

“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 frowned 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. Said he’s from New Orleans.”

“What’s he play?”

“Mandolin, I think.”

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 degrees 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 from 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.

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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 shameless to plain 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 more than 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 cast him a little 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.

He 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 as 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 Shivaree'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 Shivaree 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.”

Her smile bloomed slow and sly. “He’s awful sexy.”

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. “I can 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 a 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 a 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 once, took his glass back to the stage. He clicked the microphone on and leaned in to address the crowd. “Good news. The boss-man say 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 look drunk.

Gabriel sang, more Spanish lyrics that left Shane’s throat tight, his skin hot. He’d never been affected by music this way before. And 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."

He 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?