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Down by the River

Screwdriver

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**By Rob Knight and BA Tortuga**

**Chapter One**

"Ellen, I need the Walberg files on my desk by three, along with the case files that are going to the audit committee." Fucking bureaucratic bullshit, but it had to be done. At least those pencil pushers at the Nevada state auditors agency thought so. See him. See him be a very good D.A. and not just set all that shit on fire and start over. Hell, as much as he lectured on safe, sound and secure legal practices, there was a ninety percent chance there was nothing to find.

Phillip sighed and smoothed his hands over his close-cropped hair, sleeves already rolled up and ready for the day. Christ, he needed to get into the gym again -- his arms were losing that gee-I'm-a-stud look and heading into pencil neck geek territory. It didn't work for him.

At all.

Like not at all.

"I also need you to schedule a hair cut and a few sessions with the trainer. Maybe twice a week for two months, hmm? Check with Steve to make sure my speech for the opening of the children's wing in Peccole is ready. Did you RSVP to Bill for his daughter's wedding?"

"Yes, sir. The governor's assistant asked if you would give a toast for the bride."

"Of course. Get me the files on them, and we'll write something. Order them something suitable." He synced his calendar and sorted idly through his mail. Junk, junk, politics, junk. Blah blah blah. "Anything else right now?"

"No, sir. You have a staff meeting at four p.m. and dinner at the Olive with Dr. Barton and his wife, Madeline."

"Ellen, Dr. Barton's wife name is Sylvia."

"Oh."

He chuckled, hung up the phone and tossed a half dozen social invitations, kept a dozen more for Ellen to schedule for him, including a rather swank-looking private invitation to discuss fund raising for a certain D.A.'s possible run for the Senate.

Swank.

Him.

Phillip grinned at himself, shook his head a bit. Good thing the neon lights around here had hidden his rough edges long enough for him to file them off. The sunlight bounced off the toe of

his loafer and caught his attention, even as his emails neatly filed themselves into the pertinent folders. Damn, he'd need to make sure his tux was cleaned for that wedding. Ellen would know to get a gift that was suitably expensive, yet useful. Something the newlyweds could use. She was brilliant that way.

A knock on his door and John McIver, assistant D.A., tennis freak and father of six wandered in, two cups of coffee in hand -- one cafe au lait for him, a low-fat latte with a shot of caramel for John. "Hey, man. We got a new case."

Phillip waved the lanky blond into a chair, leather coasters at the ready. "Anything good?"

"Depends on what you think is good, I guess." John gave him a tired smile and handed over the coffee. Not bad, even if it was too weak.

"Homicide with a murder weapon, a body, and irrefutable DNA evidence?" That always looked good for their office.

"Not even." He got a wink, and then a grimace as John tasted his own coffee. "Man, they always make it so bitter."

Right. Bitter.

Lord, he missed good coffee. Even after twenty years. "So? Move to tea like all the other poor lawyers with ulcers."

"I am not a prissy git, Phil. Anyway, it's an armed robbery, assault with intent, yadda ya."

"Put Jeff and Linda on it. They're competent enough." For babies.

"Okay. They could use the practice, huh? Oh, hey, did you get a thing on that cocktail party at the Simms?"

Lord, that man was all about the social climbing. Of course, any man who had six kids needed to have lots of money and ambition. Lots of money.

"Probably. You should go, get some media." Get bothered and questioned and photographed. Give him some space. "Sue would absolutely love to go."

"You think?" The half-empty paper coffee cup hit the trashcan. "Well, then I will. Anything else you need from me right now?"

"Don't forget the staff meeting, and make sure your shit is ready for that audit." The last thing he needed was for shit to hit the fan this far into the game.

"I'm ready, man. Really." He got the patented John who looked a like a tennis pro smile. "Going before you get really growly."

"Kiss my ass, Johnny." He grinned back, knowing that years of practice had given him a non-threatening smile that was effective, if completely unnatural.

"Now, now. Don't get personal." At least the man remembered to close the door when he left now. That had taken two years.

Like he'd get personal with that ass.

Christ.

He sorted the rest of his mail, leaving aside one plain envelope with the return address of a correctional facility in Baton Rouge.

Who the hell wanted a Nevada district attorney from down there?

He slit the envelope open, staring down at the signature. Joe Boudrain.

Jesus.

Just.

No, it couldn't be.

Phillip looked again, not reading the letter yet, just staring at a rough, messy signature with a name he hadn't heard in twenty years.

"Fuck me."

\*\*\*

Grant Thibbideaux popped the top on his beer and grinned over at his favorite contractor, Alan Moreaux. The man worked his ass off and rode his crew like a wildcatter riding a two-dollar whore. It was fucking hot. Too bad the man was straight as an arrow.

"Good day's work, Alan," Grant said, toasting the man with his bottle. "We keep on this schedule, we'll get you that bonus."

"You know it, man. It ain't cheap, sending a girl to college." Alan grabbed a cold one of his own. The man was nothing if not all bottom line.

'Course in the excavation and plumbing business, a feller had to be. It was hard, dirty work, and you only got the big jobs that made the kind of money Grant did by working your ass off and greasing a few palms. "Wouldn't know, buddy. But your girl sure deserves it."

"She does, don't she?" Those black eyes snapped as a journeyman walked by, pipes bouncing on one bony shoulder. "Goddamn it, Theo! You bend that copper and I'll beat it out of you!"

"Sorry, Bossman."

Grant rolled his eyes. "They're always sorry. You got that cooler, right? You give them all a beer when they get the job done, yeah?"

He had a steak dinner waiting on him at home, according to Anna Marie, who kept his house up. She always left right before he got home, giving him a hot meal and his favorite thing. Privacy.

"Yessir." He got a nod, a grin. "You don' worry about all this. I got your back."

"Cool. Well, you get yourself a nice supper in town 'fore you go see that mistress of yours." How a man could have a wife, a daughter, and a mistress was beyond him. But Alan did it with style. "Night, buddy."

"Night, man." Alan started hollering, a wicked grin on his face as his crew jumped and popped. Goddamn.

Yeah.

Still hot.

Laughing, Grant headed for his truck, taking the back roads home, waving at the sheriff's deputy who woulda run him down and given him a ticket, if he was anyone else. Grant Thibbideaux didn't get tickets. Not in this town.

Shit, not in this Parrish.

Home looked damned good after his long day, though, and Grant parked by the back porch, hopping out and whistling up his hounds. He had three, two girls and a boy, all huge feet and floppy ears, bouncing toward him, tongues lolling. He gave scratches to Daisy and Patch and Earnest and then headed inside, praising Anna Marie devoutly.

Supper smelled fucking amazing.

He grabbed the mail as he headed through, tossing the church and realtor fliers, tossing the bills at his desk.

The only thing that wasn't a bill was a long envelope with a bunch of numbers that didn't make no sense, then the name of a prison in Baton Rouge. A prison, for fuck's sake.

Idly, Grant wondered which one of his cousins was about to get out on parole.

He almost tossed that, too, but his damned insatiable curiosity had him opening it while he waited for his salad dressing to soak in and his butter to melt on his biscuit.

An explosive curse burst from him when he saw the name signed at the bottom of the simple letter. "Fuck a Goddamned duck! No fucking way."

No fucking way. Joe Boudrain was never supposed to pop up in his life again. Grant crumpled the letter in his hand, turning right toward the phone. He wondered how many palms he was gonna have to grease to make the sumbitch go away.

Fuck, he should never open the mail until after supper, now should he?

## Chapter Two

*Hey. You and me and our friend, we gotta do some talkin'. Blood brothers, we stick together and I got need of y'all's help.*

*I'm sitting here in Baton Rouge, waitin'.*

*You and him, y'all'd best come on afore the glue lets loose on old promises.*

*God bless.*

*Joe.*

Phillip had read the fucking letter about eighty times, fingers working his temple.

Joe.

Fuck.

He sat, staring at the computer screen on his laptop, a glass of whiskey on his bedside table.

Grant Thibbideaux's number was right there. The son of a bitch was still in Louisiana. Shreveport. Figured.

Jesus.

He reached for his phone to call when the fucking thing started ringing. "Hello?"

"Well, I ain't never figured I'd have to call *you*." Jesus. How many years and he knew that voice like it was yesterday.

"I definitely didn't expect to hear you on my private line, Tater." He barely resisted the urge to ask how Grant had found it. Still, someone in his private security firm was going to get their asses busted.

"Well, now, *Shine*, I got my ways. Just like someone else we know, I suppose." He almost laughed, what with Grant trading nickname for nickname. Lord, they'd been dumbass kids.

"The letter came to you, too?" It might be a dumb thing to ask, but he wasn't bringing Joe's name up until he had to.

"It did. You figured on someone else?" A whole world of disbelief sat in that one question.

"After twenty years, I didn't figure on anything at all, to be perfectly honest."

After twenty years, the last thing on his mind was the three of them, standing knee-deep in the



fucking bank of the Mississippi, the mud and blood soaking the legs of his torn up jeans. He ran his finger over the thick, old scar bisecting his palm. Shit.

"Yeah. I hear you." Grant chuckled, the sound rich and deep as bayou homebrew. "So what we gonna do, Mr. D.A.?"

"Well, I'm afraid I'm not licensed to practice law outside of Nevada, Grant, and, if what my compatriot there in Baton Rouge says is true, our old friend is in some very, very serious trouble."

First degree murder while on parole for grand theft? Never a good thing.

Joe'd dug himself into a hole no one could get him out of.

"So what you figure he wants from us? Not like either one of us can pull those kind of strings."

"I haven't a clue." What he did know was that the skeletons in his closet were buried, dusty, and lost and he fully intended to keep them that way. He had enough shit to deal with -- he was black, he wasn't married, and he wasn't having babies.

That made assholes nervous.

He heard a deep sigh. Grant had always been fucking impatient. "That don't help me a bit."

"Well, I genuinely hate to disappoint you, Tater, but you are considerably closer than I am. Why don't you pop down and ask him what the fuck he wants?"

"Bullshit. You're the legal eagle. It'll look less weird if you look into it. You can always say he looked you up." Growly bastard.

"Because, one, I don't do criminal cases, I have a staff for that. Two, I just told you I'm not licensed to practice law in our beloved home state. And last, but definitely not least, legal eagles who are about to announce that they're running for Congress don't visit convicts." Not if they intended to win, at any rate.

Lord knew Phil never played any game he didn't intend to win.

"No shit?" That wasn't a chuckle. It was a full out belly laugh. "Lord, and I can say I knew you when, Shine."

"I haven't heard that in an incredibly long time." Hell, he hadn't heard that familiar drawl in decades.

"No, you done left everything, yeah?" He heard nothing close to rancor there, just matter-of-fact truth. Hell, Grant had no right to bitch even if he would. He'd left home just as fast and hard as Phillip. There was shit there they had to get their distance from.

"We do what we need to, yeah?" They all three chose their paths.

"We do. We do at that. I'm not sure we can ignore this, man. You got someone who can look into it quiet-like? Or do I need to?"

"I'll ask a few questions; it wouldn't hurt if you did the same." They didn't move in the same circles; they'd get different information.

"I can do that, sure enough. I got a man who'll do just about anything, I pay him." A dark note crept into Grant's voice, and Phillip hoped to Hell the man didn't do anything stupid.

"Convenient." He rubbed the bridge of his nose, his reading glasses bouncing a little. "You'll call if you discover anything?"

"I will. You do the same for me, Shine. You got that?" Well, some things never changed. Tater was just as fucking bossy as always.

"I'm sure I'll remember." He chuckled, shook his head. "Sleep tight."

"Always do, buddy. How do you sleep these days?" Grant hung up on him, just like that, leaving the silence before the dial tone ringing in his ears.

"Fuck you, Tater. I sleep just fine." He slammed the phone down and grabbed his glass.

Just fucking *fine*.

### Chapter Three

The summer sun beat right down on his head, making him sweat like a lathered horse. Grant pushed through the last of the underbrush to get to the swimming hole, hoping to Hell that Phil had done what all he said he would. Cold beer and cigarettes were a heck of a luxury for him.

Phil wasn't in sight, but the cooler from his Uncle Theriot's convenience store was there, right as rain. Fucking A.

Hooeee. Grant took one more good look around before heading right for the cooler, grabbing him out a Schaefer and popping the top.

"Lookit you. Drankin' my beers up. Wearin' them old jeans that had to be yo' daddy's." Phil's voice sounded before the man did, the curly-headed bastard sliding up out of the water.

Grant grinned, admiring all that skin for a minute. Lord love him, he did like the way Phil looked. "I thought it was our beer, Shine. You get any smokes?"

"Yeah, buddy. Unc's new woman had two cartons in the back..." Lord, there was some folks in Phil's family. Shine's daddy played jazz up in N'awlins on the weekend, slept with some skanky damn whores during the week. His momma was living with this ugly drunk of a mechanic that had a way faster fist than brain.

Then there was Vieux -- Uncle Theriot.

Lord, that man was a fucking legend -- he made the heavy-duty hoodoo, and he always made Grant's skin crawl, the way he'd look through you, like he knew all your secrets.

Phil swore that once he'd seen Vieux curse a man that beat on a little gal from their church. He said that the old man had killed one of the old roosters, hacked its head right off, and sprinkled the blood down in the Bayou until the gators started rolling.

The man got himself stuck on the train tracks, got himself hit, too, and dead.

Grant wasn't sure if Phil was telling the truth, but Phil sure believed every fucking word and that was good enough for him.

So, yeah. Scary.

That was okay, though, Nobody cared none at the store if a few things went missin' now and then and no one worried on shit like age or nothing. It worked. "You do love me best, yeah?" He went looking for the smokes, needing one like the worst itch he couldn't scratch.

"That's what he tells me in the locker room, Tater." Joe came slinking through, greasy blond hair hid beneath one of them bandanas.

"Fuck off, Bones." Shine leaned against a tree, water sparkling away. "You bring food?"

"Yeah, yeah. I ever let you down?"

Grant shook his head. The answer to that was usually, but he was in a good mood and didn't want to fight none, so he kept his fool mouth shut. Well, mostly.

"What'd you bring us?" Grant asked, figuring that was safe.

"Brought burgers and shit from the Dart." Three big assed bags of grease plopped on the ground.

"Now, don't go gettin' bugs in it and all." He tossed his smoke away, reaching for a bag, smelling the fried potato smell. Lord, his stomach was growly. He gave the best looking bag to Phil, though. Phil was somehow more classy than him and Joe. That was okay, too. He liked it.

"Sweet." Phil slid down to the ground, sprawling. Those long, thin legs were the color of a rich, deep cafe au lait, the quick damned things the pride of H.J. High's football team.

Maybe he needed a quick dip before he ate. His cock was a little too interested to have him watching all that wet stuff. And that could be kind of inconvenient, springing a happy.

The water was swampy, but it did its job, Joe coming in after him and splashing like a fool. They wrestled a bit, acting like stupid gators. Hell, they'd be attracting them soon enough, they weren't careful. He whapped Joe on the head and headed back for the bank, pulling himself out and grabbing another beer.

Shine smoked. The little boombox played U2. "Dude, you seen that video with them boys on that big old building in Dallas? Them cops was pissed."

"Can you imagine anything getting this town that het up?" Grant couldn't. Maybe if someone brought in a Republican for a speech...

"Hell, the fucking twirler's water broke on the fifty yard line during homecoming and we didn't even miss a play."

"True enough." Everyone was famous in a small town, at least for a bit. Man, that burger was pure D fat bomb. Thank god for the Dairy Dart.

"Y'all interested in going down to the Quarter Saturday? Daddy's got a gig and says he'll pay twenty each for hauling shit."

"I'm in." Grant loved going into the big town with Phil. He really did. And Joe was a good time, too, for all that he never failed to get into trouble.

"I'll go," Joe said. "S'long as one of you can convince my momma I'll be with you and not drinkin'."

"I'll do it." Shine could convince a hoodoo queen to bathe in a baptismal.

In fact, Grant thought maybe he'd seen that.

"Cool." Joe kicked back, munching a fry, not paying them any attention. Which gave Grant time to stare a little.

Phil was gonna leave them, soon as the summer was over. The guy had it all -- scholarship, grades, the acceptance letter and everything. Fuck. Going to fucking California. He was gonna miss his Shine. He surely was. Grant figured he wasn't the college type, but he was going to LSU anyway. A man had to find a way to make a living.

"Y'all is real quiet." Joe threw a chunk of mud at Shine, one square hand slapping it out of the air. Now Joe? Joe wasn't going no fucking where.

No way.

"We were eating, man." Wasn't no sense gettin' deep with Joe, either. Grant winked at Phil, just a' grinning. "You know. Burgers. Fries. Keeps the mouth occupied."

Phil gave him a huge smile, front teeth crooked as hell. "If we had ice cream, it'd be perfect."

Jesus. If he could see that look every day of his life... But he couldn't. Sighing, Grant tossed his leftovers and slid right back into the water, ducking under and swimming hard.

It wasn't long before Phil was beside him, pacing him, just pushing and pushing like always. "You wanna come over tonight? There's gumbo." There was always gumbo on the stove at Phil's house. Always.

Panting, Grant stopped, treading water, eyes searching for Joe. He was far enough away that Grant didn't figure he'd heard the offer. "Sure, man. Better than home, yeah?"

"Yeah. We... we just let Joe go on, though, eh, Tater?"

More beer for them. More time to just shoot the shit.

"Yeah. He's got to do some work for his Aunt Lena anyhow. He won't miss out or nothin'." He wanted his alone time with Phil.

"Cool." He got another one of them grins, bright and happy. "I got me a quarter bag."

"No shit?" Oh, score. He could so go for that. Maybe they'd get loose and happy. "I'll be there, then."

"Yeah? Fucking A." One hand just barely brushed his leg. "I'm gonna go have a beer."

"Kay. I'll be there in a minute." His own hand slid across the small of Phil's back before he ducked under, knowing that holding his breath would help him go down.

If he saw something he shouldn't have on the way down, weren't him or Phil saying a word about it.

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Grant tapped his shot glass on the desk, the sound dull and flat. He'd needed a shot of Jack to get the nerve up to call again. Funny thing, that. He was known for having nerves of steel.

Phillip did always get the fucking best of him.

The phone rang and rang and Grant had just about give up when it clicked on.

"What did you find out?" Ah, so polite, so classy.

"Well, hey to you too, Shine. So good to hear your voice." He had been raised up right, even if Phil's momma had been the worst kind of whore. You didn't treat folks that way.

"Right. You've been pining, I can tell. Hold on. I need those files. I don't want to hear that you can't find them. I want to hear, yes, sir. I'll have them sent immediately." Someone was grumpy. He was about to get grumpier, if Grant knew anything about the man after all these years. And he thought he did.

"Well, our friend is in some deep shit, man. And he's wanting help. In the most... well, desperate fucking way."

"Well, all the evidence that the police there have says that he did what he was accused of." Phil sighed and Grant heard a door shut and lock. "What kind of help does he expect?"

"Something you ain't used to, I imagine. You being all lawful and all." The shot glass clacked so hard that it broke in two, the Mardi Gras mask all split down the middle. "I didn't talk to him, 'course. My man did."

"Of course. He's got a court-appointed lawyer -- a very blinky little girl named Grace. She has a decent acquittal rate."

"He don't have a lot of confidence in her. I tell you, Shine. I got some photos. He looks old. Desperate." Lord knew he and Joe had parted ways badly, but it made him downright sad to see.

"He'll go hard time this time, Tater. He's a repeat offender. What, exactly, does he expect us to do?"

"Get him out. Hell or high water. He was crazy, Alan said." Goddamn bastard had all but foamed at the mouth. Alan had offered to have someone inside kill him.

"I'm not sure a psychiatric ward in Baton Rouge is better than the state pen..."

"No, I mean... Shit, Shine. He's not bucking for psych. He thinks we can get him to South America." Jesus fuck, what was hard to understand about that?

"Excuse me? What, we're supposed to head to motherfucking Louisiana with a couple of sticks of dynamite, have a little andouille, blow him out of prison and put him on an airboat in the Gulf?"

"Well, I didn't suggest it, you fuckhead! I'm just tellin' you." Asshole. Fucking fucker, asshole.

"Fuckhead? Surely after twenty years you could come up with something more original." He could see the lip curl. He hated that tone. Hated it.

"Don't you sneer at me, Shine. I knew you when." You'd think he wasn't almost forty. You'd think he was still a fucking teenager, hoping for one shred of Phillip's respect and affection. Funny, how that damned superior tone took him back.

"You did, and you're one of three things I..." Phillip took a deep breath and Grant could see him - see him -- shaking his head. Joe wasn't the only one Grant had pictures of. The up-and-coming Vegas DA looked fucking edible, lean and slick, perfectly dressed and classy as fuck. Made him hard, late at night when no one wasn't looking. Made him want, even as he mourned the curly-haired, gangly teenager with crooked teeth. Wasn't no going back to that. Not after what they done.

"Miss you sometimes, Shine. I surely do."

"I hear that. I never. It wasn't supposed to be like this, you know?"

He could close his eyes, just for a minute, and believe that. Believe that Phil woulda called once in awhile. Maybe seen him at Christmas and shit. "I know, Phil. I fucking know. We can't just let him stew. What we gonna do?"

"Tell him to keep his mouth shut and not drop the soap in the showers?"

Oh, yeah. That would work. "Sure. I'll just send that along. You call me when they come for you, yeah?"

"Does he say he's got proof?"

"That's what he says. Something not just eyewitness. He don't care, Shine. He's going down either way. Says he might as well go down for it all..." That was Joe. All or nothing when you didn't need him to be.

The string of expletives that came out of Phil was either really sexy or vaguely terrifying.

"Damn, son. Nice to know some things don't change." Grinning, he poured another finger of Jack. "What now?" Hell, he usually made decisions. But this one stymied him.

"Pick me up at fucking DFW tomorrow. I have a reason to fly there, at least. Then we'll go talk to the motherfucker and explain things." Well, well. That was a sure thing, wasn't it?

"When are you coming in?" Shit, listen to the whomping of his heart all of a sudden. He was... what? Gonna see Phil for the worst possible reasons. Down boy.

"Ten thirty. Tell me you have a comfortable car, Tater. My ass is going to be tired."

"I've got you covered, Shine. Trust me." How many times had he said that in his life to this very man? "I'll be there."

"Then I will too. See you, Tater. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow. Night, man."

They hung up and he sat there staring at the damned whiskey. Jesus. What a fucking mess.

What was even worse was that he was kind of looking forward to it.



## Chapter Four

"Thank you for flying with us, sir."

Phil nodded and tried not to growl. He didn't need the baggage check; he had his laptop, his carry-on. He wasn't fucking staying. He was going to Baton Rouge, tearing Joe's tongue out, burning down the man's house, possibly jacking off in the shower knowing he was in the same state as Tater and then going home.

Ta. Da.

He headed down the concourse, resisting the urge to stop and check his clothes, wash his face. This wasn't a social visit. Not at all. Hell, he still had his suit on from his day.

He idly played the 'not Grant' game as he rode down the escalator, checking off all the various people standing around. Then the boxy, barrel-chested bastard came into view, looking exactly the same but different as hell, all at once. Jeans. Chambray shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Muddy boots and gimme cap. Shock of blond hair and the brightest blue eyes on Earth. Tater.

He just stared.

Jesus.

Just. Jesus, that was.

Fuck him.

He didn't trip on the way off the escalator, but it was a close thing.

Grant stepped forward as soon as he was clear, one square, tanned hand held out for him. "Hey, Shine. How in Hell are you?"

He took that hand, and then pulled Grant in for a quick, hard hug. "Here. I'm here, Tater."

"That's good enough for me, buddy." Lord, Grant had a working man's strength, hugging him until his ribs protested. Then the man backed off, blue eyes just twinkling at him. "You got any bags?"

"Nope. I have traveling light down to an art. Have you eaten?" His stomach still thought it was eight p.m.

"Nope. Had to dig out some old biddy's septic tank and then hit the road. I'm starving." Grant clapped him on the back and led the way out the doors.

"Sounds like fun." He wasn't even being sarcastic. Every so often he dreamed about just going north and working on a highway crew. It didn't last long, but it happened.

He got a sideways look, and then one side of Grant's mouth kicked up. "It was. 'Til that four foot cottonmouth come after us out of that hole."

"Ah, well. You used to be able to outrun them, once upon a time." He lived in rattler country now. There wasn't enough water to make a bayou boy tear up in nostalgia.

"Still can. Can still shoot straight, too." Oh, look at that truck. A big old duallie, just tricked out to beat the band. Grant had said he had a comfy ride.

He wondered what Tater would say about his Jag. He tossed his two bags in the back seat, then took his jacket off and put it on top of his stuff.

"You look good, Shine. Real good." Another sideways glance came his way, this one more a once over, assessing him.

He looked right back, unashamed, as he loosened his tie. He looked good and he knew it. It was a huge fucking part of his job, looking sharp, smart. Grant didn't look preened and primped like him. Grant looked like a wet dream, bulky and male, tanned and scarred and hot. They kinda sat there for a minute before Grant cleared his throat and took off his hat, tossing it on the dash before rubbing his hand over short brown hair. "So, what do you want to eat, man?"

"It's Dallas. I want Tex Mex." And as soon as he got far enough east he wanted jambalaya.

"You got it." They eased right into the traffic, the big truck thrumming with power. A lot of people would call that machine overcompensation. He knew that wasn't it with Grant. Not that he'd had a good, long look in a while. Hell, they'd never done more than jack themselves off in the same room, porn on his tiny little TV and...

Whoa.

This is not a hook-up with your incredibly hot fucking former bud.

Not.

This is a fact-finding, breaking-and-entering-to-destroy-evidence type of trip.

They pulled into El Fenix a while later, coasting to a long stop. Grant had been pretty quiet, which wasn't like him, at least back when. Maybe he'd gotten more cautious. Christ knew Phillip had. He slid out of the truck, grabbing his jacket to put it back on, wishing restlessly that he'd stopped to put his jeans on in the airport.

"You need anything out of your bag, Shine? They got a bathroom in there." Okay, the freaky mind meld thing could stop any time.

"I wouldn't mind getting changed. I stand out a little."

"Just a bit. Like a shark in a pool of gators, Shine." That grin took him back twenty years. Boom. Grant pulled his bag out and handed it over, locking up behind them.

Bastard. He headed into the garish lights, heading back to find his jeans, a simple, tight knit shirt. Oh. Better. Grant was sitting, drinking a beer, when he got back, chips and salsa waiting.

"I got us some queso coming, and some guac." Blue, blue -- and Jesus, he knew he was obsessing, but they hadn't faded with age, if anything, they were brighter -- eyes ate him right up, just like they had when they were kids. Grant still thought he looked good. Somehow that made him proud.

"Oh, man. It's been a long time since my lunch martini." He slid into a chair, winked and drained a glass of iced tea. "Shit, I can't believe I'm sitting here."

"Neither can I. Sorry it took somethin' like this to get you here." Tater tilted his head. "You really gonna run for office?"

"That's the plan. There's nowhere else to go from where I am, and I'm too young to retire."

Nodding, Grant held out his tea glass for a refill. "Yeah, yeah, I guess so. I hear that. I'd go crazy, I didn't work."

"Exactly." He hadn't taken a day off in eight years. He was hoping like hell he could be on a plane Monday morning.

"I'll have the chicken chimichanga, honey. Thanks." That waitress all but melted when Grant called her honey. Jesus.

"Beef enchiladas." He gave the girl a nod, handed over his still-closed menu. "You married yet, Tater?"

"Huh?" Those eyebrows went all the way up, almost to the hairline. "Hell, no." Then Grant flushed dark red and glared at him. "You?"

"Tater." He was the one that never had even messed with a girl, even when they were kids. "Don't be stupid."

"Oh, fuck you." Laughing, Grant dug into the queso, pushing the guac toward him, just like old times.

"Pun intended?" He laughed good and hard, salting the chips and settling into the food.

Something hot flashed in those eyes for a minute before Grant crunched away again, just grunting. The man had a wicked scar on the back of one hand now, stark white against the nut brown skin.

"You're almost as dark as I am, now." He could remember skinny dipping, could remember that lily white ass in the water.

"Only on the neck and arms." And the cheeks. Look at that man blush. It could make him forget why he was here.

He let his eyes go wide, gave Tater his most blatant innocent look. "You mean you don't go to the tanning beds nude? It's *all* the rage, like waxing."

A chip full of queso plopped right back into the bowl, Tater swallowing hard. "Do you?"

"Tan?" He had to tease.

"No, fuckhead. The... the other."

He met those blue eyes, refusing to be ashamed. "I do."

"Oh." He thought maybe Grant was fixing to make queso flamado, the way those cheeks heated up even more, making Grant grab for his tea. "Got a seed, you know?"

"You ought to watch those." Jesus, he could eat the man alive. One. Bite. At. A. Time.

"Yeah. They're hard on a body." Grant gave him a wide-eyed look, and then just started laughing, loud and raucous and fucking infectious. They hooted, just like they had a million times over anything from some silly jokes to the stories his daddy used to tell about the folks on Bourbon Street.

"You two are having way too much fun." The pretty waitress hugged on Grant a little when she came for refills, grinning at both of them.

"We're old friends. We have a lot of jokes to catch up on." Thousands of them.

"Well, y'all just let me know if you need anything. Like another beer or more tea." She winked at Grant and sashayed off.

"Man, she's hunting you hard." Phillip shook his head, grinning ear to ear.

"She's destined to be disappointed. I don't swing that way, Shine."

"Yeah? That's got to be as shitty a road in your world as it is in mine. Maybe worse." Not a booty-finding expedition. Not. Not.

"Makes for a lot of TV dinners and hand lotion. 'Course I just have a lot of hicks to deal with. You got politics, huh?" Poor Grant looked like a lobster again. Tanned or not, the man had the most expressive skin ever.

"I do. Voters want babies and beautiful women or a serious celibate nature. Sucks, given the amount of opportunity I have."

"So. How long are you staying?" The abrupt change had him blinking, and Grant wasn't meeting his eyes, was just turning the salt shaker around and around.

Right.

"I didn't book a return flight yet. I'm playing it by ear." Why the *fuck* didn't he just say Monday?

"Yeah?" Well, that got Grant to meet his eyes, those crinkles at the corners all bunching up with a smile. "Cool."

"You got a plan, Tater? Are we spending the night here? Heading straight out?" He could probably drive for a couple hours before he died.

"I thought we'd stay here. I've got a little place. Just a condo, but I'm here enough that it's worth the money." Yeah. Yeah, he could see that. Besides, that way he could pretend it wasn't his fault that he didn't deal with shit right away.

"Works for me, man." Fucking Joe. Fucking Joe and his little bullshit criminal tendencies.

"Well, we're good, then." They chowed down, and man it was good to have Tex Mex again. Not that Nevada didn't have good Mexican food, but it just wasn't the same.

Just like a lot of shit.

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The condo wasn't much. Oh, it was fine. Not run down or nothin'. He could afford the best these days. But he didn't live there. Not like he did his house.

So. It was just a once or twice a year condo, with the furniture that came with it, and Grant didn't know if that was good enough anymore. Maybe he should have got Phil a hotel room.

"Well," he said, flipping on lights. "Here we are. You want a beer?"

"Yes, please." Phillip nodded, plopped his bag on the floor, shoulders rolling. "You mind if I take my shoes off, man?"

"Shit, no. When have I ever cared?" He'd gone barefoot half his life, snakes and gators and all. Grant went to the fridge, and lo and behold, his condo agent had done everything he asked. Snacks. Lone Star, Shiner, and Blackened Voodoo. Woo hoo.

"Cool." Phillip sighed, the sound all hot and husky. God *damn*.

His cock took an interest, and Grant tried not to frown at it. He was too old to be springing to life like a weed in the spring. Really. "Have a sit, man. I'll uh... I'll be right back."

The bathroom would be a reasonable compromise between being rude and needing to get away to thump himself.

"You okay, Tater?" Shine's head was thrown back, throat working.

"Yeah. Yeah. Just gotta piss." Lord love him, because no one else would. Grant made a run for it, hitting the head and unzipping, getting himself all good and thumped and adding cold water to boot. Only when he was sure it would take an act of God to get him up did he go back out.

When he came out, Shine was at the balcony, looking out as the blues poured out of his cheap-assed stereo.

That man had always loved the blues. Jazz. Dixieland. All the shit Phil's pop had played. Grant was a country boy. Or Zydeco. Hoo yeah. But this was okay.

"Better now you've had a beer, Shine?"

"I think? Yeah. Shit. I haven't... I just keep thinking about shit and... What fucking happened to Joe, Tater? He wasn't a genius, but he wasn't a hardened criminal back then."

Grant thought about that for a minute. He'd always had a fondness for Joe in that way you have a fondness for a cousin or other relation. Love 'em, but don't like 'em much. Still, Shine was right about the criminal part.

"I guess he just didn't have no ideas, Shine. No drive to do and be. So he kinda... got like still water."

"I suppose. I wish he'd decided to do something like drink himself crazy rather than first degree murder..."

Nodding, Grant grabbed up his beer and took a long swallow. "Well, I tell you, man. We're not giving him the benefit of the doubt. It's hard to, considering. But what if..."

"What if what? His DNA is all over the crime scene, he had electronics from the place in his trailer, and there's an eyewitness. I could win that case with a paralegal and a secretary trying it."

Lord, lord. Listen to that arrogant son of a bitch. Damn that was hot. He hadn't wanted to believe that Joe did it as a robbery. He really hadn't. No matter what Alan had come back telling him. "Yeah. Yeah, okay, Shine. Whatever you say."

"Look, I don't want him to be guilty any more than you do, but I'm having a really difficult time

dredging up sympathy for a man who is attempting to shake skeletons in a closet I don't need opened." Those dark eyes just stared into him. "And I imagine you're in the same position."

"You know I am. Don't be fucking stupid." Feast or famine, him and Shine. Either they snarled or they laughed.

"I don't *do* stupid, Grant. There's not a lot to recommend it."

His hand clenched around his beer. Hell, all he'd have had to do to get his cock to go down was *talk* to the man. "Want another?"

"Sure. I'll get it." He could see the tension in Phillip's back, the way the muscles jumped and jerked under that obscenely tight shirt.

Closing his eyes, he let the music soothe him a little, just let it flow through him. God, him and Phil. They were like dynamite and a match. Really.

The cold longneck brushed along the back of his neck, icy fucking cold. "I didn't come here to fight with you, Tater. I swear to God."

"I know, Shine." Turning, he grabbed the beer, smiling a little. He could feel the heat from Phil's body, and his own frame perked right up. "We've always been kerosene."

"Ever since I kicked your ass in the fourth grade, you big bully." Fuck, look at that smile.

The urge to kiss that smile right off all but killed him. His knees actually tried to buckle. "Yep. Only way to get my attention back then."

"Is it easier now? I hit a hell of a lot harder, but I have less stamina."

"Not as good as you once was, huh?" He clapped Phil on the shoulder, needing to touch. "It's a lot easier now."

"I've gotten old, man, what can I say?" Phil chuckled, settled into the sofa. "You're no spring chicken anymore."

"Hell, no. I'm just an old fart." He sprawled in a chair across from Shine, grimacing as his ass protested the hard seat. Jesus, where had he gotten such an uncomfortable chair?

"You need a massage. Hell, I need a massage. I should have flown Harve in with me, just to be a spoiled brat."

"Harve? You have a masseur?" He squinted. "Are you sure you're Shine?"

"He works for the governor. I borrow him." He got an odd look, a smile. "And no, I'm not sure. That kid had better friends than I do."

"Oh, I don't know. You had Joe then." That made him snort his beer a little, tickled as a dog with a feather up its butt.

"Fuckhead. Joe was... on the outskirts of shit." Of them.

"Yeah. I know, man." They'd been fucking Batman and Robin or some shit. Two of a kind. "Ever miss home?"

"I used to, then I got busy. Now it's a quick thing -- like crappy Cajun food in Vegas or hearing a jazz tune."

"Yeah." He'd gotten busy, too. And shit, he still lived in his home state, so the voices were the same. He just missed Phil. He hadn't even known how much.

"The first bit after I left, though, it was like a missing leg. I kept looking for your ass." Phil grinned, shrugged. "We did what we had to do."

"We did. We do." He looked up, met those dark eyes straight on. "It's damned good to see you, Shine. Damned fine."

"Yeah. You got all muscle-bound and shit. It looks good."

His cheeks heated, and his grin kinda stretched his cheeks. "I work hard. Might as well show it off, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah. You just love looking like a stud. I know it." Grant'd bet his bottom dollar that none of Phil's fancy Las Vegas folks ever heard that crass laugh.

"Hell, yes. Not that it does me any good. Me and my hand, buddy." He and his calluses were good friends.

"I know all about that. Hell, I have to keep my porn in a safe in someone else's house." Jesus.

Okay, he wasn't that bad off. Grant tilted his head. "What kind of porn?"

"Well, I don't go in for drag queens or long storylines. This is stroke-off material. Fine men. Fine asses." The man could *blush*.

"Man, I need to look at your stash..." His own face was on fire, but the words just kept coming out of his mouth without stopping.

"Yeah? You don't have one? Do we need to go to Austin?"

"Uh." Fuck. He'd rather just go to the bedroom. "Nah. I'd just be imagining someone else anyway."



"Yeah? You got a... somebody on your mind?" What was that note in Phil's voice?

"Always." He'd never just put it out there when he was a teenager. But he wasn't no kid no more.  
"Always you, Shine."

"Yeah?" Those dark eyes dragged over him, slow and easy, like the best kind of touch. "Then there's no shame to admitting that I have a thing for white boys with blue eyes and broad muscles, huh?"

"Not a bit." Surely Phil could hear his damned heart beating like a drum. Boom.

"Well, then." He could see Shine's prick just filling in those jeans, could see that flat, hard belly twitch.

"What we gonna do about it, Shine?" To Hell with cold water and thumping. His own cock was a live wire, letting him know what it wanted.

Shine licked his lips, swayed a little. "I hope we're going to take what we need, Tater. If not, I'm going to have to stroke myself raw thinking about you."

Jesus. He moaned, right out loud, the thought of finally, *finally*, getting to touch almost more than he could stand. Grant moved to the couch, close enough to reach out, still half scared to do it. Phil, though, Phil wasn't scared at all. The man just scooted over, pressed against his side with all those lean, fine muscles.

"Hey. You good?"

"I'm better than. You got any idea how much I've dreamed of this?" And all that time dreaming wasn't half as good as the real thing.

"I think I do, yeah." Phillip's hand slid right up Grant's thigh, skirting his cock, thumb brushing his balls.

His whole body arched like he'd had an electric shock. "Oh, do that again, Shine. Do it."

"Look at you..." Oh, shit. Grant had never heard Shine's voice sound quite like that. The touch was repeated -- one, two three times, the final time Phillip cupped his balls, fingers rolling carefully. His legs opened like a two-dollar whore's, his hips slipping on the couch. His own hands finally kicked into gear and went to touching, sliding down Phil's chest. Phil was thin, muscles toned and firm and hot, even through the shirt. Phil swung around, straddling his thighs, bold as brass.

"Hey there." Look at that. Grant stretched just enough, bringing their mouths together for a kiss, his tongue stealing out to taste.

Oh, man. Shine... Shine, he knew how to kiss. Grant lost his breath, lost his grip, just lost it, those warm hands holding his face as Phil took his mouth. His eyes tried to roll like dice on a craps table. Breathing in great gasps, Grant pulled away a moment to stare. Then he plunged right back in.

Phil's lips were swollen, hot and open, letting him in deep. So sweet. Spicy. Beer and salsa. Damn. He'd wanted to do this his whole fucking life, he figured. And now he was. Damn.

"I. Goddamn. Tater." Phil stared at him, forehead to forehead, their lips almost touching. "Again."

"Uh-huh." God, he just... Shit, he might explode. He stroked Phil's cheek, his throat, his shoulder, feeling those muscles quiver. Phil sucked his bottom lip, teeth teasing a little. Jesus, sensual fucker. They kissed for a long damned time, both of them moaning and humming, both of them touching like crazy. Goddamn, they had a lot of time to make up for.

"Take your shirt off." Phil had it tugged out of his jeans already, pushed up toward his nipples.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay." Struggling, he shrugged out of it, tossing it to the floor. Oh, hot. Hot, hot hands.

"Jesus. You. I could just." Those open lips landed on the curve of his shoulder, shutting Phil up and making his hips roll.

"Uhn." His hand curled into Phil's dense, short hair, holding on so he could push, to try and get more of that mouth. Every inch of his collarbone was licked and nibbled. Then Phil headed south, teeth sliding over his nipple.

"Shit!" Man, when was the last time anyone had done that? He couldn't even remember. And this was Shine. His Shine.

"Good?" Shine's tongue slid over the tip, soothing, heating him up.

"You can't even believe." What, was he fourteen? He had to do some doing. He licked along Phil's jaw, just tasting the sweat that beaded up there.

"Grant." Phil shook for him, head tilting, giving him that neck. Oh, somebody liked that. He bit down a little, the texture and color of that sweet skin fascinating his eyes and his mouth. He stroked down Phil's back, hand landing on one hard ass cheek.

Fuck him. He felt that response all along his body, Shine damn near humping his thigh. He let himself squeeze harder, let his lips and tongue keep moving. They were getting desperate, but he still wanted to take his time.

"Oh. Oh, damn, Tater. That's fine." Phil tugged the tight t-shirt off, giving him all that cafe au lait skin.

"No, you're the fine one." His other hand popped right up like a jack in the box, fingers pinching at Phil's nipples. Smooth and slick, that skin fascinated him, almost as much as Phil's reactions did. He'd never had a guy that pushed into it like that, that needed so bad. They were just gonna ignite soon. Go up in flames. It was a Hell of a way to go. Grant took another kiss because he had to, because he couldn't do anything else. Phil's fingers were working at his jeans, tugging his belt and trying to pull him out. Touch him.

Grant helped, spreading his thighs under Phil's and pushing up, letting his cock spring free. Jesus. Jesus fuck. He was gonna die.

"Want to... Oh, hell." Phillip slid down, landing between his thighs, cheek rubbing his shaft for a heartbeat before those lips just dropped over his cock.

His eyes were fucking glued to where that mouth covered him, wide and shocked. Grant grunted, hips pumping up too hard, but he couldn't control it if he tried. Phil looked... hungry. Happy. Like this was just doing it for him and Grant thought the fucking world could end now and it would be okay.

Of course, he'd like to get off real quick, before he died. He grinned down at Shine, stroking his cheeks, his shoulders, just marveling at how damned good it felt. Shine pulled, cheeks hollowing. Fuck, that tongue slid over his shaft, sort of slapping or fluttering or something.

"Gonna... Oh, God, Shine. Gonna." Jesus, he was gonna blow like old faithful. Like right now.

Shine's thumb pressed under his balls, jostling him good and hard, sparks lighting behind his eyes. He shorted out, just flat lost it, coming hard. Right into Phil's waiting throat. His whole body shook with it. The suction eased, Phil sucking him clean before backing off, letting him recover.

Shit.

"Shine. Man... Jeez." His breath heaved in his chest, sweat just running down the back of his neck. "C'mere."

Shine chuckled, the sound a little desperate, a little husky. "Comin'."

He got himself an armful of lawyer, hot and hungry and wanting. Those jeans were a sight tighter than they had been when Phil changed into them, but Grant got them open, got that pretty cock out and in his hand. Fuck, the man smelled good. So damned good.

Phil's head snapped back, hips jerking, cock sliding on his palm. "Tater."

"Yeah, Shine. Jesus, you're pretty. I can't believe..." He stroked harder, words failing him completely.

"Don't. Don't stop, man. I need it." Oh, hell. Look at that.

"Not gonna." Oh, look. Speech. "I'm gonna give you what you need. Promise." Grant ended that by taking another kiss, pulling Phil right to him to suck that lower lip.

Phil whimpered, balls drawing tight, eyes rolling. Yeah. Right there. Hell, yeah. So close. Man, he could tell Phil was close. He pushed his fingers tighter together, pulling harder, giving Shine all he had. Heat just poured over his fingers, wet and sharp-smelling.

Rubbing it into Phil's skin has his own cock twitching again. Nothing urgent. Probably nothin' that was gonna be anything. But it felt damned good.

"Mmm..." Phil leaned in, body rolling against him, all lazy-like. Fuck, that was something -- like watching someone dance or some shit.

Almost like the blues that still played on the stereo. Only not sad at all. Satisfied. "Good, Shine. Real good."

"You know it. You want me to stop?"

"No. Not a bit." Fuck, he could just keep going. A long, long time. He could keep touching that skin. Tasting that sweat.

"Thank God." Shine moaned, tongue sliding back toward his ear, teeth careful on his earlobe.

"Mmmhmm. Feels like heaven to this redneck, Shine." He got his fingers moving again, sliding up Phil's belly, tracing the ridged muscles.

"You taste good." His neck was explored, the hollow of his throat.

"Yeah?" Well, who woulda thought? He just tasted like salt and soap, he reckoned. Shine was the tasty one. Always had been, the few times Grant had eaten off those fingers, all innocent like when they were in school. Not so fucking innocent now, was he? No, sir. So much for his cock not getting up again. Shine was grinding away, their cocks sliding together, hands petting and teasing while that mouth went to town. Jesus. Just. Phil was something.

He didn't think Phil had even gone soft. "You ain't human, Shine. I swear to God."

"Nah. I'm real. I just have been waiting."

"Me too, buddy. Me too. I ain't wanted no one like I've wanted you." Was he a fucking sap? You bet he was. He was just babbling, but who wouldn't with Phil on their lap?

"I. Shit." This kiss knocked his fucking socks off, Shine just blowing him away.

He held on and kissed back, tasting Phil again, his heart trying to trip over itself. He fucking loved that taste, had imagined it a million times.

Jesus. They could do this in the shower, in the bed. Do it over and over. Goddamn.

The thought had him jerking, had him reaching down to wrap his hand around Phil's, pushing their cocks together harder. The sound their skin made rubbing together was fucking obscene.

Phil's prick was longer than his, thinner, leaking as they moved together, both crying out into their kiss.

"Jesus. Phil. Please." What the Hell he was begging for he just didn't know. But man, he needed whatever it was. Now. Phil's hand joined his, the thumb rubbed on the tip, nail just teasing the slit.

"Yeah. Yeah." His hips started pumping again, up and up, and he rubbed his own thumb over the wetness they'd made, the heat.

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Want." Phil nipped his bottom lip, tugged.

"Anything, man. Shine. Anything you want." He tilted his head, kissing some more, tongue pushing right past Phil's teeth.

Phil's eyes went wide, heat spraying between them, the scent of Phil all male and sudden. Grant came too, just like that, like he hadn't come maybe fifteen minutes ago. He figured his own expression was pretty comical. All surprise and wow.

"Goddamn." Phil looked...

Gobsmacked.

That was it.

Gobsmacked.

Just like he felt.

Maybe he had something to thank Joe for after all.

Just maybe.

## Chapter Five

He woke up in the middle of the night in bed with someone.

It was odd enough to make Phillip confused and tense before his eyes adjusted and he could see the rough-hewn jaw of his former best friend. Jesus, the man was stunning. Phil'd always thought Grant was fine, but now? Now that the baby fat was gone and the football muscles were replaced with a working man's strength?

Yes, please, and thank you.

He took his time, looking, admiring, fingers twitching to touch.

Grant snuffled a little, like he always had in his sleep, lips smacking. Then the man rolled right over into him, one hand landing on his ass. Phillip chuckled, fingers trailing right over Grant's hip.

"Mph? Oh, Shine, feels good." What was fucking amazing was that he could tell Tater was still asleep. So he had to be dreaming about Phil. Fucking A.

"Shh. Easy." He kept touching, not trying to wake Grant up, turn the man on. He just needed to *feel* a minute.

"Mmmhmm." Grant snuggled right in, starting to snore a little. No way could you call a burly guy like Grant cute. But he was...

Shit, this was all probably a fucking mistake, but Phil was far enough out into the pale that he figured there wasn't any harm.

"Shine..." Grant moved closer, lips on his shoulder, little kisses making a trail.

"Right here." The man had amazing hair, honestly.

Christ, he was being a sap.

"Oh." Those eyes looked bright as hell in the dark room as Tater blinked up at him. "Well, hey."

"Hey." He grinned, stupid as it fucking sounded; he couldn't stop.

"You feel good. Hot. Smooth." Listen to that man babble for him. Tater always had when they were alone. Just him. Tater only did it for him.

"You were sleeping hard." He traced each muscle, one after another, stroking that pretty belly.

"I was. I was dreaming about you, man. And then lo and behold, here you are." He got another

bright grin, Grant leaning up for a kiss. Oh, fuck him raw, that was fucking irresistible. Bastard. Grant sorta... leaaaaaned against him, licking along his lower lip. "Love the way you feel."

"Goddamn. Why didn't we do this when we were young and nubile?"

"Uh. Because we had some shitty notion about ruining our friendship. And you leaving for school." Rough fingers stroked over his shoulders, down his arms, savoring him.

"Oh. Right. You went too, yeah? I mean..." Shit, he didn't want to remember that shit. He'd had a lot of shit to deal with and he wanted to enjoy this. Now.

"I did. For all the good it did me." Looked like Grant didn't want to go down that memory lane either, because the man took a kiss that curled his toes. His eyes rolled and he held on tight. Goddamn. He was used to doing the doing, but Grant just took him straight to heaven.

"Mmm." He could tell how much Grant liked kissing him. Hell, he could feel it against his hip, hard and hot and so damned fine.

Grant rolled, pressing him into the mattress, all those muscles fascinating his fingers. Kissing him again, Grant started to rock against him, cock pushing against his belly now. Lord, that man was horny in the morning. He surely was.

Phil reached down, got himself a double handful of tight ass. It felt so good that he tugged Grant tighter in, rubbing them together.

"That's it, Shine. That's it. Feels like Heaven." Rubbing harder, Grant let those hairy thighs slide down on either side of his, bringing their cocks in contact.

"You've got an amazing ass, Tater. I'd buy stock in it." Things matched together, pretty as you please, and he jerked, arching up like he'd been touched by a live wire.

"I'd eat you with a spoon, Shine. Always wanted to suck you. Fuck you. Vice versa. Whatever." That wide chest heaved, Grant panting for breath.

"Yes." Suck. Fuck. Catch. Pitch. He wanted it all while he could get it.

"Oh. Oh, damn." Grant pushed right up like a guy doing calisthenics, arm muscles bulging. Then the man moved right down his body, mouth blazing a trail across his belly.

"Grant. Jesus. That's hot." He braced himself, heels digging into the mattress.

"Yeah?" Hot breath stirred the trail of hair leading right to his cock, and Grant moved on down, chin nudging him. "This is the hot part."

"Oh, sweet Jesus. Grant. Please." He pressed his lips together; it was a little early to start begging.

"Please what?" Oh, the man knew how to tease. Always had, in different ways. Now it was with little licks, then a good hard suck to the head of his cock.

"Don't stop." It was going to drive him crazy, but what a way to go.

"Uh-uh." Or at least it sounded like a negative. It was hard to tell when Grant went all the way down and swallowed.

"Oh!" He couldn't decide whether to reach up and grab the headboard or down and grab Grant, so he sort of fluttered.

"Mph." Okay, that decided him. He'd go for holding Grant. Phil was careful not to pull Grant's hair, fingers pushing into the soft, thick locks. A low moan was his reward. Well, that and Grant sucking harder, really pulling back and forth. Looked like someone liked sucking as much as he did.

"Turn. Turn up here and let me..." Grant did something with his tongue and Phil's eyes rolled.  
"Oh. Oh, fuck. Again."

"Mmm." Giving him just what he asked, Grant did it again. And again, that hot tongue and those wet lips making him buck and cry out.

He forgot all about reciprocating or sharing or anything but the way that mouth felt on his cock. Phil humped up, fucking Grant's mouth, giving it up. Grant moved with him in perfect counterpoint, really loving up on him, eyes opening to meet his. Jesus, look at the expression in those pretty eyes.

"Tater." He shot, just like that, hard enough that his spine threatened to crawl out of his skin with it.

Swallowing hard, Grant hummed around him, hands stroking his hips like the man was praising him.

He was fucking ruined.

For life.

"Damn, baby. That was the best thing ever."

"Yeah?" When Grant finally pulled off he got a smile brighter than the fucking Nevada sun.  
"You taste fucking amazing. I swear to God, I feel like I'm eighteen again, watching you skinny dip and stroking off."

Oh, shit. "Or in the bedroom late at night, jacking off, wondering if you noticed."



"Sometimes." Nodding, Grant pushed up to lie along his side. "Sometimes I pulled off with you."

"Yeah." He reached down, his fingers joining up with Grant's, both of them touching that heavy cock. "I wanted you something fierce. Didn't know how to say it, then."

"I didn't know if I dared to." They both laughed, the idea of them doing... this, as young as they'd both been almost ludicrous.

"This works." It really worked. "We're more appreciative now."

"Hell, yes. And no fumbling..." Lord, he liked that grin. A lot. He was fucked.

"Mmmhmm. Not trapped by our hormones." He licked Grant's lips.

"Shit. You got my hormones in an uproar, Shine. Rampaging." The way that accent lengthened the As had him hooting.

"Yeah. Yeah, I hear you. I have to keep reminding myself we're not babies."

"You know it. But hey, like you said, it works. What do you want for breakfast, man?" Grant kissed his throat, rolling away just a bit.

"Coffee works for me." He took the hint, heading for the edge of the bed, so that he could get ready for the day, ready for work.

"Hey. C'mere." Pushing close, Grant kissed him until his eyes crossed. "Don't you get all closed up and lawyerly on me, Shine. We got to deal with this, but that don't mean we can't stay all friendly like."

He leaned in, took a kiss of his own. Yeah. Being friends with Grant had been easy. Making love even easier.

They could so work with that.

At least for a day or two.

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"Goddamn it, you fucking asshole! Get off the road if you can't fucking drive!" Grant shouted, flipping the guy off when he pulled in front of his big dualie on the Interstate. Goddamned fucking tourists. Phil snorted, and Grant glared over. "What are you laughing at, Shine?"

"Nothing at all. I was admiring your restraint and gentility." Shine was fucking cackling.

"Uh-huh. High-class white trash, that's me." That grin was worth a little disgruntlement on his part, though.

"Yep. Pure gentry, you. Not half-breed Creole like me."

"Nope. Just a crazy Cajun." He'd teased Phil mercilessly most of their childhood about his coffee and cream skin, his dark, curly hair.

"When did you decide to go into contracting, man? I mean, it suits you to the bone, but you never talked about it."

"Well, how much did I really work when I was a kid?" He laughed a little, thinking of those lean months after he'd left home. "I got a job doing some digging. Found out there was money in it, if you were the boss."

"Yeah? It's a good look for you." He grinned over at Mr. I Go Out in the Sun Naked, who was looking at him like *he* was naked or something.

"Thanks. I like how you look, too." Lane, but heartfelt. His cheeks heated up. Lord, he was a doof.

"Good." Phil smoothed down the front of his t-shirt, showing off that amazing six-pack. "I'm trying. I keep waiting for someone to tell me it's time to visit the surgeon."

Grant blinked. "The surgeon? What for?"

"Eye lift, jowl lift -- you know. All the plastic surgery shit you have to do to be considered young and trustworthy."

That was insane. "A man should look like he's lived, Shine. I don't trust no fifty year old politician who ain't got lines on his eyes."

"Yes, well, you don't live in Vegas where everyone's young."

"Nope. I live in the real world." He lived where the sun came from the sun and people worked hard and bribed harder.

"I can assure you, Vegas is extremely real. If it was make-believe, I wouldn't work ninety hour weeks."

"Lord, Shine. You *do* need to get out more." He turned off, heading off the Interstate and down the state highway.

"I came here to see you and Joe, didn't I?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess you did." No way was he gonna mention how it hurt that it took Joe doing something stupid to get Phil there to see him.

"Yeah. Only took one big asshole threatening to ruin both our lives to make me break a vow to never step foot in fucking Louisiana again." Phil sighed, rubbed his forehead and grabbed that fucking laptop again, tapping away.

Biting his tongue, Grant turned up the radio, letting the Zydeco music soothe him, make him bounce in his seat. Wouldn't do no good to snarl. Never had. Never would.

Phil started muttering under his breath -- something about John and Dave and Susan and stupid assholes taking the weekends off.

"You gonna shut up and talk to me instead, Shine? Or are you gonna bluster all the way?" Okay, when had he ever been able to keep his mouth shut?

"I'll probably bluster. I'm a lawyer. That's what we do." Phil shook his head, looked over. "I feel a little like Alice going through the mirror, man, and I want to fucking kiss you so bad it hurts."

"We could stop a bit." That whole kissing thing was something he could really get behind.

"Pick a place." Hell, yes. That was pure need and it was all for him. It wasn't about fucking Vegas and fucking lawyers and fucking politics. It was about him.

"You got it." He started scanning the side of the road. It had been awhile since he'd been down this way, but he'd bet he could find somewhere.

That damned laptop got turned off, closed, the little wire glasses put into their case. He kinda liked the little glasses. But hell, he liked Phil without them. Or near any way he could get the man. One hand landed on his thigh, the touch tentative at first, but pushing harder.

"Shit." He swerved, his hands clamping down hard on the wheel. "Gonna make me run off the road."

"You've been driving for years, man. Focus." Those fingers slid higher.

"Uh-huh. When was the last time I drove with you feeling me up?" Jesus fucking Christ on a pogo stick. Grant figured his cock was gonna pop right out through his closed fly.

"There's a first time for everything, Tater. Just think of all the options."

"I am. Trust me. In me. Sucking me." His mouth had a terrible case of run-on, didn't it? There. Grant chose a side road that looked pretty deserted. And unlikely to be patrolled by state troopers.

"Mmmhmm. Or I could ride your cock. We could sixty-nine. I could watch you jack off in the shower..." Shine moaned, moved closer. Perv. Sexy fucking perv. It was something, when the man stopped being a politician and started being... Shine.

"Gonna make me hurt." Gunning it, Grant rounded a bend and hit a bush line, slamming to a stop and throwing into park. "Need you."

"Right here, Tater." Phil already had his seat belt off and was heading over.

"Good." His hands landed on Phil's shoulders, pulling the man close. Well, as close as he could get with the steering wheel and the gear shift and all. The kiss he got burned him down to the core, Phil trying to climb into his skin.

They broke for air, both of them panting, his hands cupping Shine's cheeks. "Taste amazing."

"Uh-huh. Damn. Again." Those chocolate-brown eyes were gleaming, staring right at him. So he did it again, pressing his mouth to Phil's, pushing his tongue out to taste. God almighty. The man was gonna burn him alive. Phil started sucking on his tongue, pulling hard enough that he felt it, balls deep. It was like the man was sucking something else. He'd always heard that, but never believed it. Jesus, he did now.

Phil's fingers headed south, sliding right down his belly toward his cock. Grant spread his thighs as much as he could, hips rolling up. Okay, ow. Steering wheel. "Back seat, man. I need more room."

"Uh-huh." Phil scooted back, licking those swollen lips. "Can't suck you here."

That had him whimpering, pulling away from Phil to open the door and scramble out. "In back. Now."

"Bossy." Phil slid into the backseat, right behind him, hands opening those tight jeans.

"Wanting. God, Shine. A man can only take so much teasing." Maybe twenty years. After that he had to have it.

"Teasing means you don't put out. I put out."

"Uhn?" His hands found skin, under Shine's shirt, and it kinda shorted him out. Grant couldn't think, could only feel.

Phil's little nipples were hard and tight, belly taut. "You make me crazed, Tater. I swear."

"Good. We match." His fingers pulled at those hard little bits of flesh, twisting a little to make sure Phil felt it all the way down.

Phil jerked, lips crashing against his with the movement. Oh. Someone liked that. Grant chuckled, and then moaned as the kiss had him jerking and pumping his hips like a teenager. Hands never stopping, he traced the line of Phil's ribs, then down that ridged belly,

"Fuck me." Was that a request or an exclamation?

"Uh. As in for real?" Hell, did they even have a condom? Was he gonna get hit? Would he mind if he did?

Those dark eyes were shining. "I guess it's crass to do it together the first time in a truck, but yeah. I want all of you I can get, Tater."

"Oh, God. We don't have anything..." He wouldn't put Shine at risk. He was clean, but they at least needed lube.

"We have each other and suitcases, man. I have lotion in my ditty bag."

"Oh. Fucking A." Lunging for that little bag, Grant hauled it up out of the back, rummaging. He glanced up to find Shine watching him. "Am I killing the mood?"

Oh, listen to that laugh. Jesus Christ. "If you do, I'll let you know."

"Well, come here, Shine. We'll get rolling again." Those clothes had to go. Now.

"I'm right here." Phil pushed into his arms, face lifted for a kiss.

Grant gave that kiss and then some, tugging at Phil's shirt and jeans. Getting completely naked was risky, but Goddamn, he couldn't do this any other way. Not the first time.

Phil was working with him, stripping down before attacking his clothes. "Fuck, the police better not come."

"No shit. I was just thinkin'... Well, you know it's dangerous when I think." Oh, look at that skin. He fucking loved that color. Dreamed about it at night.

"No thinking for the redneck." Phil spread a little, those soft, heavy balls resting there, cock full and dark.

"Nope." Drooling, sure. Touching. Oh, Hell yes. He could touch with the best of 'em. His hand closed on Phil's cock before he even thought about wanting it to.

"Mmm. Yeah. Yeah, man." One of Phil's legs bent, knee pushed back.

"God, you're hot. You smell fucking amazing." He reached beneath those fuzzy balls to tease Phil's hole, finding his way.

"I can't believe it's you. That's something else." Phil grinned and the look was plumb evil. "It'll probably suck, huh? Since I've dreamed about it so long?"

"No way. No way am I going to let this be bad." It might kill him to hold back and make it fine, but for Shine he would.

Shine's laugh rang out, his lover nodding, smiling at him. "I'll hold you to that."

"Of course you will." He pressed, just a little more, letting Phil know what it felt like to have a little stretch.

The laughter faded, Phil pressing back before rocking away again, damn near dancing for him.

So fucking pretty. He'd always thought Phil was the best of them. He still did. That damned lotion resisted opening, but Grant finally got the lid off, got his fingers slicked so he could push into Shine's body this time, one finger first.

"Jesus. This is like... Goddamn, Tater." Yeah. Yeah, he heard that.

"I know it. So hot. Tight inside." His arm shook, his chest heaving as he pushed another finger inside Phil's body.

"Gonna feel good, your cock in me." Phil groaned, foot propping up on the back of the seat.

"You got that right." Grinning, Grant pushed harder, stretching Phil a lot deeper, a lot wider.

Phil shivered, moaned for him. "More. More, man. Now."

"Yeah. Okay, yeah." Shit. Performance anxiety wasn't usually his thing. It sure wasn't softening anything. But it was making him fumble with the lotion. He finally got it around where he could slick himself up, and then pull Phil up over his thighs.

"Oh, hell yes. Fuck me. I've wanted to know for years." Phil helped, shifting and sliding until that hole was damn near *kissing* the tip of his cock. Grabbing Phil's hips, Grant pushed up, his cock sliding in an inch or more. His eyes just rolled like casino dice, his fingers clamping hard on Phil's skin.

"Grant!" Those brown eyes landed on him, just wide as shit. Phil went up, and then pushed down, meeting his next thrust, his cock sinking in deeper.

"Oh, God." That body squeezed him so tight he had to hold Shine still a minute or he was gonna pop like a cork. "Wait, Shine. Just a second."

"Uh-huh. Been needing. I. Tell me when." He could feel every ripple of every goddamn muscle.

"Yeah. Hell, I know that. But I gotta wait or I'll end too soon." His breath came in great gasps, his whole body shaking with it. Phil squeezed him tight, then relaxed a little as those hot-as-fuck hands slid up his arms and those fingers dug into his shoulders, rubbing on him. "Oh." His head rolled on his neck, his eyes trying to cross. "Good. Good, Shine. Better."

"There. Oh, fuck. Look at you." That was a satisfied goddamn sound if he ever heard one.

"All you want to, man." He was making wild offers, but he could stay where he was for the rest of his life.

"I want to." He got a wild grin, Shine kissing him stupid. "Fuck me, man. I need you."

"Gonna make you feel so good." So good. Grant started moving, rocking, sliding in and out. The space was tight, but they made it work.

"Uh-huh." Phil looked at him like he was a goddamn god, staring as they moved together.

"Fucking love this." Faster. He had to go faster now after all of that holding still. Grant panted, his balls aching, his whole body straining.

"Yeah. Yeah, man. More." One of Phil's legs bent, Shine sliding down a little and letting him in deeper. His body nudged Phil's ass, his balls, and that was just the best fucking thing in the world. The hottest thing ever. His head tried to explode, sure enough. Then he hit something in Phil and he got this sharp, needy cry, those fingers gripping his shoulders. "Again! Grant, please!"

"You know it." He tried for that spot over and over, listening to his Shine go crazy for him, feeling that tight body close down on him like Phil was trying to squeeze his orgasm out.

Phil groaned, dark eyes rolling like dice, so fucking close it hurt. "Come on. Come on, honey. Need to feel it."

"Feel it? Babe, if you can't feel this..." Grant punched up with his hips, reaching down to pull at Phil's cock, not caring a bit that he was a little too rough. Oh, fuck. That cry suited him to the bone -- desperate and wild and all shaped like his name as Phil shot for him, heat pouring over his fingers.

"Oh, Jesus." He felt it all around him, strong as a vise grip, hot as a bonfire on Friday night after football. Phil's body worked him like a practiced whore, muscles squeezing and rubbing his cock. Grant finally let it go, his cock jerking inside Phil's body, his hand gripping Shine's cock like a handle. He cried out with it, hoarse and long and low.

"Grant." He hadn't ever heard his name sound like that.

Ever.

Fuck, he hoped he'd hear it over and over. When he could draw enough air in, he nodded and kissed the corner of Phil's mouth. "Fucking A, Shine."

"Uh-huh." Phil nodded, teeth teasing his bottom lip a second.

"Lord." His skin got all goose-bumpy, shivering right up. "Make me crazy. Like a fucking kid again."

"Uh-huh. It's a hell of a ride, Tater. I swear."

"It is." Rubbing his bristly cheek against Phil's, Grant smiled to himself. He didn't want to move. No sir. Not a bit.

Phil's lips found a sensitive spot right under his ear, brushed it softly enough to make him shiver.

"Damn. Damn, babe. We might have to go again." Look at him, acting like he wasn't too old to be fucking in the backseat of a king cab.

"I could live with that, honey. I surely could." Oh, that accent was creeping back, soft and sorta musical.

"Yeah? I mean, I wouldn't hurt you for nothin', Shine. Never." Phil's cheeks were a Hell of a lot smoother than his, shaved right down this morning.

"Not going to hurt me. Filling me right up."

"Good." His cock decided that it wasn't gonna flag at all, perking right back up again, and he resisted the urge to stare down at where he and Shine were still joined.

Shine groaned, one hand cupping his cheek, thumb on his jaw.

"Goddamn." Grant started moving again, unable to stop the rhythm of his body. It knew what he needed long before his brain did.

"Uh-huh. Gonna feel you tomorrow, deep in me, man." Shine's ass clenched around him.

"Oh, God. I... Jesus." His hips started rocking again, going to town. Phil got to him like nothing ever had.

"Yeah." Phil's leaned up a little, hips tilting.

"Kiss me." He wanted that mouth again, kind of wanted Phil to do a little of the doing. Not that he minded... Oh, hell, he just wanted that mouth.

"God, yeah." Phil kissed him like the world was coming to an end, tongue pushing into his lips.



Opening up and taking it, Grant moved in time, his cock stroking right into Phil's body again. Lord, he was... Shine left him fucking speechless. One of Phil's hands landed on his ass, pulling him in deeper. That got him a deep sound, Phil crying out into his lips, jerking on his cock.

"More." He said it against that amazing mouth, their lips moving together wetly, slipping and sliding. Phil nodded, moving like nothing going on his cock, riding him. Goddamn. They were gonna kill each other. No doubt about it. What a fucking way to go. And hey, then they wouldn't have to worry about Joe. No. No thinking about that. This was too good.

His bottom lip got a good, hard bite. "Pay attention. No wandering."

"Nope. None." Grinning wildly, he started moving again, one hand sliding up Phil's back to press between those sharp shoulder blades. "You make me so damned hot."

"Good." He got this wild, happy grin, Phil looking like a million bucks.

No more wandering. No sir. Just fucking and sucking and sweating. Shit, they were steaming up the truck, and wasn't that a hoot? Grant needed more and more to keep him happy, and he didn't know what he was gonna do when Shine went home...

"No. Fucking. Thinking." Shine squeezed him so hard his eyes rolled, his breath just stopped in his chest.

"Oh. Oh, Jesus. Yeah." His brain shut down, his body took over, and Grant humped like a mad thing, his thighs straining and aching.

Oh, shit. Listen to how he could make Phil sound, how he could make Phillip cry out and beg.

"That's it, baby. That's it. Jesus God, gonna come so hard..."

"Yeah. Yeah. Grant!" Phillip's face went a sweet rosy red, eyes wide as saucers.

"Fuck, yes." That was it. That was all she wrote. Boom. He came like a ton of bricks, a harsh cry torn out of his throat. Heat sprayed over his belly, Phillip right behind him, coming hard for him.

"Damn..." That was. Shit. They were gonna kill each other for sure.

"Uh-huh." Phil's hands slid down his sides, just petting away.

"Do we have to go?" He knew it was a whiny butt question, but he asked it anyway.

"We could find a motel with a bed..." Maybe he wasn't the only whiny butt...

"Shit, yes." They could steal one more day. Just one. "Let's do that, Shine. For tonight."

"There you go. You. Me. A shower. A bed. A locked door." Shine was grinning.

"You got it. Man, I think that would be a fine thing." Once they got unstuck and all.

"Yeah. Yeah, way better than getting on with shit."

He took a kiss, nodding, grinning back a little. "Well, come on, then. Let's get done up and we'll go do some more."

"Cool." Oh, man. Look at that smile.

They'd put it off for one more day.

Just one more day. They're earned that much after all these wasted years.

## Chapter Six

Ah. Motel 6. Home of weary travelers, horny fuckers, and truckers on a break. Phillip laid out on the surprisingly comfortable bed, stretching his lower back right out.

There were muscles in him that hadn't been so well-used in, well, ever, and he still couldn't find it in himself to regret it. Grant fucking him had been something else, listening to that gravel-rough voice ringing out in the cab... Damn.

The door opened, Grant muscling in with two Dr. Peppers and a bucket of ice. Man, they should order a pizza.

"You think we should order a pizza?" Grant asked, making him hoot. Those pale brows drew together, Grant frowning at him for laughing. "What?"

"N...nothing. Nothing at all." Shit, Grant could either read his mind or he was still predictable as fuck. Phil leaned toward the first; no one else knew him like Grant.

"Uh-huh." Giving him a suspicious look, Grant handed over a drink. "What do you want on it?"

"You don't remember? Man, I'm hurt." Besides, they probably didn't make andouille and tasso pizza here. They needed to go a little further south.

"They don't make that here..." See? There the man went, reading his mind. "So, I guess you want sausage and Canadian bacon in its place, yeah?" This time it was Grant laughing a little.

"You know it, man. It isn't right, but it isn't bad."

Jesus, Grant was a fine, fine specimen of a redneck.

"Cool. I'll order." Grinning, Grant pulled off his shirt, reaching for the phone.

It was more than he could do, to not roll over, get his lips on Grant's lower back. Grant hummed like he'd read his mind again, wiggling for him, showing off. Look at that farmer's tan. He licked along the edge of Grant's waistband, blowing on the wet skin.

"Mmm. Oh, good, Shine. Huh? No. I'd like to order two large pizzas with sausage and Canadian bacon. Yeah. Motel 6 on LaGrange. Room 112. Thanks."

Yeah. Good. Grant tasted like sex and salt. He was addicted. Phil closed his eyes, tongue exploring one inch after another.

Grant hung up the phone and turned to him, rubbing a hand across his head. "Hey, you."

Oh. Belly.

"Hey." He grabbed those soft, dark curls leading to heaven with his lips and tugged a little.

"Uhn. Oh, man. I'm not sure we got time, Shine. They said twenty minutes." That body didn't move away, though. No sir. Grant moved closer.

"I can't just touch?" He didn't have to get Grant off again for a bit. He just needed to touch.

"Oh, you can touch..." Wiggling, Grant settled in next to him, hand cupping his hip. "This is as good as it is weird, Shine."

"You know it. We're just going to have to go with it." No thinking. None.

It wasn't going to do either of them any good.

"Well, there you go." That bright grin came back, the frown chased right away. Man, his Tater had always thought too much. No one figured him for the deep one, but Grant was always running shit over like a Mac truck in his mind.

"Mmm." The man would have made a shitty lawyer. Although Phil would so go for Grant in Armani.

Grant gave him a long, slow kiss, so different from the desperation in the truck. The kiss almost burned, it went on so long, fanning a low flame. He sort of got lost in it, clinging against Grant, fingers hard on those broad goddamn shoulders.

"Mmmm. Jesus, Shine. Love the way you taste. Can't believe I get this." Grant moved against him, slow and slinky, just making him smile.

Fuck, and it had only been a couple days. By the time he went back to Vegas, he'd be thoroughly lost.

Those thick, scarred fingers moved over him, across his back and down his ribs. It had his nerves firing, his skin shivering and rising up with goosebumps.

"I keep thinking I'm having this weird-assed dream." That he was going to end up with a hangover and rumpled sheets at home.

"Nope. Not a dream. Not even a nightmare unless you're thinking of Joe, Shine." Listen to that man laugh. Lord, it was like they were teenagers again.

"I wasn't thinking of that skanky bastard a bit. You've got my attention, every bit of it."

"Fucking A. I want that." Loving on him, Grant licked a line up his jaw, and he could tell there was no extraneous thinking going on at all now.

Every few seconds, Grant would hit a hot spot and he'd moan, arching a little and rubbing away. Jesus. Jesus, he was hot as a fucking tomcat.

"Sweet. Goddamn. So sweet." That voice was getting all gravelly on him, all growly. Which meant that pizza boy had best be late.

"Wanted this for fifteen years. Dreamed about your ass." Grant's mouth. That hard, heavy prick.

"I know. Never did forget you, Shine. Not for one day."

"Yeah." Jesus. He was fucked.

"Kiss me." Those blue eyes just burned into his, Grant leaning up to get to his mouth.

He met that hungry, swollen-lipped mouth halfway, the kiss going from slow to breath-stealing in a fucking heartbeat. Grant's hands settled on the back of his neck, holding him right there making him feel everything. Making him just... God. They found themselves a rhythm -- rubbing and touching, lips parting every so often so they didn't pass out. Just about the time that Grant was climbing his body to hump against his hip, though. Well, the inevitable happened. The pizza came.

"God damn it." He met Grant eyes, not sure whether to laugh or snarl. "D'you pay him already?"

"I did. But I bet I have to sign." Laughing, Grant got up, wrapping a robe around himself and pushing that hard cock down. "Don't go away."

"I'm going to make a break through the plumbing in the shower." Dork.

"Hey, that would be more my thing." Grant got the pizza real quick. Clearly the pizza man knew something was up.

"Yeah." Plumbing. Somehow it suited. "I managed to break my toilet three times last year. I should've called you."

"You should have. I would have come a'runnin'. How do you feel about cold pizza?" That robe pooled on the floor, leaving Grant bare.

"I'm a fan." He knew he was licking his lips, staring like a starving man. Yeah. Yeah, he was a big fan.

"Oh, good." The pizza boxes landed on the little table with a thump, and Grant sort of... cannonballed onto the bed. Whomp. He was laughing, arms and legs wrapping around Phil, holding on tight as they rolled.

"Christ on a pogo stick. I'm getting too old for this shit." But that big body was all over his, Grant's cock hardening right up again.

"Uh-huh. Old man. Le gorgoyo." He teased his well-muscled bastard, who was about as far from a fat-bellied tadpole as you could get.

"Asshole." Busting a gut, Grant burrowed in, gnawing at his neck. "You and your muddy fucking animals."

"Rumor is, I used to be a Cajun." Once upon a time, when the world was full of jazz and homemade wine and beignets.

He could feel Grant tense up a little, and he knew that silly man was thinking again. Then Grant shrugged it off and kissed him. "You're still spicy."

"I still miss decent fucking coffee and the way the jasmine smells in the nighttime." No more thinking.

"Yeah? I get my coffee from the Cafe du Monde store still." Settling in, Grant leaned on his shoulder, hands skating over his skin.

"My secretary brings mine in. Tastes like shit, but they say it's expensive." He let his hands slide all the way up Grant's thighs.

Grant spread like butter, arching up for him. "Life's too short to drink bad coffee, Shine."

"You know it." He'd maybe forgot a little bit. Just a touch. Oh, touch.

"Mmmm." That man was real good at the touching. Grant stroked his belly, following every little ridge, fingers exploring his navel. Then those rough finger pads slid down over his hipbone.

Oh. Oh, shit. He arched up, nerves firing and surprising him. "Do that again."

"Yeah?" Blue eyes flashed to meet his, smiling all the way. "Like this?"

Shit yeah, Grant had good hands. Really good hands.

"Uh. Uh-huh." One of his legs drew up, without him even trying, muscle just going tight as hell.

Laughing right out loud, Grant followed the line of his thigh, plucking a little at the hairs there, the man moaning for him. "So fucking pretty."

"You've got the most amazing fucking hands." His teeth sank right into his bottom lip, making it sting.

"You've got good everything." Grant teased his cock with the tip of one thumb before turning back to his legs. One hand cupped the back of his knee, stroking the thin skin there. Shit. Shit, Grant was finding erogenous spots he'd been missing for decades. How many men did the man have to sleep with to know how to push his buttons so well?

"Now who's thinking, Shine?" Grant asked, short nails scoring his skin. "I can see it."

"Huh?" Oh, fuck. Harder. More. Thinking sucked. Grant bent and bit him, right on the inside of his thigh. The sting sent a jolt through him, made his cock jump. "Grant." He went up on his elbows, knee opening out, giving himself up.

"Mmmhmm. Oh, honey. I can smell you." That was it; that was all the warning he got before Grant was sucking him in, lips closing on his cock.

Hot. Hot. He. Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. "Chou-chou! Tater! Please!"

Nodding a little, Grant sucked harder, giving him just what he needed. Those hands slid up his thighs, palm reaching up to cup his balls. Phil pressed down into that touch, groaning as the pressure made things just that much sweeter.

"Mmmm." The sound vibrated around him, made him all but thrash on the bed. Goddamn. Yeah. Grant was just giving it up for him.

"Gonna. Gonna make me." There was no way he could wait.

Those eyes met his for a split second, and he could see it all right there. Yes and please and goddamn it, Shine. Then Grant closed his eyes and set to sucking Phil's brains right out through his cock. It fucking worked too, everything in him went sproing and his balls drew up like they wanted to crawl up inside him. He shot like he was a teenager with an unlimited supply of Viagra.

Grant took him all the way, licking up with that tongue, rough as a cat's. And damned if the man didn't look like he was loving it. He could hear himself babbling some, murmuring in broken patois and English, just giving up the praise. Grant kissed a line up his belly, starting low and ending just below his chest. "You blow me away, man. You surely do."

"You did the blowing, chou-chou. What can I give you?" Man, look at him going with the coherence and shit.

"Oh... let me think..." Shimmying right up, Grant rubbed on his thigh. "Your hands, Shine. I just need your hands."

"Mmmhmm. Used to jack off. Watch you. Wish." He shifted and pushed until they were sitting up, Grant settled between his legs, back to his chest. He got his fingers around that thick, heavy cock, both hands working.

Arching back against him, Grant moaned. "Oh God. Me too. When we would... you know. I was always thinking of you, Shine." That cock just jumped in his hands, proving the truth of the words.

"Yeah. Yeah. Tell me about it." His mouth found the curve of Grant's shoulder while his hands worked that cock, one at the tip, one at the shaft.

"More. Oh, fuck. Close." Man, it made him feel a hundred feet tall that Grant sucking him, then a simple hand job, could make the man so hot so fast.

"I got you." He let one hand drop down, roll Grant's balls.

"Got me. Anytime you need me." Grant's breath huffed out, and those balls actually jerked against his hand, giving him all the warning he needed that Grant was coming hard for him. He kept rolling, making sure Grant gave it all up, gave him all he needed. Need. They were exploring the different facets of that word, weren't they?

Finally Grant flopped back against him, one hand patting his leg, clumsy as hell. "Almost too much, Shine."

"Almost." It was always like that with them, though. Always almost too much.

"How about that pizza?"

"It's a plan, Tater."

Tomorrow they'd have to get back on the road and start thinking again. Tonight? They'd just take what they could and relax. When he looked at it that way, nothing was too much. It was never gonna be enough.

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Grant woke up with a damned hard feeling in his belly. He knew it was time to get back on the road and he damned well didn't want to. He'd dreamed all damned night, waking only when Phil touched him, soothing him back into sleep with soft Patois words and sweet touches. Lord, he hadn't had dreams like that since he was twenty-one and just out of college, starting his new life.

The bayou, the river, the smell of water-logged cotton and leather... Shit.

Grant stared at his bloodshot eyes in the mirror while he brushed his teeth. Fuck Joe to Hell and back for stirring this all up again.

A soft touch slid up his lower back. "You didn't sleep worth a shit."

The touch turned into a massage, Phil pushing in deep.



"Uhn." He went up on tiptoes, hands braced in the sink. "Bad dreams."

"I know. I heard. I can drive today." The massage kept on, finding tense spots and working them loose.

"I'll let you. You sleep okay? Or did I keep you up?" Fuck, that man had good hands.

"I'm good. I'm good, man." Phil's forehead landed on his spine, thumbs digging in above his hips.

"You keep doing that, you'll be more than good. I'll reward you." His muscles started loosening right up, tension easing out.

"I'm a fan of positive reinforcement, through and through." Jesus, that man had hands like nobody ever.

"I know that. I remember." Of course, when they'd been kids it was Po Boys and pralines that Shine had asked for.

"Do you?" Lips became tongue, sliding on his skin. "You used to get me sno cones for helping you mow."

"Grape." His whole body shuddered, goosebumps rising on his skin. "You always liked grape."

"Mmhmm. I haven't had one in twenty years." Shine's thumbs spread him a little as his ass cheeks got rubbed, that mouth on the small of his back.

"We should... oh. We should get one." Grant pushed back, spreading like two-dollar whore, needing whatever Shine was gonna give.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Fuck. Shine's tongue slid lower, teasing his crease, hands holding him open. "Like this, too."

"Good. So do I." His back arched, his ass pushing back, trying to get more. It was like once the floodgates opened he couldn't get enough.

"Mmm. Grant." The words were whispered against him, then that tongue traced his hole, sliding over his skin.

"Fuck, Shine. Gonna make me crazy." Maybe he already was. Wasn't he too damned old to take it standing up in the bathroom? Didn't matter none. He wanted it.

"Gonna make you feel good. Gonna make sure you don't regret this with me." He got licked and kissed, his hole just getting loved on.

"Never. Never... Stretch me, babe." He needed more. Like fingers. Something.

"Yeah." Two thumbs slipped inside him, that tongue still working. Jesus. Jesus.

His eyes rolled, which he had to admit was better than staring at himself in the mirror. Grant figured he was just gonna explode, his body on fire for Phil. Phil fucked him until his knees buckled, fingers slipping on the wet sink. Then all that hot skin covered his back, Shine's cock nudging him. "Please. Please, man. I need."

"Yeah. Fuck, yeah, baby. In me." Legs sliding even wider apart, Grant bent, ready to take Phil deep inside.

"I. You. Rubber?" Shine's cock rubbed against his hole again, wet-tipped, hot as sin.

"Come on, baby. In. Now." Shit, it'd been so long he figured they'd be fine. And his Phil was a damned careful man. Most of the time.

"In." Phil pressed in, filling him deep, hot little endearments whispered against his shoulder. Fuck, Phil was hot, just like a brand inside him.

So thick, stretching him wide. Oh, God, he was just lost. Lost. "More, Shine. More."

"All of me." Those dark hands landed on his hips, tugged him back until his ass was smack against the curve of Phil's hips.

"That's it. Just. Like. That." Squeezing down, Grant started rocking, needing Phil to feel it with him, needing the man to start moving. Phil's hands moved him, pulled him onto that cock, over and over, thighs slapping his ass. All he had to do was rock. And pant. Sweat ran into his eyes, and he closed them, biting his lip, reaching down to pull at his own cock.

"Oh. Oh, fuck. I can feel that, all around my cock."

He bet Phil could. Hell, he could feel every inch inside him, burning hot and moving, rubbing him like crazy. It worked both ways. Shine's feet slipped a little and Phil's cock pushed deeper, pegging his gland, sending shocks through him.

"God, baby. Shine. Again." He could feel that again and again until he just exploded with it.

"Uh-huh." He got it again. And again. And again, Shine just fucked him, good and hard. He rocked, his hand moving between his cock and the sink, his ass just stinging with every thrust. Grant shouted with it, his body on fire, ready to shoot any moment. Then Phil's hand joined his, that thumb pressing hard all along the heavy vein in his cock.

"Fuck! Merde!" If Phil could slip back into the old ways, so could he. Goddamn, he was... Yeah. Just like... Grant shot, his teeth rattling it rocked him so hard.

"Chou-chou. I. Oh, shit. Feel that." Phil's teeth scraped his shoulder, heat just filling him up.

Grant shook, his arms trying to hold him up, his legs refusing to help. "God help me, Phil. I want this."

"I got you. I got you, Tater." Phil sounded... shell-shocked. Just completely lost.

"Yeah. I. We got to. Goddamn." They could run away. They so could. Just go somewhere.

"We have to talk to him. We have to figure this shit out." That was his Shine, refusing to back away.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. We'll talk." Grant managed to unbend, his joints creaking so he could stand and turn around.

Those dark eyes held onto his, sure and steady as the tide. "Yeah. Then we'll figure it."

"And then we'll walk away and let him rot." His hand came up, touching Phil's cheek. Grant laughed. "You need to shave."

"Ah, for my little Brazilian waxer."

"Brazil... Lord, Shine. First you know folks that tan naked, then you wax?" He started laughing. He just couldn't help it.

"You know it!" He got a grin, a wink. "Little tanned boy playing with my ass? Closest I got to getting some."

"Oh, you old bitch." He reached around and smacked that tight ass, feeling his hand bounce right off. "Got me now, Shine."

"You know it." Shine's fingers circled the tip of his cock, tugged a little. "I got you."

"Jesus." There was no way he was gonna get up again, but it felt so good anyway. He leaned in, licked the sweat off Phil's throat.

"Mmm." Salty, warm, Phil tasted like summertime and sunshine. "Let's go bathe. I can rub you down."

"Sounds like a plan. I can shave you..." Now that would be something.

"You could." He was sorta stunned, that Phil didn't even tense up, just nodded and headed into the bath.

Well, damn.

Maybe he could get it up again, after all.

And that was sure enough to make any bad dream that might have lingered completely disappear.

## Chapter Seven

He'd been to a lot of prisons in his career. He'd been to a lot of prisons to see people he knew, even. But this? This was an entirely new ballgame. Phil wasn't sure he was ready.

He could hear Grant grumbling behind him, filling out the paperwork and leaving the pocketknife and multi-tool behind. He didn't have any contraband. He knew this and in his official lawyer monkey suit, he was getting none of the hassle Grant was.

"Goddamn it, will you stop poking me?" Ruh ruh. Grant sounded like a grumpy pit bull.

"Gentlemen. Mr. Thibbideaux is with me. Let's make this quick and we'll both be out of y'all's hair." Lord, the Creole was seeping back into him.

"Yessir." The one guard had him sign in for Grant, too, then let them go on their way.

Grant shoulders hunched right up, those blue eyes all but white while Grant stared around at the walls and bars.

"Relax. This isn't a psycho. It's Joe." Right? It was just Joe.

"It's not that. It's the whole deal, b--man." Yeah, he could see where the whole prison thing might freak Grant out. Luckily it didn't get to Grant enough to call him baby in there.

"Yeah. I can understand that. My first time, I felt pale." He winked, chuckled as they settled at a table in a little windowless room.

"Ghostly, huh?" They laughed together, but it was strained. Hard.

They brought Joe in, dressed in one of those damned orange jumpsuits, and it was all Phil could do not to stare. Christ. All those years and Grant had gotten fine and Joe was...

Skanky.

Scary.

Deeply fucked up.

Grant *was* staring. Openly. Mouth kinda hanging right down.

He kicked Grant under the table, then stood. "Joe."

Joe gave him a crooked grin. "Lookit you, all fancy-schmancy."

"Have a seat." He wasn't going to go there. He wasn't into the guilt thing.

Grant snapped his mouth closed and nodded. "Hey, Joe."

"Hey you. You look good. You were shorter, last time I saw you. Y'all bring me any smokes?"

"Shee-it, Joe. They wouldn't let us bring nothin' in. I thought they was gonna cavity search me." Grant's voice changed, taking Phil back to being fifteen, just like that. Jesus.

"Christ on a crutch. Y'all is about as useless as you ever was. C'mon, Shine. Say you brought me some love."

Phil didn't wrinkle his nose, but it was a close thing. "I don't smoke, Joe. What is it you want from us?"

"Well, I got me a little problem. Maybe a big one. I figured it was time to call in a favor."

"Well, the evidence is pretty straightforward, Joe. What does your lawyer say?" There wasn't a fucking chance Joe didn't do it. Not one chance.

Joe stared at him a moment, but the man looked away to the left before he answered. "He says it might fly if I had a better alibi. Maybe some old friends in town..."

Shit.

"You don't think people would notice if we lied, Joe? What the fuck *happened*?" Maybe he could find a way to swing an insanity plea.

"Well, I'd be stupid to say anything happened, now wouldn't I? They say I surprised a guy during a burglary, and had to fight my way out." And then Joe had run and left the poor fuck to bleed out.

"And they say you didn't call an ambulance, Joe, that you let the guy bleed to death."

"Right. Because it's so bright to stay around when someone's painting the floor red." Those damned eyes shifted again, sliding away from his, Joe's mouth pursing up.

Grant cleared his throat. "So you were robbing someone?"

"I was... What does it matter why I was there, goddamn it?"

Phil arched an eyebrow. "Because homicide in commission of a burglary is a Class A felony?"

Grant's chair slid across the floor, that stocky body springing right up. "We can't help you, Joe. Shine. I got to... Out."

"Okay. Okay." Fuck. He waved to the guard. "Can someone escort Mr. Thibbideaux out please?"

At least with Grant gone, he and Joe could play hard ball. Grant gave him this desperate, apologetic look, but he left all the same. Hell, Phil couldn't blame him. The man had never been in a prison in his life. "So, what's the deal, Joe? You killed a man. They've got you. You're going down unless you've got a twin or a videotape of you in Bora Bora on the day."

Now that Grant was gone, Joe leaned forward, face set and hard, not a bit of the happy kid he remembered in there. "I'm okay with a few short runs in the klink, Shine, but I ain't going down for murder one. Not for a piece of shit security guard."

"Cry me a river. You should have fucking thought of that before you stabbed him for forty-three dollars and eighty cents, you stupid asshole." He didn't back up an inch. "Jesus, you've got a rap sheet as long as my arm."

Nobody could save Joe's ass.

"Yeah, you're a fancy-assed lawyer, Shine. You can fix this. I know all about you. You fucking owe me."

The hair stood up on the back of his neck. Hell, he never figured Joe would even think about him.

"There isn't anything to know, Joe. I'm a lawyer. I know the law. You broke it." Come on, you stupid son of a bitch. What do you know?

"Oh, Shine. I know you want to run for office. And I know an awful lot about your... past. You really think all them hoity toity fucks in Nevada want to hear about how you grew up? About the summer after your senior year? You think they want to know about you and Grant, the river or how you got them scars on your back?" Shifty little fuck.

"Everyone has scars, and the Cinderella story is exceedingly popular with the voting public, my old friend." He kept his face schooled. They all had something to hide, didn't they? And of all of them, he had the most to lose.

He could feel the edge of panic raise up inside him, make him ache and worry. He hid it, though. Joe wasn't as smart as him, wasn't as clever. And there wasn't any evidence."

Right?

"Yeah, but Cinderella didn't drown her wicked stepmother in the swamp, did she?"

"That's not the story I heard, no."

"Funny. That's the one I know best. In my story, two fucks killed an old man while their friend stood because in the brush and took pictures." When Joe said pictures, it came out 'pitchers'.

"I'm fairly sure there weren't cameras in the Cinderella story."

"I know there were."

Asshole.

"I do. Don't get all hoity-toity on me, you son-of-a-bitch." That oily voice went low, threatening. "If I got to go down for murder, I can take you and old Tater with me."

"You really want to threaten me, Joe? I mean, don't you want to assure yourself I can't cut a deal with the DA here before you take things any deeper down the shit hole you've created?"

God damn motherfucker.

He didn't think about back then. Him and Grant, they hadn't had choices back then. They hadn't and he'd be damned if he regretted it.

"You talk to that DA, Shine. You get me less than five years. Then we'll decide if I'm threatening you." Joe planted his hands on the table, standing as the guard came forward. "Just do what you do best, man."

"Believe me, old friend. I never do less." He'd bury the slimy motherfucker tonsils deep and pour bacon grease over the fucking bastard and leave him for the crawdads.

"Good." Without another look, Joe turned and made his way back through the door to Hell. And the asshole was whistling.

Phil nodded to the guard, even managing to make a few, well-timed and familiar jokes before he managed to get outside, rage bubbling up inside him. He was fucking going to kill something.

Grant was waiting for him, sitting on the hood of the truck and smoking a cigarette.

"You ready?" He took the smoke from Grant's fingers, headed around to the passenger side.

"You know it. You shut him down?" Man, look at those hunched shoulders.

"I'll take care of it. Come on." He needed a hotel room and his address book and a goddamn private detective. Now.

"kay" Grant started up, all but burning out of the lot. "Where to?"

"There's the Horseshoe Casino. I'll get a room there. There's some information I need." And if he knew nothing else, he knew casinos.

"Got it." Fucking asshole Joe, putting this fucking wall up between them.



Shit, who was he kidding? Joe was just a part of it, and he knew it. He finished the smoke, tossed it out the window, and reached out, hand curling around Grant's thigh.

One hand settled on his. "Well, that sucked rocks, baby."

"No shit, Tater. That is no fucking shit." They looked at each other for a half second, then they started laughing, the sound fucked up and broken and so wrong.

Grant steered them into the casino lot, stopping the truck and staring at him. "We got to bury him, Shine."

"I won't let that smarmy little fuck ruin things, Tater. You got my word on that." He would figure it out.

"I know. I know, Phil. You've always been the good one. Good as gold."

He snorted. Right. Good as blood-spattered fucking gold. He shined up real pretty. "Yeah. Yeah. Come on, Tater. Let's get a room."

He was smart. Quick. Careful. Not good.

"Yeah. We can sit. Think on it." Not that his Tater had ever been one for sitting and pondering. No, Grant liked to do.

"Yeah. We'll get our shit together and fix this." Either that or he'd find a way to make sure Joe fucking disappeared. He had not made it this far to lose everything.

"There you go." He got a smile, Grant squeezing his hand. "We'll put our heads together. We're smart dogs."

"I've got your back." He had then, he would now.

"And my front. These days."

"Everything I can get."

## Chapter Eight

Grant wasn't sure what to do. After a lifetime of making hard decisions and running a business and all, he hated that feeling. Phil was pacing, looking fine in a pair of boxer-briefs and nothing else. Fine, but agitated, and grumpy as hell.

Sighing, Grant rolled his head on his neck, stretching his arms above his head. The bed was really the only place to sit, but he did wish Phil would stop with making marks in the carpet. "Okay, Shine. You need to tell me what all went down, aside from you'll deal with it."

Those dark eyes met his, square on and serious. "He says if we don't spring him, he'll talk."

Well, there you go. Grant felt his mouth go dry. "I didn't think he knew."

Grant didn't think anybody knew. Nobody by him and Phil.

Right? Right.

Phil arched one eyebrow. "He sure seems to know something..."

Yeah. Fuck.

"So, we were right. We got to bury him." They'd both said it, out in the truck, but now it was sinking in. Shit. Shit.

"Yeah." Phil rolled his shoulders, tension there sharp enough to cut. "I need to dig a little, find out where Joe lived."

"Okay. What can I do?" Back and forth, back and forth. The space in front of the bed was seven and a half paces long.

"I'm going to make some calls, see if I can't find out..." Phil stopped, stared at him, and Grant could see the bald, raw terror in those dark, dark eyes. "He wants this, Tater. He wants to take us down and drown us with him."

God damn it. It was all so goddamn long ago. Water under the fucking bridge.

Maybe he should be the one making calls. Surely he had more contacts in Louisiana than Phil did. "He could die in prison."

Phil's eyes were icy cold. "He's going to, one way or the other."

"Tell me what I can do, Shine. I got a lot of friends." He wasn't gonna feel bad for wanting it, for being willing to make the call. Joe should have let it be; should have gotten on with his life.

"I..." Phil stopped, stared at him. "What are we doing, man? Talking about killing somebody?"

"If I have to." He would go to hell anyway, wouldn't he? "I don't want to, Shine, but I won't see you go down."

"Go down for what? There's nothing -- nothing -- that anyone can hook on us. Is there? Besides the word of a fucking felon, is there any *proof*?"

"No. No, I don't think so." Hell, how was he supposed to know? They'd been kids. Stupid, probably careless. But Joe had just been a kid, too, right?

"I don't either." Shine stopped next to the bed, that lean face looking young again, a little lost.

"Well, then we have to focus on that." That was safer than killing Joe in jail by proxy, right? "We got to make sure he's got nothing on us."

"Yeah. I'll find where he lives. Where he's been lately." Dark eyes fastened on him. "I'd do it again, Tater, for you."

"I know. I know. So would I." Grant finally just held out his hand, amazed at how easy it was. Their first few hours might have been awkward, but after that, it was like they'd never been apart.

Phil reached out, took his hand. "I won't let him ruin us." Phil skin was warm, dry, fingers moving over his palm, his wrist.

"No. I know. You're the smart one, Shine." Not that he would make Phil go it alone. No, sir. He was ready. He pulled Phil close, leaning his head against the flat, fine belly.

"Yeah." Phil started touching him, fingers in his hair. "Fuck, I want to just run, you know? Just take you and disappear."

"I know. You got you a good life, though." A life he didn't really want to think on, because then Phil would leave.

"Yeah. It's everything I ever thought I'd have." Phil'd always said -- always, the son of a bitch -- that he'd get money, power, live on the edge.

Grant turned his face to Phil's skin, licking at the line of hair just below the belly button. They had a lot to do, a lot to think on, but for now he wanted to be distracted. Phil's belly rippled, shifting under his mouth. All of the sudden he could smell Shine -- all soap and sex and need.

Closing his eyes, he rubbed his cheek against the smooth skin over Phil's ribs, his hands coming up to pull the man closer. God, he'd missed this man, without even knowing what he could be, what they could really get up to together.

"Tater." Phil stepped closer, humming a little. Always singing. His Shine was always singing.

"Mmm. Hey, baby." He kissed a line down to one hip, pulling at the elastic of the shorts, wanting more.

"Hey. You think it's ridiculous, to want this, right now?" Somebody was thinking too goddamn much.

"No. No, I don't think so at all." The shorts went down and Phil's cock came up, and Grant bent to take the tip into his mouth, sucking a little, tongue moving underneath. It didn't take much at all for Phil to get all swollen for him, filling up his mouth, parting his lips. Those long fingers stayed in his air, not pushing or pulling, just touching him. The music didn't stop, and Grant went with it, letting Phil's rhythm push him on, his lips sliding up and down. Hot. Hot and salty and a tiny bit bitter, Phil tasted like home. That pretty cock pushed Joe and all that shit to the very back of his mind, let him focus on Phil, on the way the man needed him like nothing else.

He pushed one hand lower, cupping Phil's heavy balls, savoring the difference in the feel of the skin there. Then he went to town, his head bobbing up and down as the air between them heated with their sweat.

"Damn. Damn, Tater." Phil spread for him, hips rolling up, bucking into his mouth.

Damn was right. So good. He stopped thinking and just felt, his cock aching, his mouth moving. He took a deep breath and pushed down even farther, trying to give Shine something special, something he could feel.

"Need you, so bad." That soft voice dragged over his nerves like a fur-lined glove. "I've dreamed about you."

Fuck. Oh, fuck. He rolled Phil's balls a little, wanting nothing more than to take everything this fine man would give him. Come on, Shine. Come on.

He felt Phil jerk, thighs going rock hard as that cock pushed deep. Salty drops poured over his tongue, Phil rocking harder, faster, fucking his lips. All these sounds poured over him, Shine singing for him.

Grant soaked them in, groaning around Phil's cock, finally letting go with his hands to reach down and pull his own prick out of his shorts. He wanted. Wanted everything.

"I ain't..." He almost grinned as Shine bit off the word, the sex making the man lose all that high-dollar education. "Soon."

"Mmmhmm." Soon. Oh, God. Please soon. Grant didn't figure he could hold on too much longer. No sir. He was gonna go off like the Fourth of July. Phil's fingers wrapped around the back of his neck, the long back arching as Shine took him deep, spunk pouring into him. Fuck. Fuck. Yes. Grant licked and sucked, swallowing hard, trying to keep it all inside. He had to breathe, though, so he could come, so he could shout when he let go of Phil's cock.

As soon as he let go, Shine shoved him back, bending to take his cock in, lips meeting his hand on every stroke.

"Phil! Baby. Oh, Jesus." He babbled, his whole body rocking, muscles he didn't even know he had straining. He was going to explode. All over. Phil's hands slid under his ass, dragging him up and right into the tight fire of that throat. Fuck. Fuck, yes.

Grant shouted, his hands slapping against the bed, his heels digging in down by the floor. He shook with it, his balls emptying, his cock jerking. Never say he couldn't give as good as he got. His Shine took everything he had to give, then just pushed close, tongue cleaning his prick right off.

"Sweet. Oh, Shine, that was sweet." Fucking A. Some little voice in his head said he couldn't be too sorry about Joe, if he got this, even for a little while.

"Mmm. You're better than andouille, Tater."

"Better than tasso?" Grinning like a fool, he sprawled back on the bed, holding out his hand for Phil one more time.

"Better than etoufee, even." Phil was a snugly bastard.

They got all wrapped up like a couple of octopuses, and Grant enjoyed the hell out of it, while he could. "You know I love my etoufee."

"I know. I know you love my ass, too, so it works."

"It so does." Maybe they'd have time for him to have that ass before they had to deal with Joe. They'd have to go home to do all that.

Right now he just didn't want to think about anything but smooth skin and that contented smile. That made all the rest worth it.

Surely it did.

## Chapter Nine

Joe sat in his cell, listening to the guy in the next little cubicle pray. Rotten fucker could pray for hours, babbling on and on about please, God and help me, Jesus.

Fuck that shit. The Lord helped those what helped themselves.

That was all he'd been doing, calling on Tater and Phil. Wasn't like he was asking all that much. They both had money, and Phil had the legal power now, and Joe just had a little piece of their past. Just a teeny, tiny one.

Just one that could ruin all they'd worked so fucking hard for while he took the blame for everything they'd ever done as kids, literal or not.

He was tired of being the fall guy, the stupid one, the one didn't know no better. Well, old Joe wasn't stupid, no sir. He'd finally figured out how to get what he needed. Yessir. Phil would help him, even if Grant didn't have the balls to come see him, to look him in the face.

Phil had a lot to lose. He'd make things right for Joe. He surely would, or he'd pay the price.

Either way, Joe figured it gave him a happy.

And that was something the Jesus freak in the next cell over would probably never understand.

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Phil set himself to making phone calls as soon as Grant fell asleep, sitting on the floor with his laptop on his knees as he searched for information. He needed to know what Joe had on him, and that meant figuring out where Joe'd been and where Joe thought he might be going.

There was no fucking way that son of a bitch was going to touch him or Tater, not if he could do anything about it.

After all these years, he thought maybe he could.

"Terry. I need information about a case in Louisiana. A previously convicted felon up for murder one. I need to know where he's been living for the past three years, what cars he's been driving. Where he's worked. Everything."

"You got it. Just give me names and institutions." Terry was one of the best in the business, discreet and loyal, if not cheap.

"I'm sending in to the usual email. Everything I have so far, everything I want. I'm not in the office, so send it directly to me." He pinched his nose, trying to fight the headache. Maybe he should look for his father, too, since he was so close.

Or not.

"Will do. I take it the rush fee applies, yeah?"

"It does indeed. You know I take care of my people." Money wasn't his worry. Jail time was.

"I do. Okay. I can get what you need. Give me a little time." He could already hear Terry ticking off contacts.

"Cool. Just a little." He clicked the phone off, bent his head to the laptop, his nerves jangling. There wasn't a chance he was going to cope. Not a chance.

Grant's voice sounded like it had been scrubbed with sandpaper. "Who was that, Shine?"

"A private investigator. It's still early. Get some sleep." Jangle. Jangle. Jangle.

"I will when you do. I can feel you vibrating."

"I don't think I can. I'm buzzed." Furious. Livid. Ready to go down to that jail cell and whack Joe with a shovel, uncivilized as that would be.

"Well, come here. Work can wait another half hour." Grant sat up, reaching for him with one beefy hand.

"You think?" He put the laptop aside before he thought about it.

"I think. I got a better idea, Shine." Grant stretched for him, the sheets sliding down.

"I can't answer every problem with sex, can I?" Well, maybe he could.

"Absolutely not. Good thing this is a you and me problem."

His laugh surprised him; he didn't think he had any left in him anymore. "You got that right, Tater."

"Yep. Ain't much we cain't fix with a little lovin', maybe some fucking." Grant took his hand and pulled him down, the sheets feeling a little damp.

"Works for me. You know I approve of a good, hard workout." He sighed and pushed close. "I've got someone working on our problem."

"You said. If he can't come up with something, I'll get a hold of some folks I know." Grant sounded fierce, and that look backed it up, serious as the grave.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Please, God. Don't let that be a bridge.

"Okay. Damn it, Shine, come here." Pulling him right up against that broad chest. Grant kissed him, making him forget, even if it was for a second or two.

He blinked up, staring into Tater's eyes. Fuck him. Yes. He straddled Grant's hips, pushing down and rubbing hard. Moaning for him, Grant held him right there, hands squeezing his ass. The man did love to touch his butt. He flexed a little, letting Grant know he was there, paying attention.

"Fucking A, Shine." That mouth was something, that voice calling to him, making him want more.

"How the hell did I live so long without you?" And when, exactly, did he lose any self-control?

"I have no idea. Must have been because we were stupid." His Tater never held back, did he? No sir. The man kissed him like they'd been together for years.

Of course, they sort of had. Somewhere in the back of his head he'd always been looking for his own personal Jesus, his big thing. Or been running away from it. Whatever. Grant's fingers found his balls, tugging, telling him he was losing focus.

He groaned into the kiss, belly jerking. "Right here."

With you.

"Good," Grant rumbled against his mouth, licking and biting at his lips. "So good."

"Uh-huh." He nodded, tongue tracing Grant's teeth, teasing each time the man bit.

Grunting, Grant pushed at him, getting him rolled under that sturdy body, getting on top of him. Someone was impatient as hell. It worked for him. He needed someone to drive the demons away. Grant held him down and did the perfect kind of exorcism. That mouth touched on every part of him, from his mouth to his neck to his chest, even the inside of his elbow.

His skin was burning, on fire, from top to bottom. Damn. Damn.

"Grant... sweet fuck." He caught himself twisting, gasping as his nerves lit up.

"I got you, Shine. I got you right here. You pitching or catching?"

"Fuck me. Fuck me and let me sleep safe, Tater."

"Yeah. I'll guard your dreams. I promise." Grant spread him, got in between his legs, ready to give him what for. Phil pulled his knees up, giving it up, making sure that Grant saw how that made his prick throb, made his balls draw up. Grant smiled, looking downright tickled, before bending to lick his cock, tongue working at his slit.



"Oh, damn. A boy as big as you shouldn't be able to bend so good. Well. So well." Lord, Grant made him revert to bayou.

A low chuckle ghosted over his skin. "Make you forget everything but me, Shine." Grant sucked him deep, just for a moment, lips pulling hard.

His fucking world stopped short, his whole focus on his prick, on the way that tongue felt, those hands pushed and squeezed. His balls were explored, too, the tip of Grant's tongue pushing them this way and that. Christ.

"Want you so bad." He whimpered, he couldn't help it, he needed.

"Got me. Got me." Grant moved down, pushing his balls out of the way, tonguing his hole.

Phil's eyes rolled like thrown dice and he bit back his cry. Jesus. Please.

Thumbs spreading him, Grant licked at him, pushed in and out with the tip of that talented tongue, getting him good and wet. It was like speed, but better, because he knew what was coming at the end.

Finally Grant pulled away and moved closer, all at once, cock pushing at his hole, feeling impossibly huge. Hot. Wet.

"Grant." He pushed himself up on his elbows, driving himself down on Grant's cock, almost screaming with the stretch and burn and... "Good."

"Jesus fuck, Shine." Those pretty blue eyes rolled for him, the cords standing out in Grant's neck.

"Yes." He made his fucking living being glib and this beautiful son of a bitch stole all his words clean away.

They slipped and slid and finally got Grant deep inside him, balls pressed against his body, those rough hands holding his hips in place. Full. Oh, sweet fuck, yes. Full. He nodded, swallowing hard, his head just swimming. One hand coming up to stroke his belly, Grant started moving, rocking, really letting him feel it. It was too damned much and not enough.

"Harder. Something. Fuck." His head was swimming.

"More. I know what you need." The hand on his belly slid down to his prick, pulling at it hard, setting a good rhythm.

"Tater." His muscles clenched so hard that his shoulders left the mattress.

"Uh-huh. Oh, God. Come on, Shine. Let me make you forget." The tip of Grant's thumb pressed against the slit of his cock, and the prick inside him hit his sweet spot, all at the same time.

The whole fucking world went white-hot and fine, Phil letting go, calling Grant's name over and over as he soared. Grant held him, kept him safe, then started driving into him again, hips slapping his ass. When Grant came, Phil felt it deep, so deep he knew it would throb in his ass for days.

He opened his mouth to say something, but it didn't matter because Grant was kissing him, shutting him up, letting him just shut down and let it go.

Grant was gonna become his drug of choice. He could tell.

## Chapter Ten

Grant stretched, trying to ease the tension out of his neck. Trying to figure out what to do.

He was standing in the hotel parking lot next to his truck, cell phone in hand. He'd made a bunch of business calls, telling his various contractors what to do next, what jobs to finish up, which ones he could pay on.

Jesus, he hated this mess; hated that Phil had taken a pill to sleep and that he had to tiptoe off to do business like some sort of criminal, which he wasn't.

He didn't want to wake Shine up, though. The man needed some rest. The damn man had been on the computer and on the phone all damn night, trying to work some deals, trying to figure something out. Phil was a smart bastard, quick and clever and close to evil. He had private investigators and prosecutors and shit. Grant didn't know if any of that would work, though.

He knew Joe. Hell, he knew that... he knew how... fuck, he knew what'd happened. He knew what the fuck they'd promised.

He could see them, the two of them standing there, panting, feet sank right in the river bed, water swirling around their ankles.

"What do we do now, Tater?" Shine'd looked like death walking, weird and gray under the coffee-colored skin, at least where the bruises weren't making the too-skinny body black and blue.

Grant had always been the big one, the dominant one, even if he wasn't the smartest. They all had always looked to him. Grant had been able to feel his eyes trying to roll with panic, but he'd shook it off best he could. "Now we get rid of it."

"Okay. Okay. We gotta hurry; the sun's fixin' to go down and the gators'll start eating." Phil swallowed hard, wiped his hands on his ripped jeans. "Let's do it; I sit here and jaw on it long, I'll lose my nerve."

"I thought your kind could deal with gators and shit, Phil."

Phil shot him a look. "Yeah, well, I thought white folks knew better than to drag trouble outside where the whole damn world could see it."

Jesus, they started this and they'd needle each other into a foaming fit. This wasn't about them; they weren't enemies. Right?

Grant snapped his gum between gritted teeth. "Maybe the best thing to do is let the gators go at it."

Phil was shifting, back and forth, back and forth, chewing on his bottom lip. "Yeah? Yeah. Okay. Okay, I. Right. I'll go find some poles to push it with."

He watched Phil wander off, and then a rustling came from the brush, Joe's wide-eyes staring out at him. "You did it."

"We had to. You saw."

They hadn't had a choice.

Joe shook his head. "That's some heavy shit, man. Heavy."

Joe had no idea.

"We dealt with it."

"He's gonna tell."

"No, he's not." Grant got right up in Joe's face. "You stop pushing him. You just back the fuck off." Joe didn't know the shit Phil'd been dealing with, didn't know how bad it'd gotten and the bullshit was just too much. "He's not like us."

"Shit, like I don't know that. He ain't one of us, man. He's too fucking smart and he's got shit to lose." Wasn't that the truth. Still. He knew Shine.

*Knew him.*

The sun was starting to set and them bugs was starting to get interested in shit they shouldn't.

"Get the fuck out of here."

"Where the fuck am I 'sposed to go? Y'all are gonna need a ride out of here, asshole."

Shit.

Shit, he was fucking tired of things being all complicated.

Phil came back with a couple of poles, and Grant took one, trying to keep his eyes up, trying not to see what they'd done.

"Hey, guys, you over here?"

Shine looked up, a pure panic on his face at the sound of Joe's voice. "Yeah. Dead dog stinking up the works. We're popping it in for the gators."

Joe's footsteps stopped. "Ew. Don't pussyfoot you two. Just get it done."

"Jesus, Joe." Phil looked back over his shoulder, making sure the man couldn't see them. "Cain't you go get us some smokes or something? A Coke? Something? I got money."

"No shit you got money." Joe lit a smoke, far enough back that they could just see the cherry. "I'll get some food, too."

Shit, like they could eat.

"Some smokes. A bottle of Mad Dog. That's it." Grant took the cash, then stomped over, glaring until Joe's eyes fell.

Phil was stiff shouldered until Joe left, then the man relaxed a little. "Come on, Tater. Let's... One more push, huh?"

"Yeah. We can do this, Shine." Bile rose in his throat, but it was late days to chicken out now. And it was worth it to keep his Shine safe.

"Yeah. Yeah, Grant. Do you... do you think we're gonna go to hell for this?"

"Hell, Shine. I been going to hell since that time when I was nine. Why try to change now?" He could always make Phil smile. Always.

"Well, if you're there, it'll be good for me." He got that grin, and then Phil nodded. "Okay, on three. One. Two. Three."

Dead things made one hell of a splash.

They also eddied around in the sluggish river, making little swirls before the gators started coming. His stomach churned, but Grant didn't look away. They had to be sure.

Phil reached out, hand squeezing his, just a second. "No matter what anyone says about me, I ain't telling. Not ever."

"I know that, Shine. I know you better'n you know yourself." He wanted to know Shine even better, but he'd take what he could get.

"It's getting dark." Dark and quiet as the gators went to ground.

"Yeah." Shifting from foot to foot as the mud tried to suck him up, Grant sighed. "Sure do want a smoke."

"Let's head back toward the road, yeah?" Phil was scared, Grant could hear it.

"Okay." That worked for him. He was fucking scared, too. He took Phil's arm, holding on tight enough that they wouldn't stumble.

"We got three months, Tater. Only three months and we can get the hell out. You and me, man. We'll escape."

"We will." Phil would go to college. Make something of himself. Grant had faith in that. A guy had to have faith in something, right?

They had, too, but it wasn't together. Phil's momma had shipped Shine off to Baton Rouge and he'd done his thing and Joe'd just up and disappeared. Grant had always told himself it'd been for the best, that his Shine was so smart; Grant would have held him back. And Joe, well, Joe couldn't even get buying smokes down back then.

"You're looking awfully sad, Tater." A warm hand slid up his back. "Come in, we'll order room service."

He about jumped out of his skin, whirling around to stare at Phil. "Shit, Shine. Do you ever really sleep?"

"Nope." That single word was filled with a weird mix of sadness and pride.

Damn. Grant shook his head. "Room service sounds just fine."

"Good deal. I was having bad dreams." Phil turned, headed them right back into the hotel.

Shit. Grant followed, flipping open his little phone to hit the off button. He didn't want anyone calling back while he was with Phil.

As soon as they got in the room and got the door shut, Phil pushed into his arms, demanding a kiss. Must've been real bad dreams. Grant didn't waste breath on asking nothin'. He just kissed that man back for all he was worth, lips and tongue moving against Phil's. Phil was like a lit candle against him, hot as sunshine. Those hands were pulling at his clothes, hunting for skin. His own fingers worked at the T-shirt and sweats Phil had pulled on, and guess who got who naked first. Thank God for elastic.

Phil was hard, frantic, like if they touched enough, they could fix this shit.

Maybe Phil was right.

Grant was willing to give it a try. He'd start with Shine's nipples, rubbing his thumbs over them. Then he would work down the flat belly.

"Tater. You have the hottest hands." His mouth was taken again, Shine fucking his lips with that sweet tongue.

If it felt good, then he was happy. Well, that and Shine felt so good against him, too, so hot and fine and that kiss was making his head spin.

The kiss went on and on until lights danced before his eyes, his breath stolen clean away. Phil had one hand around his cock -- and when had his jeans opened up? -- and was jerking him good and hard.

He reached for Phil's cock, too, trying to bring them together, but he couldn't quite find the angle. Didn't matter. That prick was hard, damp at the tip, and fit his hand like it was made for him.

"Harder. Harder, Tater. Make me feel it."

"Yeah. Shine. Kiss me again." If they just kept on, just got going hard and fast and deep, they might could forget. Just for a moment.

"Hell, yes." He got another of those kisses, their teeth clacking together with the force of it.

His hand worked faster, his hips humping, pushing his cock into Phil's grip. Grant closed his eyes, just feeling, letting everything else go. Phil jerked into him, coming with a cry, spunk just pouring over his hand. Yeah. Yeah, just like that. Grant took one more kiss, their lips mashing together, and that had him coming, too, his balls emptying like there was no tomorrow.

They hanged there together, panting, holding on.

"Needed that, man. So bad." Phil kissed his jaw. "Thanks."

"Yeah." Yeah, he seemed to need a lot of it, and he wasn't sure how he was gonna give it up. "So what are we eating?"

"Pancakes and eggs. Sausage. Lots of coffee." He got another kiss. "They'll knock in thirty minutes."

"You've been busy." Looked like they both had. "Did you get the good syrup?"

"I got what they have, man."

They moved to the bed, crawled back in.

"Some people have no care for your syrup preferences, Shine. You gotta ask." He snuggled in, head on one of Shine's shoulders.

"I'll call back down. In a minute." Phil pulled the blanket all around them.

"Nah. I'd rather have you all warm and here." Throwing one leg over Shine's, he sighed, loving the naked.

"Then we'll stay and hide, until after breakfast." It was becoming a theme for them.

"Okay, honey." He leaned up, took a kiss, trying hard not to think. Hide. Man, they'd been good at that once.

They'd been scary good at it, damn it.

If only Joe'd left things the fuck alone.



## Chapter Eleven

"Ay, Vieux. C'est Philippe." He perched on the windowsill, lit a cigarette and listened into the water run in the bathroom.

The voice on the other end of the line was shocked, gravelly and ancient. "Philippe? Peeshwank? C'est toi? Vrai?"

Peeshwank. Shit. He hadn't been called that in twenty years. "Oui, Unc. How you?"

"Bien. Bien. Where you be, boy? Votre papa find you?"

"You still got a one-track mind, Unc. He in the city?" Uncle Theriot knew everything about everyone and, if Joe still had a place nearby, Unc would find it. Of course, the payment for that would be seeing Papa, Phil knew. There were prices for every fucking thing.

"Oui. Oui. He playin' at the Shack. You goin' to see him?"

"I'll try. You 'member Joe from the ole days, Vieux? White boy?"

"Ya, Peeshwank, he ain't no good. There be bad shit, dere, eh? You leave that boy 'lone."

Yeah, man. Yeah. He wished he could. Phil took another deep, hard drag, feeling the smoke burn. "I'm tryin', Unc. Swear it. Here de chose, though, I need something. I need to know where he keeps his house."

"Yeah? You gwan put a hoodoo on him?" Uncle Theriot also knew every damn thing about hexes.

"Oui, Vieux. He's calling in a bad moon on us. Me. Bad juju."

"Well." There was a long pause, full of wheezing that could have been laughter, tears, or just a lot of years of smoke. "I get 'dat for you."

"You the best, Vieux." He waited for it, watching the smoke swirl above his head.

"You gon' see your papa, Peeshwank?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"You swear?"

"Yeah, Vieux. You got my word."

"It done." His uncle was always as good as his word in return, so he'd know where Joe's things lived in a matter of days, if not hours.

"I'll be waitin', Vieux. When you call, I come, huh? We can make the vay-vay, spend the evening on the porch and sing." He saw the bathroom door open, saw Grant's eyes go wide at his patois. Christ.

"Soon, Peeshwank. Yeah?" The phone clicked, his uncle hanging up.

Grant cleared his throat. "You making with the voodoo, Shine?"

"Hush, you." He cleared his throat, shook his head. "I was checking with some contacts."

"Yeah? Like who?" Grant came over and took a cigarette out of his pack. "Your uncle?"

"Yeah. I called Theriot. He knows people." He lit another one, foot tapping.

"I know. If I could do all that shit myself, I would have." Grinning, Grant drew deep on his own smoke. "I thought about cement shoes, but it's hard in jail."

"There's a benefit to having bayou deep in your blood." He drew his feet up on the sill, put his chin on his knees.

"I guess, huh? My mamma would say I have it, too, but all I got is the last name." He got another grin, this one wry.

"He wants me to go see my dad."

"Of course he does." Grant gave him a shrewd look. "You gonna?"

"I gave my word." He rolled his shoulders, worrying his lip. He hadn't seen Papa since the day after...

"Well, then, we'll go. I've got your back, Shine." Grant always did. Always. No matter what.

"Do you regret it?" The words were out of his mouth before he thought about it.

"No." Stubbing out the smoke, his Tater came over, grabbing his legs to pull them down, then muscling between them. "Haven't ever."

"Not once?" Fuck, that was hot. Fine. His. The thought rocked him a little, but once it was thought, he couldn't unthink it.

"Never. If I regret anything, it was letting you go." Bending, Grant kissed him hard. Hard enough to bruise.

Oh fuck, yes. He groaned, legs wrapping around Grant's waist. Grant groaned back, letting him know that they were right there together, so hot they were about to combust. He dragged his

hands up along Grant's bare back, nails digging in some, tugging them tighter together.

Little drops of water clung to his fingers, that skin warm and damp, so good against him. He could feel Grant's cock against him, so hard a cat couldn't scratch it. Now that was much more fun than thinking about Vieux, Papa, Joe. Much, much more, especially when Grant swarmed up against him, pressing against his belly with that sweet flesh, making him grunt. So damned good.

His hands slid down and he got himself a double handful of ass, groaning low as Grant flexed for him.

"Shine. Hot." Grant was panting for him, all ready and rarin' to go, tugging at him. "Bed."

"Uh-huh." He should really tease, he guessed, but... damn.

"Now, you evil man." Backing up, Grant pulled hard, making him slide right off the windowsill.

He rubbed all along that heavy prick, letting their skin drag all the way down.

"Uhn. Yeah. Jesus." Grant slammed against him, kissing him hard. Then he was towed to the bed.

They flopped down together, skin slapping as they landed, all tangled up. "Tater."

"Mmmhmm. Shine." Licking along his neck, Grant hummed happily, wiggling like a landed fish.

"Smell damn good. Want you, man. Before I lose you again."

"I might hunt your ass down and keep it, Shine." Grant was trying to laugh, but it wasn't coming out funny. It was coming out dead serious to him.

"I might let you." And didn't that make him stop and stare. Because he had this life, this huge life, and... Jesus.

Grant moaned, surging over him, pressing him down to the bed and kissing him so hard his ears rang. All he could hear was the rush of his own blood. He wrapped one leg around Grant, driving up, pushing against all those fine, fucking muscles. Grant bit his lip again, licking to ease the sting, cock pressing down against his over and over.

He got one hand flat on Grant's ass, driving them together. They rocked, both of them grunting now, both of them panting. It was so fast, so quick, the way they ignited. Grant's lips slipped to his throat, teeth stinging, driving him a little crazy. "Want you so bad, Shine. Should be doing anything but this, but I want you."

"Take me then. I wanted your ass for years."

"God." Those blue eyes snapped up to meet his, Grant staring at him hungrily for half a second

before the man went to rummage for the slick stuff.

Phil got his fingers wrapped around his prick, stroking nice and slow, keeping himself revved up. Grant was back before he could even think about deflating, dropping the stuff on the bed and grabbing him with both hands. Greedy man. He stretched, twisting to push into Grant's hands.

"Come on, Shine. You know how to take what you need."

"How do you know that?" He chuckled, rolled them so that he was straddling Grant, holding the man down and kissing him stupid.

He didn't get an answer in words, just a bucking body and a pair of grasping hands. His cock slid against that heavily muscled belly, hips punching like mad.

Grant finally pushed him up, staring up at him, eyes wild. "Get the stuff, Shine. I'm coming in."

"Uh-huh." He grabbed the lube, slicked his fingers and wrapped them around Grant's cock, holding tight and stroking but hard.

"Jesus." That man cursed a blue streak for him, mouth moving over the filthiest words, telling him how good it was. How hot he was.

"Oui. Oui, chere. Need." His lizard brain was taking over, leaving him with patois and hunger.

"Shine." Laughing, Grant kissed his nose, his chin, bit at his throat. "Love it when you talk muddy river."

He reached back, fingers sliding over his hole, getting himself slick, wet. Ready for that prick. One of Grant's fingers joined his, rubbing hard at his hole, then sliding inside once he was good and wet. The stretch and burn made him grunt.

"You give me an ahnvee like nothing else, Tater." A deep, raw need like nothing he'd ever known hit him deep.

"That almost sounds gross, babe." Grant pushed in deeper, that finger moving in and out.

That tickled him, and he got to chuckling. "Yep. You and me, we get down to some grossness."

"We do."

Another finger pushed in beside the first, Grant really stretching him now. He rolled his shoulders, thighs shaking some. "Yes." Fuck, he'd never been loved like this.

"Ready, Shine? Are you ready for me yet? You feel ready."

"Yeah. Yeah." He shifted, dragged Grant's cock over his hole. "I'm ready." He pushed down, the

tip popping right into him.

"Oh." Grant's eyes popped open wide, those big hands coming around to grip his hips. The man pulled him down hard, that cock opening him up wide, really making him feel it.

"Shit. Do that again." It wasn't a request; it was a fucking demand.

"Uh-huh. Over and over." Grant was as good as his word, too, slamming into him, yanking him down to meet every thrust.

Phil's head fell back, the world tightening down to his ass, to the way Grant's hands felt on his hips and how his balls ached.

"Shine. Oh, God I could do this forever. Fucking ever." Grant panted for him, sweat starting to bead up on Grant's skin.

"You got a deal. Harder."

"Okay. Okay, Shine." Nodding, Grant grunted and moved faster, harder, giving him all the friction he could stand.

He got one hand around his cock, jacking himself in time, eyes rolling.

"Yeah. Yeah, babe. That's it. I can feel it every time you touch yourself." Grant let him feel everything right back, slamming him good.

"Damn. Damn." That was fucking hot.

Those heavy hands tightened down on his hips, pulling hard, making him move. His back arched hard, and Grant moaned, loving on him with those eyes. His balls drew up tight, his ass bearing down. Right there. He was right fucking there. Then Grant's cock hit his prostate and it was all over. He hollered out Grant's name and shot, eyes rolling back in his head.

"Shine!" Grant's shout was a scream, echoing off the walls and ceilings.

Oh, hell yes.

He slumped forward, breathing hard.

Hell. Yes.

Grant flopped back on the bed, cradling him against that heavy body, hand sliding around to pat his ass. "You ask your uncle what we could do with sex magic, Shine?"

"Not yet. That's the next call."

"Oh, good." Chuckling, Grant licked at his shoulder. "I think we got us a real future in it."

"Mmm. The Tater and Shine Traveling Hoodoo Show. It's got a ring."

"It does, huh? I like it." They both laughed like fools, the tension release making them a little giddy.

Making them a little stupid.

Phil thought he'd keep it, as long as he could.

## Chapter Twelve

"Shine? Phil?" Grant knocked on Phil's door, trying to peer into the window next to it. Phil's momma had hung up all sorts of lacy curtains maybe a year back, hiding what all went on inside that house. Used to be, there'd been music out on the porch.

Hell, Phil's pop might be an asshole, but at least he played jazz down in the Easy.

The door swung open, Phil's stepfather standing there, eyes all red, lip split. Jesus, Randy was a nasty piece of work. "What the fuck do you want?"

"I'm here to see Phil, sir." Galled the hell out of him to call that man sir, but he did it, knowing it would save problems later.

"That little pussy motherfucker ran out of here this morning. You tell that little bastard that I'll tear his ass up when he comes home."

Grant clenched his hands into fists, everything in him wanting to hit the bastard. Everything. "Probably went to see his uncle, do some hoodoo on you."

"Wouldn't surprise me, little half-breed fuck. Their type always stick together, unless they're chasing white women."

"Randy? Who's at the door? Is it..." Shine's momma peered out, lip split, cheek bruised. "Grant. You get on home. Phil isn't here."

He couldn't help but wonder what Phil's face looked like.

"I heard, ma'am. Sorry to bother you." Damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn it. Grant turned, shoulders hunched, hands sliding into his pockets. He'd try Joe's first, maybe. If he didn't see sign of Phil he didn't even have to knock.

He headed through the back woods, hurrying, sneakers squishing in the mud. He was moving so fast that he damn near missed the sound of Phil calling his name.

When he tried to stop, his feet kept moving, and Grant slid, landing on his butt with a plop. "Hey, Shine."

"Hey, Tater. You got mud on your butt."

"No shit? I didn't know." It was only wet and gross. "What up?"

"Needed a smoke." Shine wasn't looking at him, not even a little. "You headed to Joe's?"

"Was lookin' for you." He hated to bring Joe in on it when Shine was hurt. Joe would spout threats and urge them to do stupid shit, and they didn't need it.

"Ah. That bastard still there up to the house?" A cigarette was offered over.

"Yeah. Said he'd kick your ass. You know the drill." Grant took the smoke, letting Shine light it for him.

"Yeah. Good thing I'm quick." One of Shine's eyes was swelled shut, lip split.

"You know it." His fingers curled into his palm again, this time to keep from reaching out and touching Phil's face with his muddy hand. "So. Momma's gone for the day. She left macaroni and cheese."

"Yeah? I ain't... I ain't got no plans. I got ten dollars. We could get Cokes and stuff."

"We could. You got enough smokes?" He had a cousin that worked at a Quick Stop. He could score them some cigarettes if they needed them.

"I took two packs from the freezer. Momma'd hid 'em."

"Well, come on, then." He could change his damned clothes, wash the mud out before his own momma screamed at him. She wasn't really a harpy, but she liked things just so.

"'kay." Shine stood up, real careful like. Damn. Damn, it'd been a bad morning.

Not that he would say nothin'. Well, not now. Later, he'd come around to it the side way, poking a little, just to see what he could do. And he'd get Phil in the bath, let him soak.

It wasn't 'til they were almost to his house that he saw the back of Phil's T-shirt, saw the blood there, on the back of Phil's jeans.

Saw how bad the morning had really been.



## Chapter Thirteen

They were on the road again, heading into town to see Phil's daddy.

Damn, but Grant hated that. Oh, Phil's daddy wasn't evil or nothin'. Least not in the way that stepdaddy had been. Even if he was, Grant and Phil were men now, strong men who could handle themselves.

No, what he hated was how stressed out it made his Shine. Because it was worse, somehow, than going to see Joe in prison.

The bayou was flying by them, Phil tapping away on his Blackberry, working his skinny ass off.

Grant kept sneaking glances over, watching those fingers fly. "You ever slow down, Shine?"

"No." There was a ton of sadness in that one fucking word.

"Well, damn. You need more beer in your life." Or more weed or something.

"You know it. I drink a lot of martinis in the city."

"Yeah." He drank a lot of scotch. He understood completely.

"They want me back there. Things are getting hairy."

"Hairy how?" No. No, Shine couldn't leave again, could he?

"There's this case, Phil. The governor's office called. You need to talk to this reporter. I fucking hate this shit."

"Yeah. Reporter, huh?" Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

"Yeah. I. Yeah." Phil sighed. "You ever been to Vegas?"

"Me? Once. Back when I was a lot younger." A lot more stupid, too. He'd lost a lot of money.

"You should come and see my place."

"Yeah?" Oh, damn. He glanced over again, finding Shine watching him carefully. "I could see Vegas again. They say a lot has changed."

"Yeah. Tons. It's still plastic and neon, but it's a place to make a name for yourself." Phil's hand crept over toward him.

"That's what they say." He took Phil's hand, admiring the long fingers. He was suddenly glad he had an automatic.

"What's your house look like?"

"Mine?" Shit, could he even remember? "It's just a long old ranch style place. Brick veneer. Red and yellow hardy board. You got a condo?"

"Yeah. Sleek, chrome, all modern. I'm not there much. Has a great sound system, though. I bet you have dogs."

"I do. My cousin is taking care of them." He was a country boy. Country boys had dogs, right?

"Cool. How many?"

"Three. Two coon hounds and a blood hound." His buddy Alan said he was like an old Southern jail warden.

Phil looked wistful, chuckled softly. "You know I've still never had one?"

"Yeah? I guess they frown on that in condos. You could come meet mine." He made the offer as casually as Phil had made his.

"I'd love that." There wasn't a bit of hesitation there.

"Then you'll have to come on. I swear, you'll love Daisy. She's the bloodhound."

Phil would look amazing in his bed.

"Okay. I bet I'd love making gumbo in your kitchen."

"You would. I got me a gumbo pot." He'd bought it on a whim, in a market in Baton Rouge, thinking of Phil at the time.

Phil closed his eyes, went silent.

Shit. He felt like he was dancing in a land mine field half the time, never knowing what to say. "You okay, Shine?"

"No." Shine gave him one of those smiles that he remembered from way back when. "I don't know how on earth I can walk away from you."

He squeezed Phil's hand. "Who says we gotta walk away? Even if we can't, you know, be together all the time."

Phil nodded. "Yeah. I hear you, Tater. You can come see the bright lights."

"I can. I can't go back to pretending you don't exist, Phil." Sounded like something right out of a romance novel, but it was the God's honest truth.

"No, not now. Not after I know."

"Yeah." He had to let go of Phil's hand to steer around some swamp that was encroaching on the road, but he could still feel the warmth.

"I got us a hotel room in the Quarter. I figured we'd go see the old man, have our chat, spend the night and go from there. I need to know where Joe keeps his shit."

"Okay. We can do that." They could eat somewhere decadent, too, have some amazing dessert. Drinks. Fuck like bunnies.

"It's been a long damned time since I went to the Easy. You go much?"

"Nope. I been a few times, but it's not someplace I go a lot for business." Too damned many ghosts.

"No? Did you build any down there, after the storm?" Phil's hand was on his thigh, now, exploring his seams.

"Some. Mostly I had my guys down there. I mean, my company put in a lot of time, but I didn't go." His cock was starting to firm up, getting happy.

"Yeah, I spearheaded the governor's initiative. It mainly meant being nice to rich old ladies." Phil's touch crept toward his balls.

"Careful now. That swamp is big over there." Didn't keep him from lifting his hips and asking for more, though.

"That would mean you needed to be careful." Phil chuckled. "Would it be rude to say that I want to suck you off?"

"No. Not rude a bit." Now all he had to do was find a place to pull over.

"Oh, good." Phil unbuckled his belt, slipped over. "Because I do, you know. I want to suck you until you scream."

"I..." Oh, Christ, he wanted that so much. Wanted to feel that pretty mouth on him, to watch Phil suck him.

"Mmmhmm. You know how many fucking years I wanted you, wanted to have you in deep?" Shit, he never would have pegged Phil as a talker, but damn. Damn, it was hot.

"Shine. Let me." The zipper on his jeans made an unbelievable noise when it slid down. Oh, thank God. The swamp bridge was ending, and there was a pull-off a quarter of the mile up the road.

"Fuck. I can smell you." Phil's fingers wrapped around his prick.

"I need you, Shine. Got me all hot." The tires squealed a little when he pulled over, slamming the truck into park.

"Push your seat back." Shine was panting for him. Fuck, it was hot.

He found the lever after a good bit of scrabbling, the seat falling back. Oh, space. Yeah.

Phil's mouth fell on him like a ton of bricks -- hot and wet with suction like a new Hoover.

"Jesus." His head fell back against the headrest, and he had to remember to put his feet flat on the floor, so he didn't rev the engine.

Shine sucked him like there was no tomorrow, not even letting him catch his breath a bit. Grant humped, trying not to let his hips push too hard, but damn. Damn. His balls drew right up, his blood pounding in his veins. One finger slid behind his balls, scratching hard enough that his toes curled.

"Shine. Shine. Please." He just needed a little more. Just that extra tiny bit...

He got more than that, one of Phil's fingers scratching, pushing inside his jeans, the tip tapping his hole.

"Fuck!" That was it. The second Phil got even the tiniest touch there, Grant shouted and came, filling Shine's mouth. Christ, he might just die happy.

That wicked evil tongue cleaned him off, licking and sliding, so damn gentle.

He stroked his hand over Phil's head, petting, letting himself feel. "Shine. You have a mouth from hell."

"Mmmhmm." Those tight curls tickled his fingers.

"Love how you feel on me." He loved how they smelled together, too. Hell, he loved Phil. Always had.

Phil kissed the tip of his cock, gentle as all hell. "I know, Tater. Always have."

"What do you need, Shine? I'm melted, but I can help a man out."

"I got what I needed." Still, Shine sat up, pushed right up against his side.

"Oh, come on, Phil. Learn to be greedy." Laughing, Grant rose up one elbow to take a kiss.

"Butthead." Phil grinned, popped his buttons. "Touch me, then."

"You know it." It was awkward, but he got his arm moved over, got Phil's pants open. Hot, long, hard as hell, that cock was perfect.

Phil's hips rolled, slid over his palm. "Oh, that's good."

"Yeah. Yeah. Good, babe." He wanted Phil to come, wanted to see it.

Those dark eyes stared into him, lips parted, tongue flicking out to wet them.

His fingers traced the entire length of Phil's cock, touching the tip, the gliding back down to the base. He wanted to suck Phil off, too, but there was no way his barrel chest was gonna bend like that. Besides, Phil looked like he was happy as a pig in shit, hips rolling.

Grant stroked faster, twisting into a torturous angle just to take a kiss. He needed it. More than anything. Phil moaned, pushed against him and that leaking cock throbbed. Yeah, someone was into it, all right.

"Shine." He kept repeating Phil's name, over and over, pulling at that amazing prick, feeling the heat of it like to burn him.

"Tater. Tater. Right there. Harder. Soon." Like he couldn't tell.

"I can feel it, babe. Every time you breathe." He gave harder, faster, more, his palm sliding up and down, fingers clenching.

Phil's lips dropped open, heat pouring over his fingers.

He kissed that mouth one more time, tongue pushing in, even as he rubbed Phil's come into the skin above that amazing cock. So fucking fine.

A semi truck zoomed by them, rocking the pickup and Phil chuckled into the kiss.

"Mmm. Like a magic fingers bed, only cheaper, huh?"

"You know it, Tater. We're high-class, you and me."

"Hell, yes." They didn't have to be high class; they could be fucking plebeians together all they wanted.

As long as they did it together.

## Chapter Fourteen

They drove into the Quarter, neither one of them saying a word. The streets were tight and busy, dirty and lit up, much like he remembered.

The big storm hadn't changed the Quarter.

The rest of the city that he'd seen, though... The Marigny had all these empty places like toothless sockets -- one house would look just fine and then...

Damn.

He kept chewing his bottom lip, looking for the Palmetto Club, where it was tucked away on the wrong end of Decatur Street. He saw the sign, a simple wooden thing, swinging off a single chain. "It's there. We can park and walk." He sounded like an old fucking man.

Tater nodded, lips tight, those eyes on the cramped street. He knew Grant hated how his daddy did him up. Hated it. Always had.

"You don't have to come with. I'd understand." Hell, he didn't want to go.

"No. You're not gonna see him alone." That stubborn jaw jutted out.

He nodded, not willing or wanting to have a war about it. He just wanted this over. He'd get the meeting done, get the information he needed, and that would be that.

Right?

Right.

Grant pulled the big truck into a space that looked far too small, but it worked, got them street parking for free. That had to be a sign.

He blinked, impressed. "Shit, Tater. That's good driving."

"Thanks." Grant grinned over suddenly. "I can do a lot more than fuck in here."

"You'll have to show off for me."

The urge to just run hit him hard and low, but he wasn't going to fucking give into it. He hadn't then; he wouldn't now.

"I will." Grant's grin went evil. "We'll go swamp riding."

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He hooted as the old Ford went spinning into the swamp, mud going flying as they shouted.

"Faster, Tater! Faster!" Phil was flying. Him and Randy'd been fighting for two days -- the bruises on his face and back were proof of it -- and he'd snuck out in the moonlight and headed to Grant's. They'd headed out at first light to play, just in case someone came knocking.

"You're crazy!" Grant gunned it, though, spinning to the right, the back end fishtailing.

"You fucking *know* it!" He was fucking gonna lose it one day. Just lose it.

"Hold on, Shine." The wheel spun under Grant's hands, mud and slime spewing up behind them.

He grabbed hold of the oh-shit handle, the whole truck swinging. Fuck, yes. That made all the last few days -- the hollering, the fighting, the bullshit -- just go away.

The right wheels both rocked up, him and Grant both leaning to correct it, and they slammed back down, the sound of sludge sliding away almost a scream. God, it was enough to get his blood up.

"Shit, I could kiss you!" The words escaped him before he could stop them, and he turned toward the open window, letting the wind hit him.

He heard Grant's indrawn breath, and they tilted again, the tires spinning wildly. He thought sure he heard a whisper, too. Sounded like, "Okay."

No. No way. No way. He was not going to....

No.

Not today.

Phil crawled half out of the window, howling.

Grant started laughing again, hollering and bellaring, and that was just too funny. Tater sounded like a maniac.

Mud splashed on him, and he slapped the roof, screaming with pure excitement. "Hoo-eee!"

"Yeah. Yeah, Shine! Shit, here we go." They gunned it up a bank, the truck lurching.

The tree branches were slapping at him, stinging his skin. It hurt, but it was a good sting, a good burn, something fucking solid. Not like shit he didn't deserve. Not like shit he never earned. Grant veered off to the left, sucking him back down through the window.

He bounced on the seat, wiping his face with one hand, grinning over. "Fuck, you can drive."

"I try, Shine. Don't want to take your head off, though." Grant let go of the wheel for a second, reaching over to tap his chin with curled fingers.

"Nope. Need that. Otherwise I'll never get out alive." He winked, shrugged.

"There you go." They made it to a section of swamp they'd need a boat to get through, and Grant screeched to a rocking stop.

Everything was quiet, all of the sudden, both of them just having a sit, a stare.

Damn.

Grant shifted a little, grimacing. "You see that gator?"

"Yeah. It's a grandpappy, huh?" He watched the big monster slink into the murky water. "I called my papa in the Easy, jus' to see if I could come a few days, maybe. Mama's gonna shit a brick, when she sees the long distance bill."

"Yeah? You know you can come stay in mine." Grant offered to let him sleep over all the time, but it was getting tough, them sleeping in the same bed these days.

"I know. I'm thinkin'... Well, you know he said no, yeah? He's got him a girlfriend and there ain't no room for me in his place." His cheeks heated; he could feel it. Fucking sucked, knowing nobody wanted you none.

"Then come home with me, Shine. I got a place for you. My people went to the casino for a few days."

"No shit? You don't mind? Cause..." He shrugged, trying not to show how motherfucking scared he was. "You know."

"I know." One hand left the steering wheel again, coming over to pat his leg, clumsy, landing too hard. "I don't care. You come stay with me."

His fierce Tater.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. For a few days, huh?" He could sneak back in, get some clothes. He had his backpack.

"Sure." Laughing, Grant pulled his hand away and threw the truck into reverse. "I got us a whole bottle of Mad Dog."

"No shit?" He applauded. "I still got half a pack of smokes buried in a can."

"Then we can have us a party." Not that they weren't already having some damned fun. The truck spun around, the back wheels sinking down, almost sticking them.



"Don't you swamp this old clunker, now!" Jesus, this was fun.

"No way. No fucking way, Shine. We still got three quarters of a tank."

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Phil looked over at Grant and grinned as best he could, then he hopped out of the truck. The streets were busy -- folks heading in for the day, heading out for the evening. He could smell catfish and andouille, olives and beer and the river herself, just like he remembered. Shit.

Shit, he wasn't ready for this.

Grant's door whooshed shut, and the man was there next to him in a second, blotting out the sight of the wilting cardboard boxes sitting by the trash can, right by the gate.

"I'm cool." If he fucking said it, over and over, maybe it would come true.

"Then let's do this." Yeah. Tater was a solid presence. Right there. A safe place.

He didn't answer. He didn't have to.

They headed across Decatur, dodging a couple of little goth girls and a busker, heading for the club. He could hear the trumpet playing, feel it in his bones.

Papa's music.

He dug his wallet out of his pocket, handed a twenty to the wrinkled old lady at the door.

She smiled a toothless grin and nodded them through, patting his arm. "Yo daddy will be glad, boy."

His immediate reaction was to deny it. He couldn't, though, and he knew it. Papa was there on the tiny stage, just warming up with a drummer and a piano player. There was a sax on a stand, too, just waiting.

Fuck.

"You want a beer, Shine?" It was almost late enough in the day for Grant to ask.

"Huh? No. Nah, I'm good."

"Okay. You want me to find a place to sit?" Grant would find a place close enough to hear and see, far enough not to be threatening.

"Sure." He nodded, eyes on the stage. Papa didn't seem to notice them, didn't look his way. The man had dark glasses on, was totally into his music. The piano player, though, that man noticed, eyes wide, staring.

Phil could understand that, he supposed. Papa looked just like him.

Just.

When his daddy finally looked up, a smile creased his cheeks, and he nodded, slow and easy. Just like they saw each other every day.

Phil nodded back, feeling like nothing better than when he was sixteen years old and begging for that sorry son of a bitch to let him come stay before Randy beat his ass to death. He hated this. Hated remembering all this shit that he'd worked for years to forget. Hated knowing that Papa was still sitting here in this motherfucking dive playing the same goddamn songs on the same goddamn horn while his place was worth a half million dollars in a shit market. "I have to go back to Vegas. I don't belong here anymore."

"Shine?" Grant sounded worried, looked it, too, when he finally glanced over. "We got to. Then you can -- then."

"I know. I know." He set his lips, set his mind. This was like being in court. He had one goal and one goal only. Shut Joe down so tight the man's ass would squeak. That was it.

He walked up to the stage, standing and watching at the band trailed off. As soon as the horn left Papa's lips, Phil spoke. "Vieux asked me to come and see you."

Papa must be staring at him, but with the glasses it was hard to tell. The horn went into its cradle, and Papa stepped down, brushing past him. "Did he, now?"

"He did." Phil didn't follow. He was done begging for attention, had been done.

Papa turned back a few steps later. "Well, come on and let me buy you a drink."

"Sure." He stared a second, watched his father move, suddenly five years old again, watching his favorite person on earth lead the way to the bar.

Too bad he was a thousand years too old for hero worship.

## Chapter Fifteen

Grant had decided when he was about ten that he was going to have to work with his hands. He wasn't smart like Phil. No, sir. Oh, he wasn't dumb or nothin', but he wasn't a genius, and he didn't like school. He couldn't count the times that people had called his family lazy, or shiftless, or no account. Hell, for the most part it was true, but he wasn't gonna be that way.

Didn't keep him from wishing he was more like Shine. That he could some day make a living on his brains, sitting behind a big desk, like Shine would, too. He'd make it to the top of some skyscraper.

Shit, Grant would even rather be like Phil's daddy, with fingers that could draw music out of an instrument.

They were sitting in the back room of Big Jim's hiding in the late night smoke and gloom, listening to Phil's papa play his last set. Joe had smuggled them in a bottle of Mad Dog, and they were listening to the band, just sort of floating and not worrying on anything.

Phil was just sitting there, eyes wide, staring at the stage like there wasn't anything finer on earth. Lord love him, Phil was stupid for a man who didn't give the time of day or a copper penny for anything but that trumpet. Grant guessed it was like him wanting to save the Thibbideaux family name from being dragged through the dirt. You always wanted what you couldn't have.

Joe grinned over, nudged him on the arm. "You think Phil's gonna be a jazzman like his daddy? He's the right color for it, almost."

Grant licked cheap wine off his upper lip. "Nope. He's gonna be a lawyer. Maybe a doctor." Their Phil was too fine to waste away in a smoky club.

"You think?" At his nod, Joe snorted. "Only if that sumbitch his momma's married to don't kill him."

Grant set his jaw. "No, sir. I'll kill that bastard first. You wait and see." Maybe it was just big talk, but he wasn't going to let Phil get hurt anymore if he could help it.

Joe looked at him, nodded. "It might come to that, one day."

Yeah, he knew. Them bruises and bumps was just getting deeper and darker each time and Shine was starting to look like a hunted dog.

"I thought I'd try to talk to his papa first." He knew it might not make no nevermind, The man was sunk deep in his own shit. But Grant had to try.

Joe didn't have anything to say to that; the guy just snorted and gave him a nod. Everyone knew about Phil's papa. Everyone.

Sighing, Grant went back to watching Phil. Phil let the music transport him, and Grant let a happy Phil do that for him. He just... man, the shit he wanted to do with Phil was... damn. It probably didn't bear thinking on. That stuff probably made him exactly what more than one person had called his family. Trashy, and then some. Didn't stop him from wanting so bad it hurt.

Phil looked over at him, gave him this smile -- all teeth and happy. "You having fun, Tater?"

"I am." He so was. "You?"

"You know it, man." Phil chuckled, eyes back on the stage. "I love the Easy."

"I know." That was why he came, right? Grant loved Phil. His eyes widened, and he stared at Phil a moment before standing abruptly. "Gotta pee."

Fuck. What kind of sick son of a bitch was he?

Grant stared at himself in the tiny mirror in the dimly lit bathroom. "Get a grip, buddy."

He stared for a long time, a damn long time, before Joe came in. "Man, you gotta get out there. Phil's dad freaked out when Phil asked to move down."

"Where is he?" Shit. Shit. Grant slid out past Joe, his eyes tracking, scanning for Phil.

Phil was standing there, standing over his daddy, glaring down. "...what, you don't give no care that he's whaling on me? What am I to you?"

Fuck. Grant went over, trying for casual. "Shine. Come on. It ain't worth it."

"Why not? Why ain't it? I cain't go back there much more, man. He's gonna kill me."

"Now child, stop with that drama. That white boy ain't doin' shit. You want I should talk to yo' momma? Like I kin deal with a kid here. I got work to do. There ain't no room."

Grant tugged at Phil's arm. "Come on, Come on, Shine. We can stay here tonight, yeah? I still got twenty bucks." Twenty bucks would buy them a cheap room right off the river.

"I'll give y'all money..."

Phil turned on his daddy, snarled. "I don't want your motherfucking money, you *asshole*."

Joe came sidling up, plucking at one sleeve. "People are starting to take notice, boys. Come on."

Phil stormed off, shoulders up around his ears. His daddy pushed a roll of bills in Grant's hand, enough to make him sorta queasy.

"Here. Take it. I cain't. I ain't made to take care."

"No. No, you obviously ain't. I swear to God, that man hurts Phil so bad he can't get up again, and I'll make you pay." He took the money, too. Damn it, Phil deserved something.

"Come on, Tater!" Joe tugged again. "We lose him, it'll take forever to find him again."

Wasn't that the truth?

Grant turned on his heel and headed out, following Phil, knowing the man would have turned left.

Son of a bitch. He could see the tall fucker, moving through the crowd, weaving through all the people. Shuffling past the pile of trash next to the bar on the sidewalk, Grant broke into a trot, No way was he going to let Phil try to get home alone. Hell, they could stay the weekend now. Sleep and party and smoke and shit. That would make Phil smile, right? He glanced back to see where Joe was, but there was no one back there. Shit and shinola. Course Joe was all about the disappearing shit. Always had been. Fucker.

Things got a little weird and Joe was gone. Grant guessed he ought to be thankful. Phil would be easier to talk to without him.

He caught up with Phil, not saying a word about the dark streaks on the guy's face that caught the light. His fists clenched, and so did his jaw, but he just grabbed Phil's arm and steered him toward the Clover Grill.

"Want a burger?"

"Huh? Yeah. Yeah, hubcap burgers, huh?"

"You know it. Fries. Pickles." They grinned at each other, the tension easing a little. "Just you and me. Joe's gone."

"Yeah, 'cept I want tater tots."

"Tots it is." Like that was some kind of hard request. God, Phil needed to believe he was worth what Grant knew he was.

"Cool." The queer bar was rocking busy, the dance music pouring out, guys in there... doing things.

Grant didn't look. He wasn't sure he wanted to think about it. It led to thinking about Phil. Phil's mouth. His skin. That just... yeah. No.

They slid into a booth, the grungy place a little dim, a little loud. It felt comfortable, like they could hide there, even with all the tables stretched out by the big windows. A sweet little boy

swished over and asked them what they wanted to drink, and they got iced tea and ordered burgers and extra tots.

"Sorry about your daddy, Shine."

"Me, too. I... I shouldn't have come down here. I know better, huh?" Phil was twisting a napkin, over and over in his fingers.

"You had to try." You never knew until you tried, right? It was gonna buy them dinner and some time.

"I guess. I feel sorta stupid."

"No." He reached out, touching Phil's wrist. "You ain't stupid."

"Then what am I, Tater? Why can't I get out of this shit?" It hurt his heart, to hear Phil sound so damn broke.

"Because people other than you still got control of your life." No one would ever have that power over Phil once he was of age. Grant believed that with everything he was.

"It ain't gonna be like this forever. I'm getting the fuck out one day." Yeah, he knew that.

"You are." He met those dark eyes, nodding firmly. "I know it."

"You think you'll come with me?"

"I don't know." He knew he wouldn't. Phil could do better than having a rock like Grant around his neck, and someone would have to keep Joe off the radar.

"You should. We'd make a hell of a team. We could take on whole fraternities." Shine grinned at him, dark eyes twinkling. "Scare them uppity boys."

"We so could." Sure. Sure. A fraternity for him? Losers anonymous.

The food came and they started chowing down, Shine starting to laugh and tease, to play with him. That made Grant relax, too, made him think they might just forget Shine's problems for a bit.

Hell, if one night was all they got? He'd take it and count them lucky. The rest would find a way.

## Chapter Sixteen

A hell of a lot of time had passed since Phil had damned near begged his daddy to take him in. As they settled at the bar with the old man, Grant realized a lot more water had passed under that bridge now, too. Now that the music was done, Phil had a way about him that said he was ready to go, ready to get the hell out.

There wasn't none of that desperate need to belong no more. All there was now was a cold fire, and the occasional flicker of pity in Shine's eyes when the hand reaching for the shot the bartender laid out trembled. The old man just keep looking at Phil, like he wasn't sure that the sophisticated, long-limbed man with perfect teeth and skin could possibly be the gangly, needy little boy who had come to beg for a bed, something.

"So," Phil's papa finally spoke up. "What all's going on. Look like you done good for yourself. You can buy."

"I came to see an old friend. Vieux asked me to come see you." Phil tossed a fifty on the table and stood. "I saw you. You saw me. I paid."

"Oh, now, son. You came. You must've had a reason 'sides Vieux."

Grant waited, the emphasis on Phil's uncle not lost on him one bit.

"I got some old business to put into the ground, is all."

"Seems to me you put enough in the ground 'round these parts, boy."

Grant wasn't sure he'd actually heard it, or that the old man had said it. Phil sure didn't flinch like he did. God, he hated hoodoo.

"Man has to do things when no one else will." Phil's voice was flat, hard, and there wasn't gonna be a bit of forgiving here tonight.

Grant shook his head, grabbing his drink and tossing it back. "Can we not?"

"Yeah. Let's not." Phil's voice was completely and totally devoid of anything. "You look good, man. Enjoy your drink. Enjoy mine, too."

Then Phil just walked away. The old man stared after him, shook his head. "Shit, he's a lot like his momma."

"Well, he sure never got a lot of your influence." Grant shook his head. He'd been here before, watching that stiff back.

"You don't know shit about it, son. Sometimes a boy's got to grow some balls and take his licks. Philip there, he's always been a runner."

Not always. Shit, no. He'd stood his ground before.

"You're the one don't know nothin'." Grant's hands balled right up into fists, ready to knock the man winding. He stopped when Phil glanced back and met his eyes. "Gotta go, old man. You don't know what you're missing."

The old son of a bitch never had.

Grant followed Phil out, down the street towards Jackson Square, by the buskers and the card readers and palm readers. Some things never did change. Wasn't nothin', not a storm or hoodoo or death making a bit of difference. Took him awhile to catch up on his short legs, but he got there.

"You know, this place isn't appreciably different from Vegas." He wasn't sure Phil was even really talking to him.

"No? Well, there you go." What the hell did that even mean? He sighed. "Want to get a Hurricane?"

"No." Phil looked at him, eyes quiet. "I want to go to Lafittes and have beers in the dark with you."

"Then let's go." They'd gone the wrong way altogether, but they could stop and get a sandwich at Frank's, carry it up to the bar.

"Okay." They headed back the way they came, together this time.

"I'm sorry, Shine. I know that had to suck." Hell, it had sucked for him, and he wasn't related.

"I just keep wondering what it is about me that..." Shine chuckled, shrugged it off visibly. "Not enough of the Bayou in me, I guess."

"Shit, Shine. It's more like not enough steel in their backs. You've always been the strong one, and they've always punished you for it."

Like he'd said something out loud, they stepped into Frank's, ordered a muffaletta to go while having a beer at the little bar. "So, I guess we head out tomorrow. Find Joe's house."

"We do. We got to do this, yeah?" They needed it over with. Things were staring to make his hair stand up, make his skin crawl. Time was getting short.

"Yeah." Phil nodded, eyes dark as pitch. "I swear to you, Tater, I could get on a plane and just run."



"Well..." He tilted his head. "You gonna give up everything you worked so hard for? 'Cause I tell you what. I got a stash of money and a man who wants to buy my business."

"You'd come with me? For real?" Phil looked like a gator'd just bit his butt.

"In a heartbeat. Mexico is nice." He'd even go to Yankeeeland.

"So's Brazil. Or the south of Spain."

"Spain." Well, he spoke some Spanish, thanks to the boys on his crew. "I got a passport."

"I have a house in Malaga. It's small, but near the promenade."

"No shit?" He'd never been anywhere like that. "They got oranges and olives and shit?"

"They do. Am I being a shit? Thinking about walking away?"

"Hell, no." If he could kill Joe he would. That would make him the shit, huh?

"I'm not sorry we did it."

"I'm not either, Shine." He rubbed his fingers along the back of Phil's hand, just to let the man know he was there.

Phil's mouth opened and the man's phone rang and he grabbed it, looked at it. "It's the prison. It's Joe."

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. "What?"

"I'm not going to answer it." The fucking thing just rang.

"Oh. Good idea." They could still go. Joe didn't know all he thought he did.

"Yeah..." Phil's eyes held his, sick and pissed and worried and scared all at once.

Then Phil just flipped the phone open. "What do you want?"

## Chapter Seventeen

Motherfucker.

Phil headed toward the truck, trusting that Grant was following him.

*"I mean it, Phil. I'll talk to the press. I want out of here and I want out of here now, do you understand? I got proof. I got pictures and shit. I'll take your black ass down."*

*"There's only so much I can do without time, Joe. You know that. Wheels move slowly and all that."*

*"Well, speed it up, man. Both y'all have contacts. Don't think I don't know."*

*"You're a three-strike loser, Joe. I could be married to the governor's daughter and it wouldn't be enough contacts."*

*"Well, you're gonna be the loser, you don't fix me. Tater, too. I got more on him, you know."*

*"Go back to your cell, asshole, and let me work."*

*"Fuck you, Shine. Two more days." The phone clicked, Joe hanging up on him.*

He leaned against the truck and called his uncle, waiting for the "lo" before snarling. "I saw the bastard. I need that address. Now."

"Okay. Okay, 'den." The address came in short, staccato sentences. But it came. It came and the fucking address was enough to give him goosebumps.

No. No way.

"You sure?"

"Oui. I knowed it."

"Thank you." He loved his uncle, but enough was enough.

He took a long, slow breath, trying to settle. "He's. I got the. He's at my old house. Mom's old house."

Grant blinked. "No way."

"Yeah." No shit. "Let's go."

"Got it." Grant gave him a sideways look. "You... you okay, Shine?"

"No, sir. I'm not. But I'm gonna be." He was going to take care of this shit, once and for all.

"What are you gonna do?" There wasn't a bit of nervousness there. Just a flat kind of curiosity.

"I'm going to have you take me to Sulphur and drop me off and then I'm heading south and you're heading north."

He was fixin' to shake off twenty years of civilization and wade back into the bayou.

"Why am I heading North?"

"Plausible deniability. You need an alibi."

"Bullshit." Grant knocked an elbow into Phil's ribs. "We do this together."

He grunted, pushed back a little. "No way. I don't want to fuck up more than I have with you, Tater. I'll do this and come out on the other side." Clean enough to get to Vegas and liquidate, at any rate.

"Shine." Grant stopped him, right there in the street, hands on his arms. "We do this together. Period."

"I've already got shit on you." Fuck, he was stupid over this son of a bitch.

"Joe can ruin me, Shine. He's the one flinging shit." Grant grinned a little, wildly.

"I won't let him. I won't fucking let him ruin you."

Grant squeezed his arms. "I ain't letting you get away this time, Shine."

"You need to fucking be smart, man. You need to save your ass." Phil didn't want the bastard to let go. Ever.

"Oh, fuck that, Shine. You always had the brains." For a moment he thought Grant would kiss him, right there in the street.

"I always had you. Right up until the end."

Always.

"I know." Eyes darting around, Grant rolled his shoulders. "We need to go somewhere... I. Shine..."

"Yeah. Yeah, somewhere. Fuck..."

"Come on." They hurried, Grant tugging at him. Hell, they could just duck into a hotel. He followed along, his cock aching, just a little. Grant picked a place that looked clean enough, but was cheap and discreet and they had a bed in three minutes.

He slammed the door behind them, eyes feeling like they were burning in his head. "Grant."

"Yeah." They staggered, Tater pushing up to kiss him hard on the mouth.

Oh, Jesus. Please. Yes. Now. He pulled them tight together, tongue fucking those sweet lips.

Grant crashed against him, hands on his hips. Their cocks smacked together through their clothes, and it made them both moan. Grant was hot and hard for him, all ready. He pulled at Grant's clothes, needing Tater to prove that he was good, here, fucking alive.

"Yeah. Yeah, Shine." His shirt ripped a little, Grant so damned eager, so ready.

He shoved his fingers into Grant's waistband, fingers digging into that firm, hot skin, testing the muscles. Grant moaned, just bucking against him, all that muscle tensing right up. Fuck, the man was stacked.

"More. More, I need it." He needed Grant. Now.

"Well, get naked, Shine." Grant tugged at his shirt. "I love your skin."

Right. Naked. He could do that. He popped his fly, started wriggling. Off. Off.

They got naked, and that was even better. There was no cloth hiding Grant from him, making it hard to get to what he wanted. They got to biting and touching, both of them leaving marks. Grant was like a damned animal, grunting, pushing against him. That desperation was something he'd never get tired of. He arched, head banging against the wall as his hips thrust against Grant. Fuck, yeah.

"More." Grant said it against his skin, moaning, lips hot. "More, damn it."

"Yes. Jesus, I want you." He dragged his fingers up along Grant's back, scratching hard.

"Uh-huh. Want all sorts of stuff." They finally tumbled to the bed, Grant pushing down between his legs, rubbing like a madman.

Phil braced himself on the mattress, heels digging in as his ass slammed up.

"Fuck. Oh, Christ. I gotta have you, Shine. Now. Okay?" Grant's cock slid down along his balls.

"Now. Now. Hard, Tater. Make it all fucking stop a second."

"You know it." Grant slid back, cock leaving a wet trail on his thigh. Then the man lifted Phil's hips in big, rough hands, spreading him wide so Grant's mouth could find his hole.

"Fuck!" Everything went white-hot and wild, his fingers scrabbling something fierce on the bed sheets.

"Hold on," Grant muttered against his skin. "Just a few more minutes."

"Fucking need you. So bad." He was fucking flying.

"Mmmhmm." Grant licked at him, opening him and wetting his skin. Then they were sliding together, Grant's cock replacing his mouth. The stretch and burn was enough to make the top of his head want to explode. Kaboom. That was fucking perfect. All he could think of was Grant. Joe who?

They had that old bed screaming -- the springs squealing something fierce. Grant kissed him hard, letting him have tongue and lips and a tiny hint of teeth. Fucking A.

For years, fucking years, everything had been controlled and planned and solid and, fuck. Fuck, he needed this, needed to scream with it, to go soaring. Tater gave him everything. All of the need and heat and focus he could want was right there, right there for the taking. Phil let himself go, let himself give everything he fucking was to Grant and trust that the beautiful son of a bitch would take care of him.

Grant sent him flying, that thick cock spreading him, pushing in and out. The man fucked like a dream Phil never wanted to end.

"Don't you fucking stop, Tater." He reached up, loving the look of his dark hands on Grant's skin.

"No. Not gonna. Not even close." That grin made him laugh out loud. Just for sheer joy.

Phil levered himself up, mashed their lips together, their tongues sliding on each other. Grunting, Grant fucked him harder, faster, sweat beading up on their skin. They were gonna explode. Fuck. Fuck, he was gonna... His toes curled.

"Now. Oh, fuck, babe. Now." Grant was shaking, hands on his hips, fingers digging in deep.

"Now..." He shot so hard his teeth rattled in his head, everything in him shooting out his cock.

"Yeah. Now. Oh, God." Grant came in him, too, skin slapping his, breath coming hard in his chest.

"Oh, hell." He pushed up on his elbows, brought their lips together. "Damn."

"Mmm." Grant's moans never stopped, feeding right into his mouth.

They kept moving, just rocking together a little, like they just had to. Grant's mouth moved over his skin, like he tasted a tiny bit different at every spot and Grant had to learn each flavor. It made him want to moan and shiver.

It was still early, the night still young. He still needed. His fingers caught in Grant's hair, moving him here and there.

"Shine." Grant murmured it against his skin, licking, sucking up a mark that ached.

"Yeah. Yeah, Tater. Could so be yours."

"You are." The words were fierce. "Always have been. Now I'm smart enough to keep you."

"Okay." He wasn't sure what that meant, but he meant it, all the same.

"We'll figure it, Shine." Laughing, Grant moved up to kiss him again and again.

Somehow, Grant was still hard for him and he was still riding. Maybe the good lord was letting him make up for lost time. Hands sliding up and down his back, Grant nibbled at his lower lip, letting him feel how good it was, how right. Hot. Damn, it was hot in there. Somehow they got turned around, and he ended up on Grant's cock, bouncing, riding away.

Grant was panting, chest heaving, muscles standing out in sharp relief. Pretty man. Damned fine man. His hands mapped each and every inch of Grant's chest, from waist to nipple to shoulder. His name came out in broken syllables, Grant moving harder, faster, the pace picking up again. He nodded, sweat sheening his skin, nipples hard as nails.

"Babe." Oh, fuck, it felt amazing when Grant reached up and pinched one of his nipples, twisting it a tiny bit.

"Harder." He was going to come again.

"More," Grant agreed, giving it to him, arching up so hard that Phil's knees left the bed.

"Oh, fuck. Tater!" His toes curled, and his ass clamped down on Grant's cock.

"Uhn!" Face red as anything, eyes rolling, Grant came a second time, slamming against him, cock spearing him.

It was the heat in him that sent him tumbling over the edge, his orgasm almost weak, leaving him gasping.

"I got you, Shine." Strong hands held him up until he stopped jerking wildly, then lowered him down to Grant's chest. "I got you."

"Yeah? Good." Damn good, because... Well, shit, because he was fixin' to go through the damned looking glass.

## Chapter Eighteen

Grant went looking for Phil at their usual meeting place, tromping through the swamp, splashing and watching for gators. They'd taken to not meeting at either one of their houses, picking the trapper shack that Phil's Unc had used. Phil's house, well, it was like little Vietnam or something, and Grant's people were getting to where they frowned on him being around. Maybe they ought to just run off, go to the Easy and get jobs or something.

He hadn't seen Phil in a couple days, this time, though. He knew Shine wouldn't head for the Easy, not without him.

Phil wasn't in the clearing, but the door in the little trapper shack was shut tight, which was a little weird.

He almost knocked, but that seemed weird. There had never been anyone in there, right? No one but them.

No one.

He opened the door and, fuck, something smelled bad. Rotten. Nasty.

"Phil? Shine?" Maybe no one was there yet. Maybe he could just wait outside.

"Tater?" It sounded kinda like somebody was talking through oatmeal.

Oh. Oh, sweet Jesus. No.

"Shine!" He jerked the door the rest of the way open, sliding in like a baseball player pushing into home. "What the hell?"

Phil looked like... Well, Grant didn't know. He'd never seen nobody beat up so bad. Phil's face was like one big swelled up lump and there was blood and puke all over the guy's tore up shirt. The poor hands were just like... mittens or something, and... Jesus, help him, nobody could look like that and be alive.

Nobody.

Jesus Christ. Swallowing his gag, Grant reached for Phil, his hands not sure where to touch. "What happened, Shine? What do I need to do?"

"Just go 'way. I ain't. I cain't. I cain't do this no more." Phil coughed, the sound gross and raw. "Just go 'way and don't come back here."

"Don't be stupid, Shine." No way. No way was he going to leave. "I'll fucking kill him."

"I tried. He's stronger than me."



"So we do it together." There was no doubt in his mind that they could do it together. "We got to get you a doctor."

"I cain't. They'll call the cops."

Grant chewed his bottom lip, trying to think. Joe. Joe's Uncle Frank drove an ambulance and the man wasn't a talker.

"I'll get Frank, huh? You know Frank." He didn't want to leave Shine alone, but there wasn't no way to get a hold of anyone out here.

Shine's hand shot out, wrapped around his wrist. "I'm scared, man. Real bad. It hurts."

"I... Oh, fuck, Phil. It looks bad." He took off his shirt, putting it under Phil's head, doing what he could. "I don't want to go, but I gotta. You understand?"

"Shit, no. I don' understand none o'this." Jesus. Jesus, Phil was fixin' to die or something.

Grant squeezed Phil's hand. "Hang on, man. I'll get Frank and he'll fix you."

"'kay. Don' tell no one."

"I promise." His heart was fucking pounding. A trickle of blood slid out of Phil's mouth, and Grant bit back a sob.

"You my bes' frien', Tater. Swear on Jesus' name."

"I love you, Shine. I ain't letting you go down." He squeezed that lax hand again before climbing to his feet. "You wait for me. You hear? Wait."

"Promise."

The smell of death and shit and blood had been in his nose for fucking days.

Days.

Grant figured if he never had to do that again, it would be too fucking soon. Phil had pulled through, but just barely.

His hands clenched on the steering wheel.

"You cool, Tater?" Phil's hand landed on his thigh.

"Huh? Yeah. I was just thinking." Grant grated out a rusty laugh. "You know that's dangerous."

"No thinking for you." Like Phil was sitting there, all blank. Grant thought he could hear the gears turning.

"Says you." Sighing, he shook his head. "I don't ever want to see you hurt again, Shine."

"I know that. I... I'm fixin' to do some illegal shit, Tater. You should drop me off and run."

"We talked about this." He didn't mean to growl... well, yeah, he did. They were in this together.

"We did. I'm trying to protect your fine ass."

"My ass is your ass." That made him snort, a chuckle escaping. "I'm in it all the way. Always have been."

"Thank God for small favors." Phil kept touching him, eyes on the windshield. "I'm not sure I can go back to Vegas, after this. I think, I think it might be over for me."

"We talked about that, too." Grant would have an even harder time. The old boy network in Louisiana was fast on the gossip.

"I just... How do things change, so fast?"

"I don't know. They sure do, though." He made a mental list of all the people he'd have to call, all the favors he'd have to cash in.

"Yeah. A week ago I was going to be a politician."

"You were." That still blew his mind. His Shine, stuffed in an office signing forms. "I got to tell you, man. That would have been a shame."

Phil didn't answer for a while, which made him kinda nervous, and when he glanced over, Shine was smiling, ear to ear. "You know, I think you're right. I was fucking unhappy there, Grant."

"You proved you could do it. That was what you needed." He knew how that went. Phil needed to believe he was better than where he came from.

"Yeah. I guess..." Phil chuckled. "So, South America? Europe?"

"Huh. I was thinking Mexico. That make me low brow?"

"Probably, but I'm a huge fan of the coast that way. Although we could go to the Bahamas."

"Oh, now. That has possibilities." Hell, they could island hop. He liked that idea a lot.

"It does. You, me, sand and sea and reggae music."

"Reggae?" Uh... he was a country boy. "Buffet?"

"That works for me." Phil made this low, happy sound. "Although I never understood the cheeseburger song."

"No? I love a cheeseburger. Can we get those in Nassau?" He thought they had a better chance than in say, France.

"Hell, yeah. And fried plantains. I love those."

"Oh. Yum. They have all the shit to make gumbo and all, yeah?" All of a sudden he wished they were teenagers again, before the asshole Phil's momma had taken up with.

"Yeah." Phil turned, stared at him. "So, just to be clear, we're going to bug out on our lives and run away to the islands together?"

Grant slowed to take the next curve, but nodded over on the straightaway, meeting those dark eyes. "You and me. I've got kind of a contingency plan, so I won't be broke or nothin'."

"No, that's not really a worry of mine." Phil nodded. "We'll be okay, that way."

"Yeah." He looked down at Phil's hand, still on his leg, and smiled. "What are you worried on?"

"You swear you won't laugh?"

"I promise." There was a time for laughing, but not now, not when Shine was scared.

"I got everything a man works for -- I got money, power, position, everything, and I've never been so goddamn happy at the idea of walking away. With you."

He reached down, taking Phil's hand like he had all those years ago in that shack, the smell so strong he could taste it in the air now. "I get that, Shine. I get that all the way to the bone."

## Chapter Nineteen

Joe lived in fucking squalor. Not just random squalor. This was the filthiest thing Phillip had ever seen. The smell was nightmarish, even from the truck and he and Grant just... stared at each other.

His uncle knew folks, more than he'd ever imagined and had gotten them an address that no one else had found -- not the cops, not the DA, not even the little skank Joe'd been sleeping with. Now they were there and Phil wasn't one hundred percent sure what to do now that he was sitting here.

"We gotta do something, Shine." Grant looked sick.

"I know that, Tater."

"Now would be good, huh?"

"Oh, fuck off, man." He started moving though, chuckling the entire time. Asshole.

Phil walked up to the front door of the piece of shit trailer like he owned it, walked up and looked around real quick once, before shouldering open the door and busting out the lock. He didn't wait for Grant to follow him; he just slipped inside, head down, hand searching for a light.

He could hear Grant stumble, curse. "Jesus, what a dump."

"Just be careful." He flicked a light on, wincing at the piles of filth. Jesus. Who lived like this?

"Yeah. Yeah." Grant's shoulders were up around his ears, the whole thing obviously making him pissed off and creeped out.

"Go wait outside, Tater. I got this." He could deal.

"No." That stubborn bastard squared right up, chin jutting out. "I said I'm with you."

"Stubborn asshole." His stubborn asshole. God, he loved the man.

"Yep." Grant wrinkled his nose, toeing a pile of dirty rags. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Well, I'm assuming we're looking for paperwork or something. Photos?" He forced the panic that was rising down. "Did he fucking take *pictures*?" Did any of them have a camera back then? Weren't cameras expensive back then?

"I dunno, Shine. There couldn't be much to get as proof."

"No. No, there wasn't much. Right?"

"Nope. Not unless he dug up what was mired in the mud." It was a grim image, but with the falling out they'd had with Joe after, it wouldn't surprise him a bit.

"Okay. So. Paperwork in boxes. Something like that."

Jesus fucking Christ.

He started rummaging, the fleas jumping on him, biting him.

"Man, we're going to get mange." Grant was dancing around like a circus bear, slapping at his legs.

"Or malaria or something. How does someone live like this?" His place was spotless. He paid extremely good money to keep it that way.

"I dunno. I mean, I don't eat off my floors, but damn." A pile of magazines fell when Grant poked at them.

Ew. Nasty porn. Like porn where the chick's asses didn't have the boils photoshopped out nasty.

"Dude." Grant sounded all of seventeen again, all of a sudden, staring with a deep frown on his face. "That's... Wow."

"Yeah. Come on. There's only so much time we have here."

What if they couldn't find it? What if it wasn't here? Hell, how the fuck could he find it if he didn't even know what *it* was?

"There's a bunch of those paper file boxes back here in the hall." Grant's boots crunched on God knew what.

"Watch out for roaches."

While Grant was hunting, he grabbed two potato chip bags out of his pocket, turned them inside out. Then he unscrewed the cover from an electrical outlet, using his pocketknife to strip some of the wires before shoving the greasy foil bag in and pushing the outlet closed. Grant was cussing steadily, the words getting more and more vicious every second. There must be all manner of foulness. He hurried, setting up another outlet to go. It'd take hours to catch hold, but that was okay. They needed to be away before things got started.

"Shit. Joe is a real prick, man. He's got peeping Tom pictures of at least twenty-five chicks."

"He's a worthless sack of skin." He wandered over, picking over piles of pure crap. "Is there *anything* on us?"

"So far? No. I got at least ten more boxes to go through, and there's stuff in the bedroom." Thank God it was a small place.

"Okay. I'll take the bedroom." The smell was beginning to wear on him -- urine and stale sweat and mold.

"Yeah." Another box shifted, Grant pushing things around, cussing some more.

The bedroom didn't take long. Hell, he didn't take long at all because the whole damn thing was a fucking meth lab and not a bedroom at all. No wonder Joe'd been so fucking careful about giving up where he was staying.

Shit.

"You okay, Shine?" Grant always knew.

"Uh-huh. You find anything?"

"No." Grant sighed, then gagged when he came to stand in the doorway. "There's jack. I mean, unless we need to discredit him based on character."

"No. No, come on. Let's go." He was filthy. Filthy. He needed a beer and somewhere to sit and watch. With all this equipment, when the place went, it would go sky-high.

"Okay." Grant's eyes were dark with disgust, maybe a little rage. "How can someone live like that, Shine?"

"I don't know. I don't know about any of this, Grant. Shit, maybe he wants to know how we live with what we did."

They'd never talked about it.

Never.

Not once.

They got outside, in the sun and the muggy heat, and Grant opened his right hand, showing off a crumpled three by five photo. "This was all he had."

He took it, looked, and his knees buckled. Jesus, it was him -- bloody and beaten, broken so badly he'd pissed blood for a week. His front teeth were gone, he looked fucking haunted.

"Take that away."

He stumbled out of the yard. He couldn't take this shit. Not now. Not anymore.

"Okay. Okay, Shine. It's gone." Grant didn't say where, but when those big, square hands landed on him, they were empty.

"Fuck. Fuck this shit." He growled under his breath. "Let's go. I need to get drunk and watch this place go."

Grant spun him around and kissed him. Hard. "Let's go."

He nodded. Yeah.

Yeah.

Let's go.

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Grant watched Phil suck back another drink, rolling his empty beer bottle between his palms. All he could see in his head was the picture that still burned a hole in his pocket. He'd kept it, not as a reminder, but as evidence.

What they'd done had been self-defense.

There was smoke coming out of the front of Joe's trailer, just a little, but he thought he'd seen flames licking up the back. There weren't any neighbors, no one to get hurt. Just filth and nastiness to destroy.

Grant glanced at Phil again. "Shine?"

"Uh-huh?"

"You okay?" Hell, he knew better, but the silence was killing him.

"Getting better every second. You?"

He didn't believe it. Not a word of it.

"I'm wigged out." What the hell else was he supposed to say? Joe had a lot of bad in him that they hadn't even known about.

"Yeah. Me, too. Do you think he ended up like this because of what we did?"

"No." No. That he was sure of. "If that was how it worked, you never would have made anything of yourself. You had it the worst."

"He deserved it." Grant knew Phil wasn't talking about Joe.

"He did, Shine. I don't regret it. Not a bit. I just regret missing out on you all these years." He reached over with his free hand, touching Phil's arm.

"I regret it. I feel like shit, dragging you through all that bullshit."

"Well, it kept you alive." That was all that mattered.

"It did. We killed a man, Tater. You and me. And Joe watched."

Grant didn't think any of them -- not one of them -- had really said it out loud before. Hell, he didn't think Phil'd known Joe was there.

"Joe was there, right after. He saw us hide the body." Goddamn, it felt good to say it, just bald, get it out.

"Yeah. He deserved it. He was fixin' to kill me, and you were the only one that was going to help me."

"I loved you more than anything, Shine." Grant glanced over, sideways like. "Still do."

"I know. I knew then. You're it for me, Tater, even if you walk away now and there isn't ever more of us."

Flames shot out of a front window, the glass tinkling, cracking and dropping. "Where am I gonna go without you?"

"I hope nowhere."

"There you go." He drank down the rest of his beer, watching Joe's piece of shit go up in smoke. "We shoulda brought marshmallows."

"Yeah." He thought, maybe, Phil was fixin' to lose his shit.

"Shine? We should go. There ain't nothin' in there that's worth this." Even if someone sifted through the ashes and found a signed affidavit by them that they did it, it wasn't worth this.

"You think? You think we've seen enough?"

"I think so." It wasn't gonna be a cleansing fire. Not for them. Maybe for the blot Joe put on the world.

Maybe not even for that.

It didn't really matter.

It was just time to go.



## Chapter Twenty

The road moved at light speed past the window.

He didn't even fucking know where they were going, where Grant was taking him. He didn't fucking care. There was this huge hole in the pit of his stomach, like a sink hole that he'd covered up for years and years until the ground just collapsed into it, leaving him empty. Empty. Jesus.

Hell, he wasn't even drunk anymore, not really. He was just tired and had a sour taste in his mouth.

Phil blinked over at Grant, at the tight line of his best friend's jaw. Grant drove like a machine, fists clenched as hard as his teeth. The man looked damned grim.

"I'm sorry." He'd been apologizing for twenty fucking years, somehow.

"Why? Joe is the one who's breaking the rules, Shine." Grant smiled for a moment, bright eyes shifting to him, then back to the road.

"Yeah." But if he had just...

What?

Sucked it up? Died?

Shit, he'd been a kid. He hadn't known what to do.

"Hey." Grant nudged him, poking him a little.

"What?" He poked back.

"Stop it." The swamps were getting blacker, Grant taking them deep into the bayou. "Ain't nothin' more for it now."

"No?" He was going to worry it into a bloody scar. It was how he was made.

"No. I tell you what, it just won't do to dwell." Grant sighed. "It'll either out or it won't."

"Yeah, it'll be great on my resume. Lawyer, DA, gubernatorial candidate, murderer, arsonist."

"Hell, kind of people you work with, you might do better." He stared, but all Grant did was look at the road ahead of him, lips twitching against a smile.

"I'm going to beat your lily white ass, Tater."

"You think?" Now the sideways glance had no laughter in it, just heat. "I'd like you to try."

"I'll do more than try. I got some serious motherfucking tension to work out."

"You do. I'll give you that." Grant's hands tightened even more on the wheel. "Doubt you can beat my ass, though."

"I can. Hell, you'd probably like it." In fact, he'd bet good money on that.

Grant snorted. "Not in this lifetime, Shine."

"You don't think so?" He bet Grant could bottom so pretty. Of course, if he was wrong, Grant would fuck him raw and there was zero bad there.

"No." The word came out a growl, the truck's engine roaring a little.

"What do you want to bet?" He turned to stare at Grant, hand reaching out to trace one thigh.

"I got about a hundred bucks in my pocket." Trust Grant to go for money. Practical man.

"That's wholly unoriginal. Bet me something I need." He squeezed Grant's leg.

"Uh." The truck stuttered. "What do you want to bet, then?"

"Hmm..." Okay, that was harder than he'd expected, to come up with something. "I want to skinny dip with you in the ocean."

"How is this something I wouldn't want to do?" Grant chuckled. "But I can live with that."

"So, what do you want? Not that you'll win."

"I want you to go away with me. For real. Even if it's just for a week. I want you all to myself. No phones, no jobs, no nothin'."

"You win, I'll go, for as long as you'll keep me."

"Then we got us a deal." Grant's cheeks were red, but the smile was worth it all.

"It's a bet." He let himself pinch Grant's inner thigh, just a little bit.

"Christ, Shine, I'm driving."

"I noticed. I'm smart that way."

"You are. Fucking brilliant." Grant humped up when his pinky touched the hard cock waiting under stiff denim.

"Yeah, but you know what, Tater?" He grinned, the expression actually feeling good for once. "I like it best when you make me so lost I'm stupid."

"Yeah?" Grant groaned a little, thighs shaking. "Good."

"Yeah." He wanted to suck that hard cock, all of the sudden, good and hard.

"I... Where we gonna stop, Shine? Ain't much out this way."

He didn't even know where this way was.

"I haven't the foggiest fucking idea, man." They couldn't just tromp out into the swamp.

"Well, shit." Grant shifted, one leg starting to bounce. Luckily, it wasn't the one attached to the foot that was pressed to the gas pedal. "There's a map in the glove compartment."

He nodded and grabbed a map. "Where are we so I know where to lead you?"

"Uh..." Grant squinted at the mile markers. "We been going west, mainly, so maybe toward Houma."

He pulled out his Blackberry and started typing. Hmm. Hotels. Excellent. "Holiday Inn or Comfort Inn?"

"Comfort sounds more like us right now."

"I'll book it." He was going to have to start liquidating things, going cash.

"Works for me." That leg went ninety to nothing, and he could tell Grant was thinking just as hard.

"You cool, man?" He booked a room, got the confirmation.

"I am. Just... Well, I'm hoping we didn't kill the mood." Grant tapped out a tattoo on the steering wheel. "Still want to see you try and take me on."

"No trying to it. I want to see you naked in the ocean."

"You're something else, Shine."

It seemed like forever, but they made it to Houma, made it to the hotel, and even managed to check in. They got into the normal-looking room, do not disturb sign hanging on the outside of the locked door. He stood there, staring at Grant, tension hot and heavy in the air.

Grant all but shook, fists clenched, hot color staining his neck and cheeks. Look at that barrel-chested banty rooster of a man. He was going to rock the beautiful son of a bitch's world.

He sprang forward, going for the surprise attack. Grant's eyes went wide, and that sturdy body moved. It was just about a half second too late. He slammed into Grant, spinning the big man around, one of his legs wrapping around Grant's hip. They went down with a crash, bouncing off the end of the mattress to land on the floor. Grant's hands landed on his hips, trying to push him away. He wrapped around tighter, holding on, fingers tangling in Grant's T-shirt.

"Damn it, Shine." He could tell Grant didn't want to hurt him, didn't want to leave marks. Silly man.

"You wanted to play. Do it like you mean it." He reared back, stared into those bright eyes.

"Don't you want to win?"

Grant stared right back for a long moment, then bared his teeth in a hard grin. "You know it, Shine."

They rolled, Grant suddenly on top, heavier weight pressing him down. God damn, that was hot. He spun, wriggling under Grant so he could climb out and try this again. Grant grabbed his ankle as he went, and he'd been there before. It had been scary then. Now it was Grant breathing down his neck and he couldn't wait for more.

"Fuck." He twisted, trying to find a place where he was on top.

"Soon, Shine." Grant got to chuckling, and that gave him an opening.

Phil pounced, climbing on top of Grant and straddling that fine ass.

"Christ!" Grant just sort of... exploded. That heavy body heaved, and Phil went ass over teakettle, fetching up against the desk across the way.

He turned and got himself on his feet, just barely, before the big, beautiful son of a bitch tackled him again. His ass hit the floor and he skidded, Grant's face sliding against his neck. Jesus, it was scruffy with beard.

"Hairy monkey man." He twisted at the shoulder, pushing hard against what felt like a solid mass of man.

"Uh-huh. What's your point?" He could tell that Grant was a brawler, could tell that the man stayed in shape. Well, he'd known that, anyway.

"No point." He couldn't get any fucking leverage and, when he pushed close, he started springing wood.

"Oh, well, good." One big hand got free, Grant pushing at his clothes.

"Aren't we wrestling?" He leaned in, bit Grant's earlobe.

"No. You were going to try to kick my ass. I am trying to get to yours." But Grant pressed him to the floor, one arm like a steel band across his chest.

"Fuck, you're strong. I should have decked you first."

"You should have let me baby you." That wild grin made him want to laugh out loud.

"Fucker." He grinned back. "I want you to work for it."

"I am." Grunting, Grant pushed against him again, but his legs were too long for Grant to get him in this position.

He hooted, celebrating just a little bit.

Then his right shoulder hit the floor again, his ass sliding sideways, and Grant's stubby legs pinned him down. Shit.

"Fuck." One hand landed on his chest, keeping him right there.

"Hoo yeah!" Grant crowed a little, bending to nip at his chin. "Got you."

"I haven't given up yet." He was hard as a rock, though.

"No?" Leaning, Grant pushed most of his breath out. "Try me."

He grunted, trying to push up, get out. Fuck him raw. Grant moved more fully onto him, heavy and hot and hard as nails through their jeans. Damn. He rolled his hips up, rubbing now, instead of trying to get away. A low moan came out of Grant's throat, that hard body pressing against him. Now it was more about kissing than wrestling. He opened up, groaning low. He fucking needed this, needed something about this goddamn day to be good. Grant kissed him like a man dying of thirst at a pool of clear water. Like he was the only thing in the world the man needed.

Yes.

Yes, fuck. Please.

He reached up for Grant and the fine son of a bitch slammed his hands down, the kiss going harder. They rocked together, both of them pushing, testing, but Phil knew he wasn't going anywhere. He also knew it didn't matter, not know. He was where he needed to be.

Grant kissed him again, easing up and pushing both hands under him to grab his ass. Then the man pushed down again, their cocks rubbing together through the cloth between them.

"Want you." He groaned, licking at Grant's lips a second before deepening the kisses again.

"Mmmhmm." That deep bass rumble went all the way to Phil's toes, Grant moaning for him.

He tangled his fingers in Grant's hair, pulling him in close.

"Shine." Those eyes stared right into his, Grant needing, on fire for him. Phil could see it.

"Yeah. Yeah, please."

"Yeah. I got what you need, lover." Grant was right there, with him every step of the way.

He nodded, suddenly fucking desperate for it.

Grant bit him, right on the neck where it met his shoulder. He couldn't remember Grant ever being that needy, that violent. It felt amazing.

He cried out, hips bucking up, so hard he burned. "Grant."

Jesus fuck.

"I got you, huh? I'm on it." Grant was panting, licking the skin he'd just bitten.

"Yeah. Yeah, you got me. Want you like nothing else, ever."

"Now, then." Giving up on the pretense of wrestling, Grant reared up and pulled at his jeans, getting him bare. Then Grant lifted his ass and spread him, mouth going right to the place he needed Grant the most.

"Tater!" He arched like someone'd touched a live wire to his spine, need flooding him like a levee'd broke.

"Mmm." No one could hear that sound and not think of fucking. Jesus. Grant licked at him, opening him up, getting him good and wet.

He started jabbering -- he couldn't not. He *had* to, it felt so motherfucking good that Grant deserved to know. Grant just kept on keeping on, licking, tongue pushing into him. Those big hands were solid as a rock, holding him, keeping him up effortlessly. The room spun a little and they found a rhythm -- tongue and ass, hands, cock, even his fucking heartbeat was in time.

When Grant finally slid inside him, it was almost anticlimactic. Almost. Not really, because it felt so damned good. He bore down, riding good and hard, legs wrapped around Grant's hips as their skin slapped together.

Grant stared into his eyes, hands holding him steady, that cock spreading him so wide he wanted to scream. "Mine. My Shine. Gonna take you away."

"All fucking yours. Long as you want me. You have my word."

"Jesus." Eyes wide and clouding up a little, Grant bucked against him, cock swelling hard.

He reached up, cupped Grant's cheek, the stubble rasping him as he shot.

That big old boy shook for him, body rocking, muscles tight as frozen rope. Then Grant slumped down on him, kissing the palm of his hand.

He didn't have any words left; he had nothing to say.

Grant didn't say anything either. Phil had made a bet, and his Tater knew he'd never welsh on a bet.

Thank God. It was past time to move on.

## Chapter Twenty One

It took Shine forty-eight hours to get them set up with fake IDs and shit. It took Grant another four hours to get them a flight to the Bahamas, and to put together enough of his ready cash to open an offshore account when they got there.

They were on a plane, and Grant had never been so damned happy in his life to fly, even though he hated heights.

They were in the back, the two little seats by the bathroom. They'd talked about first class, but this was easier. Quiet.

Simple.

They hadn't said a whole lot. Hell, Grant was afraid to. Not that he figured anyone would overhear. He was just afraid to fuck up this fragile thing they had between them.

Phil seemed... bruised, he guessed. Shell shocked, maybe, although every minute it was getting better, those dark eyes were staying awake longer. Grant was a little numb. Wasn't every day he set someone's house on fire and all.

"Any regrets?" Phil's voice like low, smooth, like good whiskey.

"Nope." That was the God's honest, too. He put his hand on Phil's knee. "Not one."

"Good." His heart damn near stopped when Phil's head rested against his shoulder.

Oh. Oh, he could get used to this. In a hurry. Maybe they should have gone to one of them gay resorts... The very idea made him want to bust a gut.

"You're thinking hard."

"I was thinking about us at one of them nudist camps." See what Shine said to that.

"Really? I was thinking about us buying a very private piece of land and never letting anyone bother us again."

"I could go for that." Him, Shine, some good beer... Maybe even his dogs. Hell, yes.

"Me too. Something low-tech, private and ours."

"Well, then. We'll look." It was amazing to him sometimes, how easy it had been for both of them to walk away. Phil had systematically destroyed Blackberry and laptop, all that high dollar shit. The little chip-card thingees had gotten smashed, all untraceable now. Grant had silently handed over his fancy-assed cell phone, his one nod to technology. He wasn't sure if the sounds



Phil had made when he was bashing them was joy or pain. Either way, a whole load of tension had seemed to seep out of the man. That worked for him.

"It's going to be okay. I have money, hidden. We worked hard."

"We did." His hand opened and closed on Phil's leg, Grant staring down at the calluses there.

"What if we get there and you decide I'm worthless as tits on a boar hog?"

His eyes cut up to meet Phil's. "Shit, Shine. I always knowed you were worth your weight in gold."

"And you're my fucking savior."

His eyes stung, and Grant cleared his throat to get rid of the frog in it. "Love you," was all he managed.

"Thank God." Phil reached out for him, and their fingers twined together, holding on tight.

They didn't let go until the flight attendant came with drinks, and they both got a whiskey and cola. "When did it get bad to call them stewardess?"

"Mid-eighties, I think, maybe early nineties." Phil grinned. "You remember when they used to be glamorous?"

"I do." Grant thought those ladies were something when he was a kid. All red lipstick and perfect hair.

"It's like show girls. When I first went to Vegas..." Phil's voice dropped off, then he got this grin. "Now we'll be surrounded by beach bunnies."

"We will. 'Course, we have to find someplace to go skinny dipping, yeah?" That made him all happy, just thinking on it.

"You know it. Somewhere private and quiet."

"Very private." He had things he wanted to do.

Phil's look went from distant to sharp, focused. "Yeah? You have plans, man?"

"I do." He lowered his voice. "Gonna tear you up, Shine. Make you forget everything but me."

Oh. Oh, man. Look at that. He'd never seen anything so damn hot, not in public. His Phil. Lord, the man was hard for him, and Grant thought maybe he could smell how much Phil liked the idea. Damn.

Phil's hand landed on his belly, where no one could see. "I can remember a lot, Tater."

"Then I'll have to work hard." He wanted to fill Phil's head with good memories. The man had taken on enough pain.

"You're good at that." He could live his whole fucking life with Phil staring at him like that.

"Want you." He sure wasn't gonna lie about that. Even on a plane.

"I know. You just gave up your whole life to come with me."

"Not my whole life, Shine." He had Phil. They'd figure the rest. They were smart dogs.

They'd figured out shit from the beginning, him and Phil. They'd been through hell and lived to meet on the other side.

Now they just had to figure out how to make a whole new life for themselves. Grant couldn't wait to start.

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The water was warm on his toes and he scooted his low chair down so he could feel more of it. The sun was baking him, the heat solid and good, enough to keep him lazy. Grant sat next to him, feet stretched out, toes wiggling a little. The man was plumb brown.

"You're almost as dark as me." Of course, that was a blatant lie. He was taking to this country like a duck to water.

"Sure." Grant gave him a look over the top of his sunglasses. The song on the radio had some woman telling the bus driver she wanted to get off. It was a hoot.

"You have any regrets?" He used to ask daily, now it was only once a month or so.

They had a good life.

"Not one. Well, maybe one." That crooked little grin was appearing more and more often. "We haven't skinny dipped yet."

"That's because I worried about your ass burning."

"Yeah, yeah. You worried about me scaring the fish." Grant had been amazing, though. Swimming, water-skiing, learning to fucking bungee jump for God's sake.

He'd read a lot. Compulsively at first -- news reports, politics, anything for hours and hours. Then he'd gone to biographies. Now he was devouring novels whole. They played a lot of cards.

Grant built things. Little things and big things, houses out of matchsticks, little storage sheds for their bungalow. A huge oversized gator from Coke cans.

They both cooked, they slept together in a huge bed surrounded in mosquito netting, they swam every day.

"Does now work for you, Tater?"

"It works incredibly well." They were on a private stretch of beach, there were no boats offshore, and Grant was already up, peeling off his shorts.

Phil stripped off his gauzy pants, dropping them in his chair. He headed down into the water, laughing as Grant tugged him in deeper.

"What? So I'm a little nervous." Grant's cheeks were bright with extra sun and what looked like excitement.

"Nervous? Why?" The motion of the water brought him right up against Grant, their bodies slapping together.

"I dunno. It just seems odd, being naked out here." Grant told him things now, all sorts of things, without hesitation. It was fucking amazing.

"You look like the finest thing I've ever seen, all in the light."

"And you look like a damned god come to life, Shine."

A wave came up, splashed his belly and chest, the sun catching the water. It was good.

So good.

"I'm yours, swear to God." He held his hands up to Grant.

Grant took both hands in his, letting the water push them together so that hot mouth could crash down on his. The kiss took his breath, but Grant's smile when the kiss was over almost made sure he'd never get it back. "Mine. From now on. Count on it, Shine."

He nodded. With every fucking breath until the end of time.

They grinned at each other and turned, diving into the clear, salty water.