

Excerpt from *Backwoods* by Cara McKenna

© 2010 Cara McKenna

Available September 10, 2010 from Ellora's Cave

"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.