

Excerpt from *Shivaree* by Cara McKenna

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*[mid-book excerpt]*

Natalie felt the music wash over her, as warm and languid as the air seeping through the screens. The man on stage raised the mic stand up a few inches. He sang. On some atomic level, Natalie felt the vibrations of his voice pulsating on a wavelength attuned to her own private rhythms. The lyrics were foreign—Spanish—but their meaning was unmistakable. Couples moved as singular bodies, cores pressed tight as they rotated. Hands drifted low, cupping backsides with fond flirtation, holding hips with possession. Parched, Natalie took a deep drink of her beer.

The magnetic man's eyes were closed for much of the song, fingers left to their talented devices, consciousness surrendered to the creation of the music. Natalie was staring at him when his lids finally rose, and she was caught.

For the rest of the song, he held her gaze, his eyes black in the colored glow of the motley lights. She couldn't have looked away if she wanted to. And she didn't want to. She wanted this man to sing to her. She wanted him to do everything to her, with an urgency that made her blush and made the damp, hot air feel cold against her fevery skin.

She was so far gone she didn't realize the song had ended until the clapping roused her. The man's eyes released hers. He looked down at his hands as he said, "Thank you," again, the last syllable drawn out into a sigh. He nodded to some unseen person and recorded music came through the speakers, a lazy country ballad. He flicked the microphone off and set his instrument on top of its case by the wall. Hopping off the stage, he

snaked through the dancing bodies, heading toward Natalie. She felt her eyes go round.

He was tall, just as she'd thought, perhaps six-one. Slender but masculine, strides graceful and confident.

He'd stopped directly in front of her, a strange, subtle smile curling his lips.

"Hi." She clutched her bottle like a merry-go-round pole to keep from tipping over.

"You dance?"

"Not very—"

He cut off her protest, taking the beer from her hand and setting it on the tabletop. He led her by the shoulder to a small opening in the dance floor.

"I don't dance very well," she finished. It didn't matter. These were lazy steps, a dance with no title or conventions. He led her in slow circles, one hand on her waist and the other clasped around her fingers in the air beside them. She set her free palm on his shoulder, feeling his warmth. From this close, she could smell him and see the tiny beads of sweat along his neck. His eyes were shaded by his hat. It looked vintage, the felt brim worn and the black satin band frayed. She wanted to put her nose to it and be taken back in time to an elegant era when men still danced and wore hats.

"What's your name?" he breathed, and his voice so close to her ear felt like the faintest whisper of a fingertip over her clit.

She cleared her throat. "Natalie. Foster."

"You're from away."

She nodded. "Rochester, New York. And Miami for the last few years."

"You on your way to someplace?"

"Back north," she said. "What's your name?"

"Gabriel."

She let the syllables dissolve in her brain. *Gabriel.*

"What brings you to this place?" he asked.

She laughed. "Chance. My truck broke down, up the road. I came to try and figure out if I can get it jumped, or whatever it needs. But I got distracted." She paused before adding, "By your music."

He grinned, deep and indulgent. "Oh?"

She nodded. "I don't even know what your instrument is. A harpsichord?" she ventured.

He grinned again. "Mandolin."

"Oh right. Sorry."

"But I can play you something on a harpsichord, if you brought one."

She blushed, unseen under the colorful lights. "I was way off, wasn't I?"

"Only by about two hundred pounds."

She blushed deeper. It wasn't her way, but this man made her body's inner workings misfire, sending blood to her cheeks and lips and breasts and lower.

She found her voice a few steps later. "What town am I in?"

"Shiloh. Barely a town. You heading to Baton Rouge tonight?"

She nodded. She watched his throat as he swallowed, the tendons and the bob of his Adam's apple, the dark hair framed in the V of his open collar. She glanced at his arm, bare up past the elbow, tan skin beside white cotton. He had tattoos, dark lines and shapes, just the very edges of the design visible.

All at once, being near this stranger was too much. From a distance, he was a sip of liquor. This near, for this long, he was alcohol poisoning. Natalie felt woozy. His long body felt close, closer than the inch or two

separating their chests. The heat coming off him put the southern summer to shame, and sweat trickled down her spine beneath her tank top.

She glanced around the club, over Gabriel's shoulder. It was an odd place. More Christmas lights hung from the ceiling, a canopy of candy-colored stars. Strings of random pendants and window crystals and glass beads were strung there as well, and all the tall windows were draped with long white curtains. The fabric was strange and spangled, textured with tiny pearls and lace and sequins. The breeze from outside made them dance along with the music.

"You looking at the drapes?" Gabriel asked, amused.

"They're odd."

"Made from weddin' dresses."

Of course.

"Everyone from around here calls this place The Chapel."

She nodded. She kept her eyes trained beyond the intoxicating man in front of her, mustering sobriety. Despite the chaos and noise, it was a peaceful, ethereal, sensual place. She took in the patrons, a mix as colorful as the decor. Everyone looked content, dancing, chatting around tables, seated at the bar.

With one exception. A large man in jeans and a tee shirt leaned against the wall near the front door. He was tall and dangerous-looking, and he was staring straight at Natalie.

"You're distracted," Gabriel murmured. His voice dripped honey down her neck, warm and sweet and sticky.

"It's that man." She pointed with her eyes to where he stood, nursing a whiskey and some invisible grudge. Gabriel craned his neck and smiled.

"That's Shane Broussard."

"Is he your enemy or something? He's giving us the evil-eye."

Gabriel laughed, low and seductive. He moved her in lazy circles over the scuffed wood, commanding with his hands, teasing with his breath and smile and the grazing of his chest against hers. Natalie felt lucidity fall away again.

“He’s my lover,” he murmured.

She tightened in his arms. “Your lover?”

He ran his palms over her bare shoulders, over the goose bumps that had risen there. He nodded.

Natalie glanced to the side, taking in Shane Broussard—well-built frame, nearly shaved head, boxer’s arms. He had the air of a soldier, dishonorably discharged.

“He looks...cruel,” she whispered.

Gabriel laughed again. He drew his head back to study her anxious face. The edges of his eyes crinkled with mischief and satisfaction. “He’s a beast.”

Against anybody’s better judgment, she ran her fingers over his neck and through his unruly black hair. “Maybe we should stop dancing. I don’t want to upset him.” She’d inspired more than her fill of masculine displeasure in recent months. Make that years.

Gabriel pulled her closer. “He don’ own me.”

Natalie sucked in a breath. She could feel him, stiff behind his fly, his erection pressing against her hipbone as their bodies swayed. She hesitated, torn between fear and pleasure. The chill he’d given her moments before gave way to a flush. The humid, hot air enveloped them and its magnolia scent was eclipsed by Gabriel—by the smell of his sweat and skin and by his mere presence. She wanted him. She craved him as palpably as a castaway might crave water. That his possessive lover was watching them with unveiled hatred only deepened the ache. Gabriel moaned softly as her nails raked his neck beneath his collar.

Natalie was used to going after what she wanted and usually getting it...though recent history had taught her she didn't always like her prize once she claimed it. Still...

"Does he let you take other lovers?" she whispered, reckless.

"Only women."

"And you do as he says?"

Gabriel ran his lips up her jaw to her ear, warming her with a deep exhalation. "I do."

"Why? What's in it for you?"

"I have my reasons."