He swiveled his stool and glanced around, searching the colorful shadows for Gabriel. For a half a minute he thought maybe he'd gone, but no, there he was, hiding in plain sight. Shane blinked. Gabriel was leading a young woman on the dance floor in those fast, graceful steps, looking born to it. His white shirtsleeves were rolled up to his biceps, making his tan skin even darker in contrast. He wore a smile Shane knew only too well from their time alone and the sight made all the blood rush up from his cock to flood his neck and cheeks and leave him lightheaded with hot jealousy.

Shane snapped out of his trance as Jeanne spoke.

"What can't that man do?" she asked.

Shane forced his voice into an imitation of casual amusement and drained his beer. "Find a different fucking couch to crash on, for one."

Gabriel's sleeping arrangements were common knowledge among the staff, though Shane was pretty sure they hadn't given anyone cause to guess at what was really going

on upstairs. "Anyhow, he told me he lived in Havana for close to ten years. Guess he learned his moves there."

"Explains the funky accent, at any rate," Jeanne said.

Shane nodded and slid his empty bottle across the wood. Jeanne leaned in to get a fresh one out of the bar fridge and Shane stared at her tits, on full display in a low-neck, clingy shirt. He was lost in concentration, trying to muster some glimmer of his withered heterosexuality when she snapped her fingers in front of his eyes.

"Huh?"

"Jeez, Shane."

He shook his head to clear it, knowing he'd look pathetic denying he'd been staring, worse than pathetic if he tried to explain why. "God, sorry."

Jeanne smiled and rolled her eyes, tugged her shirt up an inch. "Well, that's why I bought this top. Guess it's working."

"Yeah." Shane took a drink. "It is."

"Guess I underestimated myself. Now all I need's some dance moves like those and maybe I'd stand a chance with our Casanova." She nodded to the floor and Shane turned. Gabriel had his talented hips locked with the young woman's, two bodies making art look like sex or maybe the other way around. He led her in flawless movements, thrilling Shane and pissing him off with equal fervor. Every few turns Gabriel's eyes met Shane's over his partner's shoulder, their message intense and pointed but tough to translate.

"He's a dangerous one," Jeanne said through a sigh.

Shane nodded. He thought about the other Gabriel, maybe the *real* Gabriel—the pleading man who begged to be dominated, begged to suck Shane's cock when they were alone. That was the one Shane wanted, not this commanding man in total control of the hypnotized woman he led. Shane needed to see that man on his knees again. He needed and wanted to give Gabriel what he'd asked for that very first morning in

Shane's bed, needed to fuck him 'til he pleaded for mercy and knew with no trace of a doubt that Shane was the only person who could satisfy him.

The song came to an abrupt end and the dancers all turned to clap for the band, then the eventuality Shane had seen coming for two weeks finally arrived. A tall, beefy regular Shane recognized approached Gabriel and his partner and a tense conversation ensued. It escalated in seconds, seemingly spurred by the boyfriend's drunkenness. A new song started up as things turned tense, the girlfriend clearly telling the boyfriend to calm down just as he did the opposite. He gave Gabriel a sharp shove in the shoulder, knocking him back a pace.

Shane got to his feet.

Gabriel held his ground for a handful of seconds, looking poised to relent and diffuse the tensions. Then he hauled off and punched the boyfriend, caught him with a hook to the jaw that Shane could hear even over the music.

Jeanne gasped.

The song fell to pieces as the band stopped.

Shane crossed the dance floor in a flash, locked his arms around Gabriel's waist as a patron did the same to the boyfriend. Gabriel's body felt spring-loaded, eager to finish this.

"Not in my fucking bar," Shane growled and dragged Gabriel back a few paces, let his middle go and gripped him by the upper arm. He led him gruffly down the little hallway past the office to the restrooms, pushed in the door to the single-person men's room and shoved Gabriel through, slammed it behind them.

The bright light was blinding after the motley shadows of the club and Gabriel seemed taller, starker, a stranger all over again.

"Enjoyin' yourself?" Shane asked. He turned to flip the door lock then took a step toward Gabriel.

"Very much."

"I told you I seen this comin' for weeks now."

"I know."

"You're here as a guest. You start any more shit in this club and you'll get your ass tossed back out in the swamp, understand?" Shane came close, nearly chest to chest, wanting as always to remind Gabriel who was stronger, who was in charge.

"I upset you, Shane?"

His expression echoed everything Shane knew was true in his own heart—he was ten times more torn up from having to watch Gabriel dance with that woman than he was pissed about the fight.

"No. I just want you to remember whose territory you're in before you go getting yourself in deep with my customers. 'Specially if you want to keep sleepin' where you have been, boy."

He watched Gabriel swallow, black eyes on Shane's mouth. "I sleep wherever you tell me to, Shane."

"Yeah, you do." He brought his face close, their noses touching, breath mingling. Gabriel gasped as Shane grabbed the back of his head, knocked his hat to the ground and rammed his tongue into Gabriel's mouth, cutting off the sound. He kissed him rough for a minute, maybe less, sucked hard on Gabriel's lower lip as he pulled away, releasing it with a faint snap.

"Now," Shane said, voice low and dangerous. He pulled his keys from his pocket and unclipped the one to the apartment, pressed it into Gabriel's palm. "You're done down here for the rest of the night."

Gabriel narrowed his eyes, looking as if he wanted to say something but holding his tongue.

Shane took a deep breath and returned the stare. "Now you go upstairs, and you wait for me. You open up a bottle from over the fridge and you sit in my living room and I'll be up when I goddamn well feel like it."

Gabriel nodded.

"Good." Shane gave his cheek a couple soft slaps and stepped aside as Gabriel unlocked the door and slipped out, letting in a flare of brassy music. Shane flipped the lock again and leaned against the door, feeling as though he'd fall right through the wood, land flat on his back and crack his skull open. Might be a blessing. Instead he steadied himself, took a few deep breaths and went back out into the bar, relieved Gabriel was nowhere to be seen. Shane returned to his abandoned beer and sat back down across from Jeanne. He rubbed the counter's worn varnish with his thumb, losing himself in the motion.

"Everything all right, boss?"

"Yeah. I gave him the boot for the rest of the night."

"Seems harsh. Looked to me like Jesse started it." She turned her eyes to the big boyfriend, deep in an argument with his livid girlfriend by the far wall.

"That man works for me now. I hold the people I hire to a higher standard than the paying drunks." Shane blew out another angsty breath, feeling high, sobriety nowhere in sight.

"You okay yourself? I watch you play bouncer at least three times a week but you never seem shaken up like this."

Shane looked up at Jeanne's round, pretty face and offered his best smile. "Sorry. Haven't been feelin' like myself lately."

"You haven't been lookin' like yourself either. It's not a woman, is it?"

If only. "No, Jeannie. It's not a woman."

"Think maybe you're sick?"

"Somethin' like that."

* * * * *

Shane mounted the outside steps nearly an hour after he'd given Gabriel his marching orders. He'd had two whiskeys at the bar and wanted more. Wanted yet

another hangover tomorrow, a sour reminder, a punishment for whatever was about to happen. He opened the unlocked door, found Gabriel just as he'd been instructed, lounging on the couch with an open bottle on the side table. As Shane stepped inside Gabriel swung his bare feet to the floor, attentive.

Shane toed his shoes off and sank into the easy chair. He took a slug of wine, never taking his eyes off Gabriel's. He set the bottle down and wiped his lips.

"I hate watchin' you with those women," he said.

"It jus' dancin', Shane."

Shane narrowed his eyes. "I don't think anything's *just* anything with you." He'd never guessed distrust could be such a powerful aphrodisiac, but the more he feared losing this man's attention the hotter his attraction burned.

Gabriel's eyes flicked away for a moment and his lips pursed. He met Shane's stare again, shifting in his seat.

"Tell me how I make it up to you, Shane."

He thought about it as he downed another swallow of wine. He stood, stepped close to the couch and nudged Gabriel knees apart with his own.

"Get me hard."

Gabriel reached for Shane's belt, got it open along with his fly, eased his jeans down. Those fingers, strange and familiar and warm, peeled his shorts down and exposed him, already stiff. His eyes shut for a moment as Gabriel fisted his cock, stroking until it was pounding and thick.

"Yeah." Shane fumbled with his snaps, shed his work shirt and stripped off his tee.

Gabriel's eyes took it all in. He scooted to the edge of the cushions, his free hand surveying Shane's stomach and chest. Warm lips grazed his navel, kissing, tasting. Worshipping.

Shane was close to done already, just from the way Gabriel stared at him. He took a step back, out of his reach.

“Stand up.”

Gabriel did and Shane yanked his dress shirt out from his pants, took one look and thought, *fuck it*, ripped the shirt clean open in two pulls and scattered half the buttons across the floor. Something flashed across Gabriel’s face—Shane had seen it before, all the times they’d fucked around, that mix of excitement and fear that told him this man liked getting roughed up.

Gabriel brought his face close to Shane’s, held his eyes. “Is it gon’ be tonight, Shane?”

He didn’t answer. He undid Gabriel’s belt, wrestled with the clasp on his dress pants, pulled them down his legs. Shane stepped back to kick his own pants away and grabbed the bottle, sat beside his so-called guest and studied his body. They traded the bottle and rough, mean kisses for a couple minutes. Gabriel took a final, deep swig then nipped at Shane’s lips as he set the wine aside. He got himself into Shane’s lap, two ready cocks separated by two layers of cotton. Shane tugged him close by the hips, pressed their bodies together until he didn’t know whose legs were whose or whose idea this ultimately was. Anger bubbled up to transform Shane’s lust—to demand he take it further, tender the punishment Gabriel had coming and make good on the fantasy they both craved.

Shane shoved Gabriel onto the next cushion, yanked his shorts down his legs and pushed him to his hands and knees. He got up and ditched his own underwear, knelt behind Gabriel, ran a hand over his gorgeous bare ass. He took his own hard cock in the other fist, stroked himself as he palmed Gabriel’s flesh. Gabriel turned to watch and Shane met his eyes with a cold glare.

“Eyes forward.”

They’d done this the last few times they’d fucked around. Shane gave Gabriel’s ass a hard slap, rewarded with a sharp, sucking breath. He smacked him again, loving the jolt in the man’s body, the reddening flush where his strike landed. He jacked himself with a tight fist and fantasized about taking everything too far, just as he’d been

imagining for two weeks. He spanked Gabriel until his sporadic gasps turned to one long, drawn-out moan, then Shane angled his hips, spread Gabriel's cheeks and stroked his slick head over that tempting hole.

"Shane."

"I know what you want." He pressed a bit harder, threatening penetration.

"Do it, Shane. Fuck me."

He teased the puckered skin with slow, mean strokes. "When I'm good and ready."

"Tonight."

"We'll see."

Gabriel groaned, pushed his pleading hips back. "You been keepin' me waitin' for too long, Shane. I won't wait forever."

Fear twitched in Shane's muscles. "Well, fucking look at you, dishin' out ultimatums when here I've been giving you whatever you goddamn want."

"Not everythin'."

Shane pushed hard, felt the very beginnings of that tight heat welcoming his head. Gabriel groaned so deep and animalistic Shane's hair stood up. He backed away.

"Don't tease me, Shane."

"Me, tease? Oh that's fuckin' hilarious, boy." He tried to keep his voice cool and mean even as his heart pounded so hard he felt faint.

He grabbed Gabriel's hip, wrestled him onto his back and shoved his big thighs between Gabriel's more slender ones, cock against cock. He jammed an arm under Gabriel's back and brought their faces so close he felt the man's breath on his lips. He pressed his weight into Gabriel, gave him all the aggression and domination he loved, gave himself all the frightening physical contact he'd grown so addicted to.

"Tonight, you said?" Shane asked.

"Please."

"That's an improvement. Beg me. Beg me and maybe I'll give it to you."

"Please."

Shane kissed him, quick and deep.

"Please, Shane."

He kissed him again, dirtier and rougher, fingers digging hard into his back.

"C'mon, Shane. Please."

For a minute or more Shane fucked Gabriel's mouth with his own, thrust their pounding cocks together, ground their hip bones and reveled in their slick, mingling sweat. He pulled away abruptly, stood and watched Gabriel's violently rising and falling chest, his glassy expression.

Shane's heart beat so hard he thought it'd crack his ribs open and tear through his skin. The wine was working, blurring everything, opening Shane's mouth and pushing out words he couldn't predict but didn't fight. "Get on the fucking floor."

Gabriel got to his knees on the rug facing the couch, dug his elbows into the cushions. The most tempting invitation in the world.

Shane swallowed. God, that ass. Tan skin over firm muscle, no chance of imagining this into some heterosexual denial fantasy. Shane didn't want to, anyhow. He wanted this man, even more than he wished he didn't. He fell to his knees behind Gabriel.

"Take me, Shane."

His dick pounded and he gritted his teeth against the ache. He ran his hands over the taut skin, ripe flesh, squeezed and kneaded, got so hot from the sight it felt like a fever. He ran his thumbs along Gabriel's crack, found his puckered asshole, spat across his fingers and stroked it. The man's groan set Shane's cock pounding.

He worked two fingers in, penetrating that tight ring of muscle and holding until Gabriel's body relaxed and let Shane's fingers fuck deeper.

"More," Gabriel groaned, pushed his hips back to meet Shane's hand.

"Slow down. I need you ready for me."

"I want you to fuck me so bad. Don't care if it hurts."

Another jolt pulsed down Shane's cock, made him harder and hotter than he knew he could get. "You taken anybody as big as me before?" he asked, desperate for the ego-stroking.

"Nobody big as you," Gabriel said, voice straining as Shane twisted his fingers deeper. "Nobody near big as you."

"Good." Shane eased his fingers out and spat in his hand again, spat straight onto Gabriel's eager hole and shoved the slick digits back inside, adding a third.

"Yeah." The shift in Gabriel was visible, a fine layer of perspiration breaking out over his skin, a faint tremble quaking his muscles. "I need it, Shane. Now. Fuck me."

Shane stared, transfixed by his fingers, by Gabriel's perfect ass, this sick invitation setting his body on fire. He slid his fingers out, back in, fucking Gabriel with all the control he could muster. "Beg me," he said.

"Please. Fuck me, Shane. Please. I need your cock."

"Say it again." He took his fingers away, reached for his jeans and wrestled his wallet from the pocket, found a condom.

"Fuck me, Shane."

He ripped the plastic open and rubbed Gabriel's asshole with one hand as he slid the rubber down his cock. He grasped his erection, brought it close, feared he'd come the second his sheathed head brushed against that ready, pink flesh. His fingers left Gabriel's hole to grasp his cheek and hold him open, and he ran his cock along his crack. Gabriel's hips flexed and he groaned.

"Say it again." Shane swept his cock head up and down over the hole.

"Please, Shane. Fuck my ass."

Shane spat in his palm again, wet his cock. "You look good, boy." He clamped his hand to Gabriel's hip. "Hold still."

He held his breath, angled his pounding dick to Gabriel's entrance, pushed his head past that first tight barrier. Gabriel gasped. White spots popped and danced in front of Shane's eyes. He willed himself to breathe.

"More," Gabriel begged.

Shane had done anal before, a few times with a few ambitious lovers, with mixed results. Nothing he'd done had felt like this, didn't come anywhere near as forbidden or dirty or scary or wondrous. He felt Gabriel adjusting, easing his way. Shane pushed in deeper, another inch, then another. He drew himself out then slid back to that tight depth. He ran an appraising hand over Gabriel's ass. "That's good, boy. You ready for more?"

"Please, Shane. Fill me up."

He licked his lips, grasped Gabriel's cheeks and pushed in another inch, rough this time. "Come on. Lemme in."

A shuddering moan rattled out of Gabriel then Shane felt his body relax.

"Good... Fuck, you feel so fucking amazing." He looked good too—even if this never happened again, Shane knew he'd conjure this image as he jerked himself off, that hot, firm ass begging for his cock, taking it. He eased himself out, spat in his hand and slicked his cock. He pushed in deeper, half his length wrapped in that tight, forbidden heat. Gabriel's groans and gasps set the fire blazing out of control and Shane started pumping, not caring if they were ready or not.

He watched Gabriel's jutting shoulder blades, his back muscles flexing to brace himself against each thrust of Shane's hips.

"This worth your wait?" Shane asked.

Gabriel craned his neck to flash his dark eyes at Shane. "Yeah."

"You want more?"

He nodded, looking too lost in the pleasure to form words.

Shane grabbed his hips, pulled him hard into the thrusts, entranced at the sight. "That's so hot, boy." He rammed himself even deeper, nearly all the way. "Goddamn, you feel like heaven. Tell me nobody's ever fucked you this deep before."

"Never."

He squeezed Gabriel's cheeks together, more friction against his throbbing shaft. Shane felt himself getting ten times drunker than he had from the whiskey or wine as the seconds wore on. Each thrust felt better than the last, almost *too* good, and he wanted to flop down and collapse on Gabriel's back, wrap his arms around the man's waist and ground himself in reality for a moment.

"Pretend you're forcin' me," Gabriel said, just loud enough for Shane to hear.

The idea sent a shiver down his spine. "How?"

"Hold me down. Fuck me rough. Lemme fight you."

Shane swallowed, unable to speak. His body communicated for him, hands clamping Gabriel's hip bones, thrusts speeding up. For a minute it was straight-up hard fucking, then Gabriel changed. He lunged, reaching for the back of the couch. Shane shook off his surprise and yanked him by the hips, pulling him back hard and ramming his cock deeper.

"Don'," Gabriel said. He looked over his shoulder, eyes wide and hungry.

Shane's throat went dry and tight but he was game. He tugged Gabriel into his thrusts, driving even deeper until the sound of skin slapping skin punctuated each violent motion.

Gabriel grunted between thrusts. "Stop."

Shane had never heard a single tiny word crammed with so much need.

"You made me do this," he said, keeping his hips pounding. "You made me *want* this. Now you get fucked and take what I give you."

Gabriel thrashed, interrupted Shane's rhythm and pissed him the fuck off. He leaned forward, grabbed Gabriel's shoulders and dragged his arms off the couch so he

landed on his elbows on the rug. Shane pushed a palm against his back and pinned him, grasped his ass cheek with the other hand and slammed into him, fast and mean.

“God, you feel so fucking good. Take that cock, boy.”

He slid the hand holding Gabriel’s ass around to grip his dick, as stiff and pounding as he’d ever felt it. “Yeah, you fucking love this.” Shane squeezed him tight, gave him mean pulls, abandoning rhythm and control in favor of intensity.

Gabriel moaned, sounding wild and scared and needy all at once. He turned to stare at Shane’s body, lips parted, eyes narrowed to slits.

Shane looked between his legs, watching the steady motion of his cock disappearing over and over into this man’s stretched hole. It didn’t scare him, only got him hotter and harder. He felt unspeakably big and strong, holding Gabriel down and making his body beg for this punishment. He’d never felt anything near as intoxicating and he let it take over, rode the high.

Gabriel’s legs and hips tensed and shook as his noises turned harsh, cock going hot and thick in Shane’s fist.

“You gonna come, boy?”

Another moan answered him.

“You say my name when you come. Say my name and remember who’s fucking you.” Shane was close too. His body was burning so hot he didn’t actually know how much longer he had before the pleasure came to a head.

Below him Gabriel cried out, his hips bucking as his cock shuddered. Shane gasped as Gabriel’s ass clenched his cock, tight as an angry fist.

“Say it.”

“Shane.” It came out a gasp, choked and disbelieving.

“Good boy.”

He cupped the head of Gabriel's dick as he came, spurt after hot spurt filling Shane's palm, more than he'd known a man could give. He stroked the cream up and down Gabriel's cock, milked the last drops from him.

Free to give his own body what it wanted, Shane slowed his thrusts. He grabbed Gabriel's waist and took him deep, savoring the tightness and depth of his body, the view of his slick back muscles and the rise and fall of his ribs as he fought for breath.

"You're so hot. You're so fucking hot. Look at me."

Gabriel turned his sweaty, flushed face and met Shane's gaze. He looked just how Shane wanted, just the opposite of how he'd looked dancing with those women. Shane stared straight into those heavy-lidded eyes and rammed himself home with a fast, relentless beat.

"Oh fuck." The climax hit him like a wall, pure, incapacitating pleasure. He doubled over, wrapped his arms around Gabriel's middle and jammed his cock as deep as it could go, shooting for what felt like forever, warm come filling the condom.

The room spun as Shane came down from his orgasm and he smelled them at once. He felt his palms on Gabriel's hot skin, one slick, one sticky. He eased his sensitive cock out, stripped the condom and sank back on his haunches. Gabriel sat and they watched each other's chests as they struggled for breath.

Shane wasn't sure what he wanted. If this had been a woman he'd have succumbed to a brief bout of romantic affection, wrapped his arms around her and fallen happily into satisfied sleep. He might've done that with Gabriel if he couldn't still feel a bit of that ugly jealousy from an hour ago. He got to his feet.

"C'mon."

Gabriel followed him in silence to the bathroom. Shane got the shower heated up and stepped inside, Gabriel following. Shane soaped his hands, cleaned himself first, then Gabriel. He pulled him closer, felt their slippery stomachs and chests touch as the hot water streamed between them. He grabbed the shampoo bottle, lathered Gabriel's hair, leaned in and kissed him. Not gentle, not rough, just deep and slow and

passionate. They kissed until Shane tasted shampoo then he broke away so Gabriel could rinse his hair. Shane reveled in the eye contact, how it felt to let himself stare at this face so openly, without fear. He wanted to get lost in the heat and steam and the white noise and never find his way back to normality. They kissed 'til the hot water waned and drove them out into the cool, dry air.

They toweled off, brushed their teeth side by side in front of the foggy mirror. Shane didn't know what to make of their blurry domestic reflection, but he was still so blissfully spent he just admired the man beside him. Shane flipped off the light and fan and went to his dark bedroom, threw the covers back and got beneath them, Gabriel following suit. Shane moved, straddled Gabriel's waist and slid a hand under his head, his damp hair. The man tasted like mint, smelled like soap and spring, felt like heaven. Shane kept the kissing shallow, just a faint passing of his lips across Gabriel's.

He cleared his throat, a sudden thought making it feel tight. "How long you think you're sticking around here?"

Gabriel nipped Shane's lower lip. "Long as you let me, I guess."

A mix of emotions flooded Shane's chest. Hope and relief, and selfish, nearly violent satisfaction. It felt a lot like safety, but not quite. Shane flopped to the side. He grabbed Gabriel around the waist and pulled his back tight to Shane's chest. Shane's cock nestled against Gabriel's ass though he was too worn out to muster lust, only contentedness.

"You sore?" he asked, lips against the back of Gabriel's neck.

"Yeah. Don' mind though." The next time he spoke Shane heard a smile in the words. "Means I'll think about you all day tomorrow."

Shane was glad it was dark, that there was no chance of Gabriel turning and catching how broad his involuntary grin was. He palmed Gabriel's ass with one hand, held him tighter around the middle with the other.

Sleep came down hard, buried Shane's fears so deep inside his body's satisfaction he couldn't feel anything aside from peace and relief. Somewhere in the distance his

intuition drummed a warning, the sound ignored, lost behind two steady hearts beating in the dark.

Chapter Five

Shane was pushed from sleep by a stressful dream in which he was trying to masturbate but seemed to have been paralyzed from the waist down. When he woke he discovered a hard cock in his hand, and for the first time in his life, it wasn't his.

Gabriel's back was plastered against Shane's chest, ass against his crotch. Shane's own dick was rousing, growing right along with the one in his fist. He squeezed his hand tighter, earned a low, sleepy moan from his bedmate. He breathed in the smell of Gabriel's hair, pressed his face to Gabriel's neck and tasted his skin. The man's hips moved, sliding his cock in Shane's grip and rubbing his ass against Shane's erection.

"Mornin'," Gabriel murmured, the words thick with sleep.

Shane kept stroking, wanting those sounds, needing to feel this strong body tremble and beg. The wait was short. In a few seconds' time Gabriel was hot, writhing under Shane's touch. Shane got his other hand between their bodies, fingers between Gabriel's cheeks. He found that sweet spot and Gabriel sucked in a breath.

"Sore?" Shane asked.

Gabriel nodded, looking incapable of coherent speech.

Shane gave him a final, taunting rub and shoved his hand between Gabriel's hip and the mattress. "You forgive me?"

Gabriel laughed, a soft, breathy noise. "'Course."

Shane stroked him with a slow, tight fist, tried to make the touch sensual, motherfucking *romantic*, wanting to be the one doing the seducing for a change. Gabriel thrust himself into the strokes, reached a hand overhead to fist Shane's short hair.

"What're you thinking about?" Shane asked.

"Las' night."

"Tell me."

Gabriel swallowed and when he spoke he sounded pained. "Thinkin' 'bout how rough you fucked me. How good you felt. How much I been wantin' that...how long you kept me waitin', Shane."

Shane laughed and tightened his fist. "You callin' me a cock-tease?"

"Yeah," Gabriel moaned.

Shane's body tightened momentarily but he let it go, embraced the label. "Bet you're used to gettin' whoever you want, whenever you want 'em."

Gabriel didn't reply, just pushed his cock into the caresses, let Shane's hair go so he could stroke his own stomach and chest, clasp Shane's fist and follow the motions. "Tell me 'bout last night," Gabriel mumbled.

"'Bout how I bent you over my couch and fucked your ass?" Blood flooded Shane's cheeks and groin with equal heat as the words tumbled from his mouth. "How I held you down and rammed my cock inside you, fucked you 'til you got so hot you were begging me for it?"

"Yeah."

"How you felt so fucking tight and dirty and hot I thought I was gonna pass out?"

Gabriel moaned. Shane stared at his black stubble, breathed in his smells, stronger in the morning.

"Last night was the single hottest thing I ever experienced," Shane said, only able to utter that frightening admission because the man who had him so hopelessly spellbound was currently plastered against him, a sloppy, horny mess.

"Make me come," Gabriel gasped.

Shane smirked at the command, imagined making him wait...making Gabriel get him off first, fumble through it in a cloud of painful-looking arousal. Shane damn-near came at the idea. Gabriel moaned again as Shane took his hand away—a sound of disbelief now, not pleasure, but Shane knew how this man loved to suffer.

“Don’t stop.”

“It’s my house, I come first.” Shane piled a couple pillows and leaned back, half-reclined.

Gabriel turned over, lips parted and swollen, brows pinched together, so fucking close it had to ache...but his discomfort was overshadowed by his excitement. This was the man who haunted Shane’s brain every second they weren’t together. The man who made him feel more powerful and craved than any woman ever had, made him feel strong and filthy and drunk and goddamn invincible.

“Suck me,” Shane said.

Gabriel got obediently between Shane’s knees, stroked his stiff cock until Shane was nearing the edge himself. Just the expression on that man’s face was almost enough to pull his trigger.

“Come on. Do it.” Shane reached down, took over the stroking as Gabriel leaned in. Shane’s eyes rolled back as warm, wet lips closed over his head, as that skillful mouth sucked in time with Gabriel’s rumbling, muffled noises. So much wrong about this – a man’s rough fingers, five o’clock shadow – but so perfect.

Shane grabbed a fistful of Gabriel’s hair, gave himself over completely to how good dominating felt. “Good. Don’t you dare stop.” How good hypocrisy felt.

Skillful lips coaxed blood and pleasure into Shane’s cock, made him feel so heavy and swollen it hurt.

“Good. Suck that cock, boy. Show me how much you love it.”

Gabriel obeyed, intensified everything he was doing, angled his black eyes up to Shane’s face. From nowhere, a laugh rumbled through Shane’s chest. He smiled and shut his eyes, let himself get lost in this moment. He heard and felt Gabriel’s smug grunt of a laugh as well, opened his eyes to find the most beautiful man in the world smiling with his lips wrapped around Shane’s cock. When he came, it wasn’t lust that was flooding him but pure happiness. He held Gabriel’s head as the spasms rocked his body, voice lost to crazy, undignified groans and sighs.

Gabriel slid Shane's cock from his lips, swallowed and grinned. "Like when I make you smile like that."

"Get up here."

Gabriel made his way up the sheets, locked knees then eyes with Shane.

"I love makin' you feel good," Gabriel murmured, brown eyes boring through Shane's skull and rewiring his brain.

Shane reached between them and took hold of Gabriel's stiff cock, stroked him slow and cruel.

Gabriel moaned, shut his eyes and pressed his face into Shane's neck.

"You like that?"

Another moan heated Shane's neck and his cock was already primed for round two, a phenomenon he hadn't experienced since he'd been a teenager...not until this man had shown up. Shane brought his body closer, shifted his hips and pressed his dick against Gabriel's, earning a faint nip of teeth against his throat. He got both their shafts in his grip and stroked them together. He felt Gabriel's hand join his, squeezing them tighter, forcing the rhythm.

"Slow down," Shane whispered. "We got all morning."

Gabriel obeyed, let Shane's hand lead. He moved his mouth to the hollow behind Shane's ear. "You think you might ever suck me, Shane?"

Shane groaned, more from surprise and fear than pleasure, though the idea didn't terrify him the way it had a week ago. "Dunno."

"I fantasize about it," Gabriel murmured. "'Bout your strong hands holdin' me down and your mouth on me."

Shane let his own cock go, focusing his hand on Gabriel alone, not wanting him to feel it if Shane lost his erection. He was less afraid of the act than he was of being terrible at it. He wasn't even sure he was all that good at giving women head...God knew how hopeless he'd be with a man. Then again, his sexual strengths revolved

around his rough selfishness, a quality most ladies didn't request when Shane was camped out between their thighs, but a quality the man currently clawing at his ribs worshipped as if it were an idol. Still, there was only one position that'd leave Shane more vulnerable than sucking cock and he was afraid to start down that slope, afraid of where the momentum might ultimately land him.

"We'll see," Shane said noncommittally. He stroked Gabriel's cock until the man's sounds were irrefutable proof of who was in charge. "You fantasize about whatever you want, but remember I'm callin' the shots."

"Course, Shane." The words escaped through a series of groans, barely audible.

"Good. Now you think about last night. You think about that big cock I fucked you with."

"Yeah." Gabriel thrust his hips into Shane's pulls, lost in his brain.

"I know you been wantin' that. And if you ever want it again you remember whose house you're in."

Gabriel mumbled, "Shane," his voice caught between plea and rapture.

Shane switched hands, took Gabriel's cock in the lower one, reached the other around to palm his ass, slip his fingers between his cheeks and find that puckered entrance.

"Spank me," Gabriel whispered.

Shane got to his knees as Gabriel did the same, a position they knew well now. Shane added a new feature, rubbing his own cock until it was stiff again, resting it against Gabriel's crack. He reached around and took hold of Gabriel's pounding dick, stroked him light and taunting, the other hand rubbing his ass cheek equally gentle.

"Tell me what else you fantasize about," Shane sighed, put-on sweetness.

"About fucking *with* you...fucking someone else. A woman."

"You really like both, huh?"

"I love women," Gabriel choked out, caught off guard by Shane's tightening fist. "I fantasize about seeing you with a woman, us taking her together, making her come, then you finishing with me while she watches."

Shane could handle that fantasy. He let it take shape in his mind, the palm rubbing Gabriel's ass coming down with a smack.

Through the gasp, "Shane."

"Is she watching us right now?" Shane asked.

"Yeah."

He spanked him again, harder, rubbed him faster. He kept it up until Gabriel's hips were pumping, ass teasing Shane's cock as he fucked his fist. Shane stared at the burning pink skin he'd branded with his palm, knowing it must feel scorched and blistered. He gave Gabriel's ass a soothing graze then slapped him again, inspiring a groan that had to be at least half actual pain.

"Shane."

"I'm gonna keep spanking you 'til you come, boy."

"Hurts."

"I'll bet. And I bet you fucking love that."

Another strained moan came as the reply.

Shane was as good as his word, punishing—or perhaps more likely, rewarding—Gabriel with a fresh slap every few strokes. Then Shane felt him reach the brink, hips lost to a graceless rhythm as he came, spilling against Shane's hand and bedding, a little more encroachment into the territory Shane used to think of as his own.

Shane wiped his hand on his rumpled sheet and turned Gabriel onto his back, wanting to study his flushed, spent face.

"Happy?"

Gabriel grinned deeply and nodded.

"Good. Now up you get. I got a zillion things to get on with." A load of laundry, for starters. "Don't need you under my feet." *Or my skin.*

"You the boss, Shane."

"Yeah. And don't let me catch you forgettin' that again."

* * * * *

The slap of the screen door pulled Shane out of his own head. He looked up from the papers scattered over the bar to find his Aunt Marie trotting across the porch, her corona of frizzy red hair glowing pink around the edges from the sun streaming in behind her.

"Holy—cow," Shane said, veering to avoid cursing in front of his sixty-something-year-old aunt, the closest thing he had left to a mother. "What're you doing here?"

She smiled and held out her arms. "Surprise!"

"You look gorgeous, Miss Marie," Shane said.

They met halfway across the floor in a tight hug. She smelled as always—rose-scented lotion and menthol cigarettes.

"What brings you back to this dump?"

"Checking on my investment." Her eyes, the same gray-blue as his momma's, darted around the club, checking that all her handiwork was still as it should be.

"You mean the investment you signed over to me two years ago? It's the same as always."

"I don't know about that. It's looking a lot more worn since the last time I came for a visit," she said.

"I ordered some new stools, I promise. So why're you really here?"

"I've got a new grandchild to see," she said, puffing up grandly.

Shane made a skeptical face. "You ain't got any kids, last I knew. Do I have cousins hidden someplace you never told me about?"

"No. But Rhonda Johnson's daughter Katie just had a son. I changed Katie's diapers and made her dress for prom, so that gives me some kind of surrogate rights, I think."

"Fair enough. You want a drink?" He nodded back toward the bar.

"No," she said, wandering to a chaise lounge to take a seat with a weary huff. "These cushions are shot, Shane."

"I know. Sure about that drink?"

"I've got to get back on the road in a few – the christening's at two. I'm staying the night there but I might make you look at my car when I pass back through. It started making a knocking sound 'round when I passed through Shreveport."

Shane sat on the table in front of her. "Anything for you, Miss Marie. Sorry – Missus. How's that husband treating you?"

"Like a princess," she said, and the glow in her cheeks was all the corroboration Shane needed.

"He better."

"And how about you, darlin'? You seein' anyone special these days?"

Images from the past couple days flashed across Shane's mind, made his heart race from lust and fear and shame. He pictured that face, those dangerous eyes and lips that kept him up nights. "No one special."

"Shame..."

He sensed the lecture coming and cut it off at the pass. "Don't start. I'm thirty-five, barely."

"Your folks got hitched when your momma was twenty-one."

"Yeah, and it was a fuckin' train wreck. Friggin' train wreck, sorry. So no thanks. Plus *you* settled down at, what? Fifty-eight?"

"That is impossible," she said carefully, "as I am only forty-two. As everyone knows. As I have been for many years and shall continue to be until I drop down dead."

Shane smiled. "Right, my mistake."

Marie sighed. "Well, I really just stopped in to say hello and use the powder room and to let you know I'll bring my car by tomorrow afternoon."

Shane slapped his hands on the table beside his butt and stood. "You old tease, you, making me think you came here to see me. Hey, you want a bottle of something to bring to the party?"

"It's a christening, Shane."

Shane knew that face anywhere, that put-on sanctimonious propriety. "Yeah, and it's the Johnsons. What d'you want? Bourbon?"

She pursed her lips then nodded. "Bourbon would be best."

Shane grabbed her a bottle out of the stock room while she used the restroom and they said their goodbyes.

He stood by the front door for a long time after she drove off, looking around the club in the weak winter sunlight. This place was his, but it wasn't really. He ran it how Marie always had, kept things as close to her "vision" as he could manage. He'd never changed the upstairs rooms from his grandparents' taste aside from moving the furniture around and cluttering it up with his modest collection of bachelor possessions. The auto shop was a quarter his, but he'd come into co-ownership decades after the place had been established, didn't do much aside from his own fair share of hard work. More than his share, lately.

No kids. No wife. No nearby family, at least not any he cared to see. Not even a fucking dog.

Who the fuck was he? What did he have that was actually *his*? His truck, maybe. He'd fixed that up from the junk heap. Maybe he ought to just climb into the driver's seat and get the fuck out of Shiloh and this bar and the shop, out of the cloud of confusion and annoying self-analysis that one strange man had brought with him from...from wherever Gabriel had been haunting before he'd deigned to make torturing Shane his newest hobby.

The door before him swung in, Zach holding it open and looking perplexed to find Shane planted where he was, fists on his hips, probably with an idiotic frown screwing up his face.

"Hey, boss."

Shane stepped aside. "Afternoon, Zach. Just thinking about if maybe I should paint this place soon."

Zach shrugged.

Shane sighed and looked around, not really recognizing anything in the space that'd been the center of his world for nearly a decade.

"You all right, Shane?"

"D'you think I need a dog, Zach?"

"A dog?" Zach's befuddled expression ushered reality back in and Shane realized what a fuckwit he must sound like.

"You been drinkin', boss?"

"No... Just havin' a midlife crisis, maybe."

Zach smirked, walked to the bar and started the prep work. "My dad had one of those last year. Bought himself a muscle car and started dating this chick who graduated high school like three years ahead of me. It's not a dignified look, Shane. I don't recommend it. So sure, get yourself a dog, if that'll help. Can't wait for you to send me out back to de-shit the yard."

"Nah, I'll save that for Ryan."

Zach laughed and began emptying the dishwasher. "Good. That guy's a dipshit."

Chapter Six

Shane made the rest of the day into one long, somewhat successful distraction. He drove into Baton Rouge and spent nearly two hours in the hardware store, got dinner at his favorite diner and arrived home around eight laden with paint swatches and shiny new fixtures for the bar—a hundred little chances to keep his mind off Gabriel.

The man in question wasn't among the few dozen patrons when Shane walked in, though that was no surprise. Shane knew the man's routine the way one might find patterns in the comings and goings of a semi-feral cat, and Gabriel rarely sauntered in before nine unless he was playing, which he wasn't, tonight. Shane wondered for the millionth time what that man got up to when he wasn't at the Shivaree and how he got where he was going. His charm must work on passing cars, since Gabriel didn't drive himself and it'd take at least an hour to get anyplace outside of Shiloh without hitching.

Shane dumped his purchases on an empty shelf in the stock room and went upstairs, flipped channels until quarter past ten before heading back down to the bar. He took a seat across from Zach and was handily passed a beer and whiskey.

"Thanks," Shane said over the evening's noisy blues ensemble. He scanned the crowd again, pretending to look for his favorite employee. "Where's Jeanne at?"

Zach nodded to the hall. "Out back."

"Ah... You seen Gabriel around?" Shane had never referred to the man by his name in front of anyone before and felt naked, as if those seven letters might come out loaded, trigger some air raid siren and alert everybody to exactly what was going on.

Zach finished pouring a beer and making change. "He was here earlier, flirtin' with somebody. Maybe he got himself taken home. Why? He supposed to be playing tonight?"

"Nah." Shane made his voice so casual it didn't even seem to be coming out of his own mouth. "Just wanted to know if that mooch is planning on using my couch again before I lock up."

"Your lucky night, boss. I think maybe he found a better offer."

Zach went back to filling orders, leaving Shane adrift in a river of anxious energy.

Jeanne returned from the back hallway and offered Shane a passing smile.

"You seen Gabriel around, Miss Jeanne?"

She snorted. "Oh yes. He's out back with that redhead from Lafayette. If they dry hump any harder they'll catch fire."

"That so?" Shane kept his exterior cold even as ugly emotions were boiling in his gut. He cleared empties from tables for a minute or two so his exit wouldn't look suspicious. The pounding of his heart was so violent he thought he could hear it over the music as he strode down the hall to the back door. It opened on to the cement patio that housed the trash cans and bottle bins. The back light was bright and Shane felt caught, as if under interrogation. He took a few steps onto the grass then froze, his tiny little world spinning off its axis.

There he was, that stranger who'd got himself buried so damn deep in Shane's skin. Gabriel and a girl Shane vaguely recognized were glued together at the mouth in profile to Shane, she on the edge of one of the picnic tables twenty yards away in the shadows, Gabriel standing between her legs. Shane had thought watching him dance with women was torture, but this was worse. This was way worse and it wasn't dry humping either. The girl's skirt was gathered at her waist, obscuring the action, but Shane had no doubt they were fucking. Gabriel's pants were on but riding low. No mistaking the rhythm of his deadly hips, those too-familiar moans, the way those talented hands held the girl's ass.

Pain—the most gut-wrenchingly ugly feeling Shane had ever experienced—folded his body in on itself, wrung him out. His chest ached and his head swam and he wanted

to be sick, to force all the hateful jealousy out of his body and just feel empty, feel nothing.

The girl pushed Gabriel's pants down farther, exposing his perfect ass, kneading it with her small hands. Her feminine grunts blended with Gabriel's harsh ones and Shane swallowed down one of his own, a territorial, primal growl trying to burst from his constricted throat. No way he could rush in and break this up. It might be his prerogative as a property owner but he didn't need that man knowing how much power he had over Shane. He tore his eyes off the sight and dumped the bottles, stole back inside, nearly staggering from the adrenaline jarring his senses. He looked down to find his hands shaking, crammed them in his pockets as he skirted the bar, hoping to make a clean break for the side steps and hide in his apartment.

"Hey, boss!"

He turned to meet Jeanne's eyes. "Yeah?"

"You got bandages hidden someplace? Zach just cut his thumb open."

Zach had a fist wrapped around the digit, face pinched up in a wince. "It's all full of frigging lime juice."

"Fucking hell," Shane said. Shame burned in his face when he caught Jeanne's eyebrows rise. He'd never lost his temper with his staff before, not unless he caught them doing something illegal or downright dangerous. He shoved the anger deep in his body, replaced it with half-assed paternal concern. He went around the bar, dug the first-aid kit from behind the register and got Zach patched up.

"Keep it dry," Shane said, tossing a latex glove at Zach's chest. He left the kit on the counter and headed for the exit, wanting to run but forcing his legs to act calm. Shit, it felt as though somebody'd slit his heart open and squirted *it* full of frigging lime juice.

"You okay, Shane?" Jeanne's voice behind him sounded meeker than usual, made him feel like world-class shit.

"Fine." He strode through the lounge, broke into a run as he reached the steps. He kept his eyes glued to his door and off the backyard, forced his ears to hear only the

muffled music from downstairs and block out anything he might not be able to handle coming from the backyard.

He shut the door, switched on all the living room's lamps in an attempt to drive away the images playing in a loop in his mind. He rubbed hard at his chest, needing to soften and break up the pain that had his muscles clenched tight and his heart pounding. There was nowhere safe to look—everything reminded him of that man. The couch, the kitchen, the shower, his own goddamn bed.

Shane shut himself in his bathroom, braced his palms against the cool countertop, took deep breaths for at least five minutes before he moved. He'd be okay. He'd felt jealous before and it always faded after a day or two. This hurt more, though, more than he could ever remember hurting except maybe when his momma had died.

He stared at himself in the mirror a moment, stripped off his shirt, rummaged under the sink for his clippers and plugged them in. He switched them on and turned the setting to the second-shortest, needing a change. Something. Any-fucking-thing.

Shane put them to his temple, dragged them buzzing across his skull. His hands shook so bad the strip was jagged and wavy. Shane sensed movement in his periphery and the shaking turned near-convulsive. He tossed the clippers down, leaned against the marble again. He felt that man's heat as surely as he might have heard him speak. After a long minute, a hand came to rest between Shane's shoulder blades, fingers rubbing gently. Shane straightened, met Gabriel's eyes in the mirror.

Don't you fucking ask me what's wrong.

Gabriel didn't ask. Instead he picked up the clippers, switched them on, coaxed Shane to face him with a hand on his shoulder. Shane obeyed, not feeling as if he had a choice. His body couldn't manage to rebel when this man was making requests.

He let Gabriel do what he couldn't, run the clippers over his scalp in steady strokes. He felt his hair fall away along with his jealousy. What was left was desperation, a violent need to reclaim what there'd been that morning and the night before, nearly every night for the past two weeks.

Gabriel clicked the clippers off and brushed his hands over Shane's buzzed head.

"Saw you with her," Shane said.

"Figured. I saw your lights come on."

"You used to bein' in a different pair of arms every fucking night then?"

Gabriel kept his eyes off Shane's as he brushed clippings from his bare shoulders. He shrugged. "I like sex, Shane."

The answer deflated him, drained all his once-justified-seeming anger and left him feeling helpless and idiotic. How foolish was he being, acting as though they were in any kind of committed relationship when he of all people would be the first to deny it?

"I like variety, Shane."

Those four little words stung like a slap.

"I liked las' night too," Gabriel went on, his light touch turning sensual, palms surveying Shane's throat and chest and arms. He leaned in close. "I been waitin' forever to give that to you. Can' wait for it to happen again."

Gabriel brought his hips to Shane's, the taunting contact sending Shane's blood rushing southward against his brain's wishes.

"I can't offer you variety," Shane mumbled, resenting the tightness in his voice.

"Maybe no', but you give me other things I want. Other fantasies."

Shane swallowed before he spoke. "What kind of fantasies?" He knew the answer wouldn't be like what Gabriel had shared this morning, some simple threesome with a woman.

"Kind that involve a big strong man like you." He nipped Shane's ear. "Real nasty ones."

"How nasty?"

"I got prison fantasies," Gabriel murmured, lips at Shane's throat. "'Bout gettin' held down by a big man, like you done las' night. 'Bout bein' fucked hard an' tossed away."

Shane pulled away enough for Gabriel to see the skeptical squint of his eye. "You wanna get fuckin' ass-raped by a bunch of inmates?"

The corners of Gabriel's mouth curled in to a smirk. "Or guards."

Shane blew a breath through his nose and looked away.

Gabriel stroked Shane's arms with worshipful hands. "Been hopin' I'd find a strong man like you, Shane."

"I'll fuck you but I ain't playin' dress-up and readin' from no twisted-ass script."

"I like you how you are," Gabriel whispered. "Love the way you fuck. Maybe you have some friends who could join us sometime." He ran his tongue over Shane's jaw.

Shane's muscles stiffened. "No. I don't."

"Tha's too bad." Gabriel leaned back to meet Shane's eyes with his dark ones. "I'd love for someone to watch us." He licked his lips. "Watch you fuckin' me."

A different part of Shane stiffened but his anger trumped his dick's curiosity.

Gabriel stared at Shane's throat, ran his finger along his collarbone. "He beg you to let him have a turn. Maybe you let him. Maybe you make me suck his cock while you fuck me. You make him watch."

"I don't like sharin'," Shane said, keeping his tone even to hide just how hot the jealousy had his blood boiling, from the mere thought of this man being anything but his sole possession. Especially if that other person was a guy.

"He can hold me down while you fuck my ass," Gabriel murmured. "Maybe you take turns."

Shane wanted to tell him to shut the hell up about other men but decided to make his displeasure and possessiveness known in terms Gabriel was more likely to understand.

He grabbed Gabriel's shoulders and spun him around, pushed him hard against the counter. Reaching around, he got the man's belt and pants open quick and yanked them down his legs, bunched Gabriel's shirt up around his waist to expose his ass. He gave

him two hard slaps, designed more to hurt than arouse, though judging from Gabriel's moan they'd done both.

Rubbing his fingers between Gabriel's cheeks, he leaned in close to speak just behind his ear.

"So you think you need more than what I can give you?"

Gabriel slid seamlessly into his role. "I di'n mean it, Shane." He gasped as Shane pushed two fingers inside, soreness and preparation be damned.

Shane let him go a second, stooped to slide Gabriel's cigarette case from his pants' pocket and find a condom. He opened his own buckle and fly and took his rock-hard dick out, got himself ready. Whatever lube the condom came with would have to be enough—he wasn't about to let on that this was anything more than a hate-fuck to the man who had him so goddamn ripped up inside.

He pushed hard on Gabriel's shoulders, bent him over the counter with an elbow in the sink and his face right up against the mirror. His breath fogged the glass in time with his low moans.

Shane rammed himself deep with no warning and no gentleness, moaned in harmony with Gabriel's gasp. The man sounded strained and fearful but his grunts turned unmistakably hungry after a few dozen thrusts. He pushed his hips back into Shane's, invited the violation, reveled in it. Shane gave him another hard spank and grinned at the way the man jumped with surprise.

He watched Gabriel's face in the mirror under the cheap bulbs' jaundiced light, the whole scene looking like a fucked-up sex movie, one that would've frightened the ever-loving shit out of Shane if he'd watched it a month ago. Gabriel's clenched eyes opened and met Shane's in the glass. He pushed back, tried to reach between his legs to jerk but Shane stopped him. He grabbed both Gabriel's wrists and pinned them at the small of his back, laying his chest and shoulder back down on the counter.

"You already had your fucking fun tonight," Shane said, hammering hard.

Gabriel groaned. "Yes, Shane."

"But you like this too, don't you? You love this."

"Yeah."

Fuck, how had Shane gone his entire life not knowing somebody could get him this hot? He let Gabriel's wrists go, grabbed his waist and just *fucked*. Took everything he wanted as fast and mean as he pleased, felt the climax building as if he were speeding toward a cliff's edge. He watched them both in the mirror, watched himself as if it were a stranger fucking this exotic man in this shockingly familiar room, a stranger with Shane's face looking high on some kind of brutal ecstasy.

"Fuck yeah." He came hard to the sound of slapping skin, the smell of sex and latex and the sight of Gabriel's white dress shirt, damp against his back with sweat. Shane pushed himself in deep as the climax rocked him.

The pleasure squeezed him out, replaced all his anger with relief. Violent screwing might be a temporary fix, but for the moment he felt serene, secure, spent and happy and human again.

"Shit." He ran a palm down Gabriel's back, like a fool went straight back to worshipping the fucker.

He cleared his throat and pulled out, tossed the condom, let Gabriel turn around to survey his face with jumpy black eyes.

"You all right?" Shane asked between heaving breaths.

"Course."

Shane ran his hands over Gabriel's neck, opened the top button of his shirt, then the next. A white bandage was taped to his chest.

Shane frowned, pressing his fingers to it gently. "What's this?"

"Tha's you, Shane." Gabriel peeled the gauze away to reveal new notes—the raised black lines of a fresh tattoo edged in tender red skin.

"I can't read music. What is it?"

"I play it for you sometime," Gabriel said, smiling.

Shane stared at the staff and its notes, confused by what it meant. It meant he mattered, but it also meant he'd be yet another piece of music Gabriel was counting on forgetting, requiring a reminder for the day Shane faded to near anonymity with all those other lost souls. Still, there he was. Branded right over Gabriel's heart, incidental or not. Permanent. Shane blinked at it, pressed the bandage back in place. He slid the white cotton off Gabriel's tanned and tattooed shoulders and rubbed his tight muscles. He aimed his eyes at the ink of a hundred others, afraid his returning anxiety might show. "What d'you want?"

"Thought I already got mine for the night," Gabriel said.

Shane swallowed. "Think maybe I owe you something for what just happened. Didn't mean to be that rough."

"You were angry, Shane. It's okay."

Shane gave him a glare. "I don't need your fucking excuses, boy. You just tell me what you want and I'll make us even." *Make us good again so you won't go looking outside my house for what you need.*

Gabriel studied Shane's face, ran a hand slowly across his own stomach and fisted his half-hard cock, stroked until it was stiff and dark. "Anythin' I wan', Shane?"

"No. But try me."

"You wanna get on your knees for me, maybe?"

Shane's chest tightened but he oozed out a long breath. He could do this. He'd do most anything to guarantee this man kept coming back for more. He held on to the counter and lowered to one knee then the other. Gabriel kicked away his pants and Shane put his hands to his warm thighs, unsure.

"You never sucked dick before, eh?"

Shane didn't dare acknowledge the question...plus Gabriel knew the fucking answer, just wanted to hear it. Same as how Shane wanted to hear he was the biggest Gabriel had ever had. Gabriel's short nails raked Shane's scalp, the sensation bringing

pleasure and trepidation. Shane brought his face close, the smell of this man so potent he could damn near taste him.

Gabriel reached down and dragged his weeping head across Shane's lips, his scent making Shane's mind swim as though he'd downed a fifth of whiskey.

"Open up, Shane. Open your mouth an' I give you your first lesson."

Shane's hands trembled and he clamped them on Gabriel's hips to hide the shaking. He'd never been submissive with anybody before and it was terrifying, this impulse – this desperate need to please the man staring down at him. He parted his lips, slid the tip of his tongue out to taste Gabriel's head as it swept across his lips. He tasted strange and tangy, not quite salty, not quite bitter. His skin was smooth and warm and slick, painting Shane's lips with his pre-come.

Gabriel grinned, evil if Shane had ever seen evil. "You're so hot. Jus' like I fantasized you'd look. Now open up for me."

Shane opened his mouth wider, let Gabriel ease between his lips.

"Cover those teeth, Shane."

Fearing failure, Shane tightened his lips.

"Good." Gabriel pushed in deeper. Shane took the first couple inches, bathed them with his tongue as he worked to keep the suction going. Gabriel pumped his hips, slow and shallow.

"Yeah. Suck that cock. I teach you how to do it good."

Hands gripped the back of Shane's head, the absence of his hair making him feel as vulnerable as the hard, cold tile under his knees, the sudden loss of his height. There was pleasure to what was happening but he was frightened too. He wanted to be good, the best Gabriel ever got, but this cruel streak in his lover was intimidating, taking orders humiliating.

"Good. Tha's good. I think you like that... I make you a good little cocksucker, Shane. Jus' do what I say."

Shane freed his mouth to take a breath. His jaw ached and it was way harder than he'd ever guessed. He owed women a load more credit for this.

"Get your mouth back on me."

Shane obeyed.

Gabriel cupped Shane's head, coaxing him to take more. For a couple minutes he let Shane find his rhythm, murmured encouragement and gentle orders.

Once Shane settled into the experience, Gabriel changed. The palms grazing Shane's buzzed hair turned possessive and Gabriel's hips pumped softly.

"Make it nice an' tight. Suck me hard." Gabriel wrapped his hand around his base, giving himself pulls that bumped his fist against Shane's lips. "I wanna fuck your mouth just like you fucked my ass. Wanna own you... Bet you never got fucked, eh?"

Shane took a deep breath through his nose, trying to banish the nerves that question had ushered in.

"Sometimes I fantasize about takin' you," Gabriel whispered, stroking Shane's hair. "'Bout gettin' you on your hands and knees, fuckin' your tight virgin ass raw."

Shane moaned, the sound muffled.

"Keep suckin' me."

He obeyed, entire body tense with heat and confusion and fear and desperation.

"I fuck your ass," Gabriel went on, rubbing Shane's head affectionately, "an' I reach around and stroke that huge cock right in time with it. Pretend it's mine. How it'd feel to have a big, thick cock like yours."

Shane slid Gabriel from his mouth. "You're never fuckin' my ass."

Gabriel laughed as Shane's lips closed over his shaft again. "Maybe no'. But I can fantasize."

Shane backed off enough to mutter, "Fine."

"Wanna hear you moan when I fuck you. I do it nice an' slow, 'til I know you're enjoyin' yourself. 'Til your body's beggin' me to make it rough." Gabriel groaned, lost

in his imagination. His hips thrust his cock deeper into Shane's mouth, past his meager comfort zone and into his throat. Shane blinked his watering eyes, took what he was given and enjoyed what he could from it—total helplessness, that thing he felt all day long when he thought of Gabriel but never let himself show before now. He wanted to get it out, own up to it for a few brief moments so maybe it wouldn't dog him so hard the next morning. He clamped a palm over each of Gabriel's hips and met his thrusts.

"Yeah, Shane. Jus' like that."

Shane glanced up and found Gabriel's eyes shut tight, the hand not on Shane's head caressing Gabriel's chest and stomach, trembling. Even on his knees with a cock halfway down his throat, Shane clung to every scrap of control he could find. He upped his mouth's suction, rode a wave of satisfaction as Gabriel groaned deep, body shaking. And Shane felt big again, claimed ownership of what was happening, made it into something he was doing, not having done to him. He sucked with all the aggression he'd feel if he still had Gabriel bent over the sink.

"Yeah, Shane. Suck me. Open up and take my come."

With that, Gabriel lost it. For a half-dozen beats he fucked Shane's mouth, thrusting hard and deep, choking him until he pulled back, come lashing Shane's tongue in hot spurts.

Shane's eyes stung from the gagging and he swallowed as Gabriel pulled out, more to have the act done with than to appear obedient. He got to his feet and disguised the shaking in his legs, zipped his pants up and pressed his body against Gabriel's, staring him down.

"You want Friday night gigs and my couch, my cock, my mouth then you do what I say."

Gabriel took a deep breath, looking as though he were fighting for consciousness. "What you say, Shane?"

"You don't fuck anybody but me in my house or my club or my motherfucking yard." Shane worked to keep his anger under control, hating how torn-up he sounded.

Gabriel broke eye contact to stare over Shane's shoulder. "You can't give me what I need from a woman, Shane." His eyes reconnected. "Or you won't."

Shane took a seething breath, feeling so desperate he thought he might pass out. "Fine. You can go with women. Just not in my house... And you come to me for permission first. You do that, or else you get the hell out of Shiloh for good and leave me in fucking peace."

Gabriel blinked thoughtfully then met Shane's eyes again. "Okay."

There was no triumph in the bargain for Shane. He felt weak and defeated and he wanted to crawl into a dark room or a bottle and lose himself for a long time. "Now you get out of my face. Go to the living room and don't talk to me 'til tomorrow. I can't stand lookin' at you right now."

It was one order Gabriel refused to follow. Shane got about ten minutes' solitude before one of the louvered doors to his dark bedroom creaked open, splashing warm light across the floor. Gabriel's silhouette approached on quiet feet and the mattress sagged as he sat down.

"You awake?"

"Course I am."

"Lemme sleep with you," Gabriel murmured and a hand grazed Shane's buzzed head. "Sleep next to you."

Shane didn't answer but he didn't protest when Gabriel lifted the covers and laid his naked body down against Shane's. His skin felt cool as he eased an arm under Shane's waist, set his palm on his back. Shane couldn't see his face, just the shapes of his ear and his hair, backlit by the hall light. Soft lips and a rough cheek rubbed Shane's jaw, tightening his chest. He wanted this, bad. He put his arm around Gabriel's shoulder and held him, hard, kissed his temple, tasted the faint salt of his sweat.

"You scare the shit out of me," Shane whispered.

"Because I'm a man?"

He thought about it. "No...but don't go telling anybody about you and me."

"Why, then?" Gabriel slid a thigh between Shane's and one on top, locking them together.

Because you don't care half as much as I do about all this. About us. "Doesn't matter."

Chapter Seven

Shane didn't think he'd ever been so motherfucking happy to wake up and realize it was Monday. He stared at the ceiling, not quite ready to move and upset the warm arm flopped across his chest. He didn't want to wake Gabriel, didn't want to speak to him yet, but he wanted to get the hell out of the house, go in to work and escape the weird weather patterns inside his head. He could hear rain drumming the windows, mimicking the storm in his skull. Then he remembered he had a guest arriving sometime today and there'd be no going into the garage until Marie came by.

He pushed Gabriel's arm away and got up, tapped him rudely on the forehead. "Hey. Wake up."

Gabriel's eyes opened halfway and he smiled. "Mornin'. What time it is?"

"Almost eight. You gotta get up and out. I got company coming by sometime. I don't know when, but I don't need them finding your ass in my bed."

Two black eyebrows rose to express Gabriel's wry amusement. "I guess it your house, Shane."

"Yeah, you guess right. Get up."

They showered quickly and separately, shared a pot of coffee in the kitchen and barely spoke. Shane was feeling so many things they all blended together and cancelled each other out, left him floating in a cloud of numbness.

That cloud lifted as they wandered to the living room, and what Shane found underneath was an electric tangle of paranoid anxiety. The second he kicked Gabriel out of his house was the second he'd start wondering where he was. And who with. Sitting on the couch, he stared at the tread of his boot for a long time before pulling it on.

"Shane?"

He turned to the side, met Gabriel's eyes as coolly as he could manage.

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Shane repeated, attention back on his hands and feet. "Nothin's wrong."

"You still upset about las' night?"

"Listen..." Shane searched for the right label to tack on—*listen buddy, asshole, freeloader, darlin'*—but none of them felt comfortable, especially not *Gabriel*. "Don't you try and talk to me about last night, like you and me are some kind of happy caring motherfucking couple. 'Cause we ain't. I don't know *what* the fuck we are, and I don't know where I'll find you the next time I blink."

"Shane."

He met those black eyes again.

"You're full of shit, Shane."

He sat up straight. "'S'cuse me?"

"You make it sound like I'm the one keepin' this from being somethin' real." Gabriel waved his hand around the room. "Up here you can' keep your hands off me, but downstairs you won' even look me in the eye. I'm not stupid, Shane. I know I'm your dirty little secret."

The option of being publicly open about what was going on between them was so far off Shane's radar that the surprise of the thought knocked him senseless. Furthermore he'd never heard Gabriel string that many words together before or say them quite so firmly—it was as though he'd feigned muteness then burst into song. Shane stared past Gabriel's perfect face to the rain streaking the tall back windows.

"You act like you got some right to be jealous when you barely even look at me downstairs," Gabriel said. "So fuck you, Shane, if you think you can fuck my ass one minute and ignore me the next. Fuck you if you won' tell people what we are."

"I can't do that."

Gabriel shrugged, a tight, cold gesture. "Fine. Jus' quit actin' like I done you wrong when I'm the one willin' to be honest about us."

Shane's heart thumped against his ribs as anger morphed into fear. "So what are we then?"

"We're lovers, Shane." *Lovers*. "But you don' get to keep me on a leash when you won't even acknowledge what's goin' on between us, outside this room."

What is going on between us?

Gabriel held his eyes for a second longer then turned away, trailed a hand over the back of the couch and gazed blankly across the dim room. "Maybe someday you find you can fuck me without bein' shitfaced or half-asleep, eh?" He turned to fix Shane with a cool stare. "Then maybe you get some of that power I let you think you got over me."

Shane's blood reached a steady simmer. "Fuck you, fuckin' ingrate. Don't forget who's a guest here."

Gabriel just smirked at him. "Yours ain't the only couch in town, Shane."

Shane narrowed his eyes to slits, fisted his hands then regretted the show of hurt.

"But yours is the one I want," Gabriel went on, smiling. He took a seat on the far cushion. "Day you kiss me with a witness'll be the day I tell my eyes to stop wanderin'. For now, we jus' enjoy each other."

It was a bargain Shane couldn't refuse. "My aunt's coming by today with her car," he said, changing the subject. "I need you out of here when she's visiting. If she comes upstairs she's bound to notice you're not one of the original furnishings."

Gabriel shrugged as if Shane had just pled guilty of all charges.

"Don't give me that fuckin' saintly grin," Shane warned. "I'm not gay and even if I was, I'm not coming out to my sixty-something auntie."

"She the one who opened the bar?"

Shane nodded. "She's used to me leaving my socks all over this house, but stray musicians're another matter."

Gabriel stared at him with a weird little grin tightening his lips. He turned the tense chitchat into far more with a couple of relocated knees, lodging one on either side of Shane's hips and bracing his palms on Shane's chest. "When she comin'?"

"Dunno."

Gabriel licked his lips.

"Don't gimme that look—she's got keys. She grew up here."

Gabriel leaned down, heated Shane's neck with a couple deep exhalations before running his lips across the skin. Against his better judgment, Shane tangled his fingers in Gabriel's hair and cupped his head, succumbed to the temporary impulse to hold him there as long as possible.

"I got a deal for you," Gabriel murmured, that voice trickling malt liquor into Shane's ear and turning his brain to mush.

"What?"

Gabriel leaned back, ran slow hands over Shane's stomach. "You can have me, Shane...but if I see a woman I want to go with, I send her to you for permission. And you say yes or no."

Shane stared at the man's chest, fearing his eyes. He realized in a flash what they were, just what Gabriel had said a minute earlier—lovers. *Duh*, perhaps, but it hadn't truly occurred to him before. This man counted. Mattered. In fact, if Shane were the type who carved notches into his bedpost Gabriel's would be the deepest by far, damn near saw the fucking frame in half.

"I keep it discreet," Gabriel said, "but I send them to you. What you say?"

"And I can say no if I want?"

"If you say no every single time, you prolly won' keep me around forever." Gabriel fingered Shane's belt buckle. "But yeah. You get to decide."

"And I'll own you?" The verb he knew both of them got so fucking hot over.

"Oh yeah, you own me, Shane." Gabriel grinned, looking nearly coy if he didn't also look about three breaths away from sucking Shane's cock.

"Yeah. Fine then."

Gabriel's grin deepened to the shit-eating variety once more, a kid in the midst of his own birthday party. He offered a slender hand and Shane shook it, firm and quick.

Shane took a moment to stare at Gabriel, to feel the warmth and fear and excitement churning in his gut. He reached out and cupped Gabriel's hips, felt his muscle and strength and eagerness and realized it was all his.

"Want you," he grunted.

Gabriel blinked at him. "Then take me."

Shane pushed him off to the other end of the couch, got up and set the chain lock on the front door. He stood over Gabriel, surveying his official territory for nearly a minute. Gabriel sat up, linked his fingers through two of Shane's belt loops. Those black eyes darted, hands waiting for permission. Shane stepped closer until his ankles hit the bottom frame of the couch. Gabriel took the cue and ran a palm across Shane's fly, eager fingers tracing the outline of his erection. Closing his eyes, Shane let himself melt into the feeling, that seductive mix of power and shame and relief. He let those familiar fingers open his belt and zipper, stroke him through his shorts.

"How do you get me so hard," he mumbled, not quite a question.

"Ooooh," Gabriel teased. "I got a gris-gris."

Shane laughed. "Spare me your crazy grandma's voodoo bullshit."

"Then I dunno, Shane."

The hold on Shane's cock tightened, lighting him up with impatience and desire and that ever-present and undeniably exciting anxiety.

"There's something between us," Gabriel said.

A fuckload too much clothing, for starters. "Stand up."

He backed away so Gabriel could submit to the order. Shane memorized each button as he freed it, every square inch of golden skin as the white cotton slid away. He got Gabriel's pants off, pushed him gently back onto the cushions then went to work on his own clothes, got a condom from his wallet and tossed it on the side table.

"Turn over."

"You ever gonna fuck me face-to-face?" Gabriel asked, already obeying.

"I give you everything else you want," Shane said. "Lemme have my baby steps."

Gabriel got onto his knees, elbows on the arm of the couch. Shane sank down behind him, traced each knob of his spine, the muscles pinched between his shoulder blades, marveled at him a moment before lust pushed adoration out of the way. He squeezed his hard ass, spanked it a few times, watched Gabriel's skin bloom pink and made him wait. He fucking loved this part—controlling this man's anticipation and excitement.

"Come on. Please."

"God, I love it when you beg." Shane wet two fingers and slid them over Gabriel's asshole, eased them in slow. Gabriel's arms trembled as he moaned, set Shane on fire.

"Need it," Gabriel mumbled.

"I know you do."

"Now. Please."

Shane fisted his cock with his free hand, got a jolt from his own hardness, from believing he was the biggest this man had ever had, from the thought he might be the best, the only one good enough. He stroked himself tightly, fantasizing that if Gabriel was with another man sometime—tonight, next week, five years from now—he'd only be able to imagine it was Shane who was fucking him. His own patience dissolved. He ripped open the condom and slid it on, spat in his palm and got himself slick.

They fucked hard and fast, each finding what they needed from the other, climaxing together in a sweaty heap of ticcing muscle on the beleaguered couch. Gabriel

got his body under control enough to toss his leg over Shane's hips, straddle him and rest his face against Shane's neck, his ragged breaths heating and soothing.

Shane knew this wasn't love, at least not any kind of love that extended beyond the desires of two selfish bodies. No future, only fleeting pleasure. This was addiction, plain and simple...irresistible need coupled with painful consequences and regret, moments of pure happiness like islands, spread out in a thrashing sea of insecurity and interminable waiting.

But for as long as he had his hands on this man's skin, Shane had solace. The second he let go the pain would return, scary and intense but nothing compared to the highs. Shane had quit smoking in his twenties, a month of pure hell that'd be nothing compared to the withdrawal he'd face if the warm body currently plastered to his chest and stomach were to up and disappear.

Gabriel whispered behind his ear. "You need me gone soon."

"Yeah."

"And I always do what you say."

Shane swallowed. "We'll see."

Gabriel pulled away, peeled his hot skin from Shane's and stood, and Shane wanted to grab him and yank him back, wrestle him to the carpet and never let go. Instead he stood and got rid of the condom and they dressed in silence. He stole glances as Gabriel pressed his bandage firmly against his chest, buttoned his shirt and slipped on his jacket. He raked his hair with his fingers, found his hat and put it on...perfectly ignorant or utterly cognizant of how magnetic he was, who knew which.

He met Shane's eyes with his deadly ones. "Maybe I see you tonight, Shane?"

"Maybe."

Gabriel grabbed his mandolin case from the counter. Shane followed his every move as he walked to the door, undid the locks, opened it. Gabriel turned in the threshold.

"You keep that bed warm for me, eh?"

Shane took a breath. "Yeah. Sure." He looked to his feet, kept his eyes there until he heard the click of the door closing, felt the chilly breeze wash over him, heard the thump of Gabriel descending the steps, taking away all his sweltering heat and leaving Shane stranded in the barren emptiness of winter.

And before he even started lamenting their latest parting, Shane was craving nine o'clock, craving red wine and heated glances, tenuous bargains and a tempting imitation of trust. He looked to the clock.

Only twelve more hours and he could breathe again.

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.

Cara welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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