

# Son of a Preacher Man Jamie Craig



## SON OF A PREACHER MAN

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Dario took it, surprised by the way the other man held his hand. The grip was firm without being painful. "Good to meet you, Shawn. Dario Russo."

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"Yeah. Lucky me, huh?" He laughed, though it was more than a little hollow. "It was good meeting you. Enjoy those fries."

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# SON OF A PREACHER MAN

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BY

JAMIE CRAIG

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SON OF A PREACHER MAN  
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# CHAPTER 1

A man in reasonable health with fifteen minutes to spare could walk across Crows Landing without breaking a sweat. Give the man in question an extra twenty minutes, and he could knock on the door of every house in the town, introduce himself, meet the family, accept a graciously offered glass of water, and turn down an invitation to dinner for later that night. When Dario Russo had been sixteen, he had gone to each one of those homes and knocked on each one of those doors, looking for work. He had done everything from cleaning chicken coops to mowing lawns, and never had more than a few dollars to show for it at the end of the day. He was quite sure that if he approached those doors now, he would see the same faces, only slightly changed by the passage of thirty years.

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Or maybe those faces wouldn't have changed at all. Nothing else in Crows Landing had. If ever there had been a place where time stopped, or just passed over completely, it was Crows Landing, California.

Dario walked along the side of the road, kicking up fine dirt with each step. There were no sidewalks in Crows Landing. Just dust, and asphalt with huge, gaping potholes. They looked malicious. Like somebody had taken offense to something the mayor had done and retaliated by taking a sledgehammer to the main drag. Dario thought it was a little funny how neglect and malignancy usually ended up looking the same in the end. An occasional car passed by, grumbling along its way like an old man. In the distance, a faded yellow tractor rolled along, a mongrel dog trotting contently beside it.

Anybody not familiar with Crows Landing might have thought it a ghost town. It did have the sound of the grave—dirt and wind and the occasional muted voice coming from a distance. But Dario knew better. During the day, the children would be sent to the small elementary school, and everybody else would be out in the fields. Dario didn't expect to run into anybody.

At the center of town was a small, white building that looked newer than the rest. A luscious, closely mowed lawn rolled down from its front door, and flower beds circled its edges. The brightly colored blossoms just made the whitewash stand out more. It looked clean and cool. Welcoming. Just the sort of place you would want to be as the sun crawled higher and higher in the sky, pulling the mercury with it. Dario had never been inside of that particular building. He didn't precisely know when it was built, except that it had to been sometime after 1979.

Sweat rolled down his brow, mingling with the dust that had

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been kicked up to his face. He wasn't used to the heat, though he'd grow accustomed to it soon. He absently unscrewed the lid from his bottle of water and took a deep drink of the warm, dull water. It didn't taste good, and it wasn't very satisfying, but it did coat his dry tongue and wash away the feeling of dust there. Nothing inside the church moved. Chances were good that the door was locked, barring entrance to anybody who didn't have the right to be there.

Even if he got into the church, he'd almost definitely not find what he was looking for.

The sudden shrill sound of his ringing phone was so out of place that, for a moment, Dario didn't recognize it at all. His heart rate jumped, and he spun around quickly, searching for the source of that horrible sound. Somehow, in the city, ringing phones became a natural part of the soundscape, like engines roaring by, sirens wailing, and constant talking. Remove the phone from its most natural environment, and for a split second, it didn't sound like anything at all.

He fumbled the phone from his pocket and pushed *talk* without glancing at the name. "Dario Russo."

"Are you *serious*?"

"Ruby..."

"Don't say my name like that."

Dario blinked. "Like what?"

"Like you're trying to calm me down. Like we're friends."

Dario thought they were still friends, and he did want to calm her down. Her voice seemed at least one octave above its normal register, and he could imagine her with eyes flashing an unearthly green as she pressed the phone to her face.

"Ruby, I thought we were done discussing it."

"You left, Dario. You *left*."



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"I know. I told you..."

"You can't just leave like that. That's not how it works. That's not how adults behave."

"I told you, I have a job."

"You turned down three other jobs to work in the middle of nowhere nearly a thousand miles away. You couldn't even take the time say good-bye?"

"I didn't want it to turn into a fight." Or rather, another fight. He was done fighting with Ruby. He may or may not have loved her, but he was absolutely done fighting with her.

"People fight sometimes. When something really matters. When they're passionate. That doesn't mean you get to just run away."

"But I'm not," Dario said, without thinking. The words contained a simple truth that he couldn't deny, but that didn't mean Ruby needed to hear them.

"You're not what?"

"Passionate."

Ruby was silent for a long moment, then released a slightly shaky breath. "I see. So, this is it? This is the end?"

"Of this particular conversation. I'm here now. I've signed my contract, and I've found a place to stay. There's really not anything left to discuss."

"We were going to be married," Ruby said. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"It did. It does. This doesn't have to...change anything. It's just a job, Ruby. You can fly out to California and visit me." The words probably sounded as hollow as they felt. Dario was still staring at the church, shining so bright in the midday sun that it actually was starting to hurt his eyes.

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“No, Dario.” Ruby sighed, and now he didn’t think her eyes were flashing anymore. She sounded as tired as he felt. “It changes everything. When you’re in a relationship with somebody, you just don’t do whatever the hell you want and expect the other person to just accept that. I don’t know why I called. I guess I was hoping it was some sort of mistake.”

A single white puff of cloud floated in front of the sun, momentarily casting both Dario and the church in a shadow. He blinked, and the church looked normal again. Not shining with any great, awesome light. He even noticed that a few of the flowers were wilting on the side of the building, and there were patches of brown in the grass.

“I am sorry, Ruby. I really didn’t mean to...”

“Yeah, I know. Have a nice life, Dario.”

He didn’t feel particularly numb when he slipped the phone back into his pocket. He’d had at least twenty variations of the same conversation in his adult life. The names changed, as did the details, but overall, it was the same conversation. Dario suspected he would be unnerved if a relationship didn’t end in that conversation sooner rather than later. It just seemed to be the way of things. He couldn’t hand over every part of himself. There were elements he held close to the chest. Memories and emotions and certain, basic truths that he didn’t share. In fact, he couldn’t even let on that they existed at all.

He wasn’t shocked, but he did need a drink. He took a step forward, closer to the church, and imagined letting himself into the building. Imagined what it would be like to step into a strange building that seemed completely familiar to him. It would probably be exhausting, and definitely be disappointing. The cloud passed overhead and he turned on his heel, heading back the way he came.

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There was a bar on the edge of town that looked like the sort of place he needed. He'd down a couple of beers, have a plate of nachos, then drive himself twenty miles up Interstate 5 to the motel room that would be home for the next six months.

\* \* \*

Dario didn't stop at two beers. He had fully intended to. But he was thirsty, and every time he thought about the church, he heard Ruby's voice, and that prompted him to take long, deep swallows. Like a dying man at an unexpected oasis. When he reached the bar, there had only been two people in the place beside him. But as the sun began to set and more people filtered in from the surrounding fields and construction sites, the place filled up quickly. Dario didn't see any reason to move from his stool at the corner of the bar.

Nobody in the room bothered him at all. The women kept their distance—he supposed he didn't exactly look like a good catch at that moment—and the men were most interested in the women. All except one, who sat at the other end of the bar and occasionally studied Dario from beneath a thick fringe of lashes.

Dark blond scruff shaded the strong jaw, though it couldn't hide the cleft in his chin, or the lines around his mouth. Fresh sunburn reddened his cheeks and the powerful forearms that rested on the edge of the counter. He worked outside. His gray T-shirt was the common costume for the men in town, the beer in front of him the common escape. But his interest in the others seemed fleeting, like he watched them all from behind a wall of glass, a spectator of the world rather than a participant.

One of the waitresses brought a plate of chili fries and set it front of the stranger. Dario couldn't hear what was being said over the music blaring from the speakers in the far corner, but he saw

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the man shake his head and gesture toward Dario instead.

He frowned when the waitress picked up the plate and carried it down the length of the bar.

"Here you go," she said with a bright smile, sliding the plate in front of him. "Enjoy."

Dario waved his hand. "I didn't order this."

Her smile never wavered. "Doesn't matter. Would you like anything else?"

"I don't even want..." Dario's words faded as the waitress turned and walked away. His gaze sought out the stranger. And the stranger looked back, boldly meeting Dario's eyes for several beats before nodding at the plate. Dario quirked his eyebrow in a silent question.

The stranger picked up his beer and drained it, then rose from his stool. Grabbing a tan canvas jacket from the stool in the corner, he held it in one grip at his side as he came around the corner of the bar toward Dario.

He stopped two stools away and jerked his chin toward the fries. "I figured since you're new around here, I'd save you the hit or misses from the menu and just order the hit for you." The corner of his mouth lifted, and he took a step back. "Welcome to Crows Landing."

"So are you on the Crows Landing welcoming committee, or what?"

A full smile now, though he retreated another step. "No, nothing like that. I'm not sure anyone around here would even think of having a welcoming committee for this place. You'll find that out soon enough. Have a good night now."

"Wait. Do you usually feed strangers and then run? Did you already pay for this?"

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“It’s taken care of, don’t worry. But you don’t want me to stick around and bother you while you’re eating. Go ahead. Dig in. I promise it’ll be worth it.”

Dario didn’t want to let the stranger go. Other than Ruby, this man was the only person he had spoken with all day. “Will you tell me your name?”

The man stretched out his free hand. “Shawn Pederson.”

Dario took it, surprised by the way the other man held his hand. The grip was firm without being painful. “Good to meet you, Shawn. Dario Russo.”

In spite of the bar’s murky lighting, it was easier to make out more details when Shawn stood this close. Hazel eyes. A slight bump in his nose like he’d busted it once. His nails were short, but well trimmed. He had the body and face of a man ten years his junior. He had the eyes of one decades older.

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“I think that tends to be a universal truth when it comes to bars,” Dario said lightly, casting around for something else to comment on. Anything to keep the conversation from floundering. “Are you from Crows Landing?”

“Yeah. Lucky me, huh?” He laughed, though it was more than a little hollow. “It was good meeting you. Enjoy those fries.”

This time, he was gone before Dario could stop him with another desperate topic of conversation.

He stared down at the plate of fries, and realized his appetite was gone as well. That didn’t stop him from picking one or two from under a heap of chili, cheese, and onions, and popping them

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into his mouth. They were still hot enough to burn his tongue, and delicious, too, but that wasn't enough to jumpstart his appetite.

Dario looked up and caught the eye of the waitress. She approached him with the same smile as before. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"Yeah...do you know who that was? The guy who ordered these fries?"

"Yeah. That's Shawn."

"Yeah, I caught that part. Do you know what his deal is?"

Her smile started to fade. "What do you mean? He didn't bother you, did he?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I just don't usually have perfect strangers order chili fries for me, that's all."

"Oh, that." Her brief tension vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "He does that all the time. Or at least, whenever he happens to be in when someone new in town is, too. Which isn't all that often, but often enough to, you know, be kind of his thing."

Dario licked a strand of cheese from his thumb. "Takes all kinds, I guess." He wanted to ask more about Shawn, but he couldn't think of any good pretext to probe the waitress about him. Crows Landing was a small town, and like most small towns, they tended to frown on too many questions. "Can I get another beer?"

"Sure thing."

She had cornered the bartender and got him a refill before he had time to pretend to eat another fry. When she slid it in front of him, she paused for a moment, biting her brightly glossed lower lip. Whatever mental debate she waged lasted only a moment.

"Shawn's always been a little weird," she said. "We're all used to him, but if he ever bothers you, just make sure you tell him to knock it off. He always backs down. No matter what."

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Dario tilted his head, studying her. “He just seems like a friendly guy, but I’ll keep that in mind. Oh, before I forget, do you know anybody around here that goes by the name Billy Ray Waters?”

She frowned, thinking for a moment. “Waters. I think there was a minister some time back named Waters, but I don’t know his first name.”

It wasn’t anything except what he expected, but something in his chest twisted a little bit. He hadn’t gone all the way to Crows Landing just to find Billy Ray, but he couldn’t pretend that he wasn’t hopeful. Very hopeful, even.

“Who’s the minister here now?”

“Reverend Peck. He’s the youngest one we’ve ever had.”

Dario didn’t recognize the name, of course. If he was the youngest they ever had in town, he had probably been born after Dario had left Crows Landing behind.

“Thanks.” He smiled at her. The one he tended to use when he was trying to pick up on somebody—the one that tended to work. “I won’t keep you from your other customers.”

It didn’t seem to do much of anything now, though he decided to think it had more to do with how young she was than anything he’d done wrong. Of course, that didn’t do much but make him feel older, but he maintained it all the way until she’d headed off to help a group of increasingly drunk women at a nearby table.

Dario began mechanically picking up the fries and shoving them into his mouth, following each bite with a swallow of his beer. Something in the chili was spicy enough to make his tongue tingle, but otherwise, he barely noticed the fries. So far, his time in Crows Landing was a resounding failure. Not quite as miserable as the six months he had spent there before, but there was still plenty

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of time for things to get worse.

Dario could still easily recall the way Crows Landing looked from the back of an old Ford truck, all of his earthly possessions sitting at his feet as they bumped down the poorly kept road. Billy Ray had been standing in the church yard, watching as they pulled away. What had he been thinking as he watched them go? Dario had always wondered, but now he worried he'd never get a chance to find out.

\* \* \*

When Dario arrived in Crows Landing in April of '79, there hadn't been anything like a house waiting for them. He hadn't been surprised by this fact, and neither had his four younger brothers. Very few towns had houses waiting for them. They fantasized about what it would be like to sleep in a proper bed, to have indoor plumbing, to be protected from the summer's heat and the hard, driving winter rain. But even when they found more permanent shelter, it was barely what Dario would call a house. Usually, when they did find something, it was an old abandoned shack. One that they had to share with the rats and spiders, more often than not.

Dario sat on the edge of his bed and stared out the large window, over the motel's parking lot, and into the distance. Off to his right, the construction site flashed its orange lights, lit up despite the fact that the crew had quit for the night. They were putting in an entire subdivision, which included homes, a newer library, and a shopping center. Thirty years earlier, Crows Landing had been out in the backwoods, but now it was right on the cusp of civilization. Dario suspected that once it was finished, there wouldn't anybody around with the credit to buy one of the shining new houses, and the whole thing would be laid to waste. But that wasn't his problem. He just installed the glass.



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If he stared straight ahead, ignoring the orange lights, he saw fields upon fields. Endless miles of produce. Everything from lettuce to strawberries. They were at the far north end of American's bread basket, and if Dario jumped in his truck and headed south along Interstate 5, he'd drive for hours before reaching an end to the produce. Most of the harvesting was done mechanically these days, but not all of it.

Dario figured there were dozens of families like his, living on the edges of town, grouping together for company and safety, meeting up with old friends and making some new ones, ignoring the pain in their backs and their legs, the blisters on their fingers, making plans for the next move. Because that was always looming over them. Where would they go when the work was done and the money would dry up? Where would they find the next job? Dario always had another silent question to add to that—when would they be able to stop?

He had been sixteen in 1979, and ready to break away from the only life he had ever known. He didn't have any proper schooling, though his mother had taught him how to read and count. He had never known any life except that of an itinerant worker. He had been stuck, tired, frustrated, confused, and most of all, afraid. Afraid that he would never be able to break free of his parents. Afraid of what might happen if he did successfully leave them behind for his own life. Everywhere he looked, literally every direction he turned, Dario saw the same thing. Rows and rows and rows of fruit to be plucked, weighed, and processed.

Except for the day he had looked up and seen Billy Ray Waters instead.

Reverend Waters had specifically moved to Crows Landing to minister to the constant wave of itinerants. That was where he had

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made his home, though he traveled up and down the interstate, going wherever he was needed the most. He had a pretty regular schedule that brought him back to Crows Landing twice a week, though. And he always had his son, Billy Ray, in tow. He was two years older than Dario, and planned to become a reverend himself. That was why he traveled with his father in their old, black Chevrolet. When Dario closed his eyes, he could still hear the low, deep rumble of that truck, bouncing its way down the dirt road, sending up clouds of dust, and painting the air red. Reverend Waters always came in the late afternoon, after finishing up his sermon in town, a black hat pulled low over his eyes, shielding his face from the sun. Billy Ray didn't wear a hat.

Dario supposed he had always been a little bit in awe of Billy Ray. For one thing, he had never seen anything more beautiful in his life. Billy Ray always wore clean clothes and kept his face and hands scrubbed free of dirt. He kept his white hair cut short, and it reminded Dario of the thread his mother kept to patch up their clothes. His clothes always fit him properly, like he wasn't wearing somebody else's castoffs. His face was full, his chest and shoulders broad, his skin a healthy pink. Dario hadn't known how much a minister was paid, but whatever money Reverend Waters made, it was clearly enough to let him take care of his boy.

All Dario knew was that in the hours they spent together, he didn't feel like he was being crushed. He could breathe without an invisible weight sitting over his lungs. He could smile because he forgot his fears of the future. He had known what it felt like to be happy, and more than that, he had been given a small taste of freedom.

He had spent the last thirty years trying to taste that freedom again. He never could find it, but maybe if he could track down

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Billy Ray, he'd have a chance. Dario wasn't discouraged that the other man wasn't in Crows Landing. He had visited many temporary towns, met many people, traveled many miles. Dario wasn't going to give up until he had checked every one of those towns and backtracked over every one of those miles.

Dario fell asleep with Billy Ray at the front of his mind. His dreams were drenched in beer, soaked in memories, and brightest when he saw Billy Ray's sky-blue eyes.

## CHAPTER 2

Three weeks before Dario's parents packed them up in the back of the Ford, the church burnt down. By the time the volunteer fire department put out the flames, there really wasn't anything left to burn. The ancient wood had gone up like dry flint, and the resulting orange glow could be seen from miles and miles around. When Dario spotted the brown smoke, he had known it was the church. There hadn't been a doubt in his mind. And he ran. He was four miles from Crows Landing, and he ran without pausing to catch his breath. When he reached the churchyard, he had nearly collapsed in Billy Ray's arms.

He hadn't thought about that day in years, but as he stepped into the new church, those memories overwhelmed him. His nose tickled and his eyes watered, as if irritated by thirty-year-old

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smoke. The interior smelled faintly of varnish and perfume, and the pews were surprisingly packed. Most of them were probably locals, but Dario recognized a few men from the construction project. Astonishingly, one or two of them were even with their young families.

Dario found an empty space near the back and smiled apologetically as he sidestepped over two people to get to it. He was barely settled when the new minister, Reverend Peck, took his place at the front of the church. Dario blinked, surprised to discover that the man really was as young as the waitress had intimated. He couldn't have been older than twenty-five, and that was if Dario was being very, very generous. He had a pleasant smile, but when he started to speak, Dario couldn't help but be disappointed. He sounded like a perfectly pleasant man, but he lacked passion.

Unlike Reverend Waters. That man preached with a sort of old time fervor that made Dario think he was living at least a century outside of his own time.

His mind drifted, to slices of sunshine streaming through windows long since gone, to sweat dripping down the back of his worn collar on the shirt his mother always made him wear for services, to a different kind of preaching, a different kind of coaxing. He knew he shouldn't. This was not the place for it, though separating Billy Ray from the church had always been impossible. But every time he forced himself to refocus on Reverend Peck, his thoughts would invariably begin to float away again within moments.

The second time they had to rise, the door at the back opened. Dario glanced over his shoulder and saw Shawn Pederson slipping in through the crack. Shawn held the door to keep it from making a

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noise as it shut, scanning the congregation in obvious search for a seat. When their eyes met, he stopped, his brows lifting in pleased surprise. He nodded once, then let go of the door to step quietly along the back wall and out of view.

Dario turned his head to the other side, looking over his shoulder to follow Shawn's progress. He slid along the back of the wall, slipping in and out of view. Dario knew he shouldn't be caught staring, but he couldn't quite make himself look away, either. The Sunday morning light suited him, as did the suit and tie he wore. A man who so obviously worked in the outdoors shouldn't have looked so at ease in such restricting clothes.

Dario forced himself to look forward again. But it wasn't long until he gave into the urge to glance over his shoulder again. When he did, he discovered that Shawn had found a free seat in the pew directly behind him.

The sermon stretched long, too long. A little boy a few rows up got up on his hands and knees to survey the parishioners behind him, making faces at Dario when he realized he was being watched. Dario held back from doing the same, as tempting as it was. Soon enough, his mother scooped him around the waist and forced him to settle, and Dario had little choice but to listen to the reverend again.

Or, which was far more entertaining, get lost in memories of Billy Ray. Though those kept getting interrupted with questions about Shawn.

After the sermon, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Reverend Peck seemed oblivious to the ripple going through the congregation, stepping from behind the lectern. With a sweep of his arms, he instructed everyone to take a moment and greet their neighbor.

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Dario frowned, waiting to see what everybody else would do. They all stood and turned, hands outstretched, smiles in place. Dario slowly pushed himself to his feet. He wasn't interested in greeting his neighbors, but he was even less interested in sticking out like a sore thumb. He'd had more than enough of that to last him a lifetime.

The smiling plump woman at his left caught his hand before he could offer it. "Good morning."

Dario returned the smile automatically. It wasn't because he was necessarily happy to see her, but he had learned at an early age to never be surly and always be pleasant. "Good morning, ma'am."

Completion of his half of the ritual seemed to satisfy her, and she let him go to shift her attentions to a tall man in the pew in front of him.

"Good morning."

The familiar voice sent a faint tingle down his spine. He turned the rest of the way, and there was Shawn, smile wide, hand outstretched.

Dario took his hand, absurdly pleased to realize that his grip was as firm as he remembered. "Good morning. Fancy running into you here."

"Doesn't everybody end up here?" Hazel eyes twinkled. "Now what you should be wondering is whether or not I'm one of the sinners, or one of the saints."

"I always suspected the sinners had better things to do than go to church."

"Are you kidding? That's where all the good corruption happens." The older woman standing next to Shawn shot him a dirty look, prompting him to break away from Dario's grip. "It's good to see you here, though. I guess that means you're sticking

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around a little bit.”

“For the next six months, at least. Maybe you could clue me in on other local dishes. In case I get tired of chili fries.”

“There aren’t a lot of them. But maybe we can work something out.”

Dario scratched the back of his neck. “Good. So...how long have you lived around here?”

“There’s someplace else to go?” He smiled again, though the teenager standing next to him now had his hand out to take his turn at this meet and greet. With no other choice if he didn’t want to seem rude, Shawn broke away from their brief conversation to shake the young man’s hand.

Dario had no choice but to follow his lead, turning to the person to the right and politely offering his hand. Had Shawn’s response meant he had lived in Crows Landing all his life? If he was old enough, he’d probably remember Reverend Waters. He might even remember Billy Ray. Did he want to risk pushing for something more concrete? Like dinner that night?

He snuck a glance from the corner of his eye. Shawn seemed nice enough, but Dario didn’t think he was likely to accept a dinner invitation.

They both broke free from their new distractions at the same time. Dario smiled at him. “How long do the Sunday services usually last?”

“Not too much longer.” As he spoke, Reverend Peck’s voice broke through the murmurs filling the church, calling the congregation back to order. Before Dario could turn away, Shawn added, “I’m glad you liked the chili fries, though.”

“I’m glad you ordered them.”

Dario took his seat once again, thankful that they only had the



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benediction left. He closed his eyes and bowed his head, and a part of him expected to feel light fingers on the back of his neck. Fingers that would trace the curve of his ear, caress the line along his collar. Billy Ray had never minded that he came in from the fields covered in sweat and dust, and when he'd try to jerk away, Billy would catch him and hold him in place. He'd lean over Dario's back and whisper in his ear, "Keep your eyes closed."

Dario kept his eyes closed now, counting the drops of sweat that trickled down his back as Peck's voice droned on, rising above the buzzing flies and soft sighs of the congregation. *Keep your eyes closed.* Dario's cock twitched against his tight slacks, and he shifted, crossing his leg and trying to push the memory from his mind.

The final amen was an exhalation in a lazy summer sun, that first deep breath after a long nap. Dario's legs were heavy, his muscles reluctant to behave. Perhaps that was for the better. It gave him time to will away his burgeoning erection. He could sit quietly in his pew and wait while the ushers dismissed each row, starting from the front.

Someone tapped on his shoulder. "The Blue Goose Diner. The French onion soup, or the marinated turkey breast."

Dario leaned back. "Thanks. I don't remember the Blue Goose Diner. Is it fairly new?"

"No, not really. You've been here before?"

"Yeah, I lived here for a few months. A long time ago."

"And you came back? Impressive."

The corner of Dario's mouth lifted. "Not too impressive. I was just following the money and hoping for the chance to look up a few old friends."

When the plump woman stood, he glanced past her to see the

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usher waiting to guide them out. He rose and followed her, taking Shawn's smile and nod with him as he reached the center aisle. There was no other choice but to herd along with the other parishioners, out the double doors to pause and take his turn shaking Reverend Peck's hand.

"God bless," the young minister said.

"Thank you." Dario held his fingers for an extra second. "Do you have any free time this evening? I would like to speak to you, if possible."

Delight lightened the Reverend's eyes. "Of course. My door is always open to those in desire of enlightenment."

"Well, I'm definitely in need of enlightenment." Dario released Peck's hand, strangely touched by the spark in his eyes. He had the feeling that not many people went out of their way to talk to him. Maybe they didn't trust somebody with such a young face. "And I want to thank you for delivering such a thought provoking sermon."

"It's all my pleasure."

Then, it was time to move on, to let those behind him have their turn with the reverend. He lingered on the sidewalk, trying not to seem conspicuous as he waited for Shawn to emerge.

Shawn's exchange with the reverend was curiously short, a brief shake, a couple words. The reverend's smile wasn't as bright as it had been with the others, but Dario wasn't sure he understood why it would be melancholy now. The way the other people skirted Shawn wasn't quite as unexpected, though, not after the waitress's reaction and warning the other night. He knew what it was like to not quite fit in. That kinship was all the justification he needed to approach Shawn again.

"Need directions to the diner?" Shawn asked.

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"I was wondering if you'd mind walking over there with me."

"I wouldn't mind, but..." His voice faded on the latter, indecision warring in his eyes. They flickered past Dario's shoulder for a moment, almost compelling him to turn and see what Shawn might be looking at. Whatever it was, it helped him find his voice again. "Sure. All right."

"Great." Dario had meant to sound friendly, but he had the feeling he just sounded excited. He had been alone for every single meal for the past week, and he was getting tired of his own thoughts. He needed to hear somebody else's thoughts in somebody else's voice. "Lead the way."

More than one person looked at them as Shawn led him to the street, crossing it with just a cursory glance in each direction. The church's parking lot was still packed. Everyone seemed too busy socializing to rush off any time soon. To their advantage, he supposed. The main street was practically deserted as they walked along.

"So why are you in town for the next six months?" Shawn asked.

"The new development out near the freeway. I'm a glazier, and I was between jobs when I heard that they were looking for subcontractors out here, so I put in a bid."

"That's going to be nice when it's all done. Just about everybody remotely connected to contracting around here is working on it."

"Are you?"

"Yeah, but not until it's almost done. I'm in landscaping."

Dario gestured at the rather tired looking lawns they passed. "I take it you don't do too much work in Crows Landing?"

"More now that all the development's come to town, but yeah,

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most of my work's always been more rural. Places people from LA or the Bay buy up to get some land away from the city."

Dario snorted. "It wasn't too long ago when people were fleeing to the city. Nobody lived out here unless they absolutely had to."

The look Shawn shot him as they turned the corner was more than a little curious. "You liked it enough to come back."

"To work. I'm not at all picky about where I work. But I won't be buying a house here any time soon."

"What about the friends you were interested in finding? Have you had any luck with that, yet?"

"No, not yet. But maybe you can help with that. Do you remember Reverend Dallas Waters?"

They came to a stop in front of a narrow, glass-fronted building, and Dario stepped back as Shawn caught the door and held it open for him. "Wow, that's a name I haven't heard in a long time. You were here when he was?"

"Yeah. For a few months in '79. Which makes me sound as old as I feel."

Shawn chuckled. "You're hardly old."

The Blue Goose was decorated in shabby chic with traditional vinyl booths and checkered floor, though Dario suspected it wasn't so much intentional as a result of time. Though a sign said to wait for a hostess to be seated, Shawn walked straight past it for an empty booth as far from the front door as possible.

Shawn's shoulders looked even wider in the small booth. He turned the plastic cup in front of him over, his fingers long and rough on the red plastic. Dario didn't know why he was squirreling away every little detail. Maybe because pleasant things never lasted for long in Crows Landing.

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“So, you knew Reverend Waters then?”

“Yeah, anybody around here over the age of thirty who goes to church probably did. He passed away in '84. Lung cancer.”

“Oh.” To Dario’s surprise, tears stung the back of his eyes. He hadn’t seen or spoken to the man in thirty years, but the news was still like a blow to his chest. He blinked quickly and coughed to clear his throat. “That’s a shame. Not a big surprise, though. Not with the way he smoked.”

“He preached all the way to the end. Even when his son came back and tried to get him to stop. Nothing could keep Reverend Waters from sharing his God.”

A fist closed around his chest. “Did you know Billy Ray?”

Shawn snapped his fingers. “Billy Ray. That was his name. I couldn’t remember it.” He paused as a waitress as timeworn as the décor came over and filled their water glasses. Before she could ask what they wanted, he plucked two of the menus from where they were tucked behind the napkin dispenser against the wall and handed one over to Dario. “No, I didn’t know him. At least, not very well. He didn’t stick around for very long after his dad died.” He disappeared behind the tall menu. “Not that I can blame him.”

“Yeah, I guess I can’t really blame him, either.” Dario skimmed the menu’s offerings then tossed it aside. His appetite was gone, and with it, any particular interest in the stained pages. He doubted Shawn would know of a forwarding address. Reverend Peck might have some idea, but Dario wasn’t a betting man by nature, and he wouldn’t put any money on that. “But a part of me still thought he might be around.”

Silence passed for several moments as Shawn perused the menu. When he replaced it, his gaze was thoughtful. “Were you two friends? I would’ve thought he was a lot older than you.”

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“Oh, sure. Billy Ray only had three years on me. We were fast friends.”

A new light appeared in Shawn's eye, something that hadn't been there before. “He tried filling in for his dad, you know. There at the end, and after. Reverend's voice was really bad. It used to scare a lot of the younger kids, but he didn't seem to give any care to it. His son did, though. You probably would've liked hearing him preach.”

“I have,” Dario murmured, his mind drifting to the rise and fall of Billy Ray's voice. He understood the power of rhythm and tone, regardless of the words he chose. Maybe it was something he learned, or maybe it was just an innate part of himself, but he could reach into a person, tapping into their thoughts and feelings. “Though not in any church.”

The waitress returned then, pen poised over her pad.

“I'll have the marinated turkey dinner, please.” Shawn looked expectantly at Dario. “Anything sound good to you?”

“I'll have the same. Thanks.” Once she was gone, Shawn lifted his brow. Dario smiled in response. “I did come here to try the turkey dinner, after all.”

“Who else did you want to look up? Maybe I can help you out.”

“Thanks, but...I didn't exactly have any other friends around here. Just Billy Ray.”

“That's a shame.” He looked like he actually meant it, too. “Though I understand a little bit about that.”

“Do you?” Dario doubted he really understood, if only because Shawn couldn't know what it was like to be an itinerant. “You don't fit in well around here?”

“Not really, no. Well, I've got my family and all, but they don't

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really count. I don't even sit with them in church anymore."

"So why haven't you gone off for parts unknown? You'd probably be happier for it."

Shawn shrugged, slowly peeling away the paper wrapping on his straw. "I've got steady work around here, got my own place. People don't bother me much, so it just seemed like more work than it was worth to pick up and leave."

"If you can't pick up and move with an hour's notice, then you're doing something wrong," Dario said automatically, then grimaced. "Sorry, channeling my dad there."

"You must have moved around a lot."

Dario sipped from his water, wetting his dry lips and even dryer tongue. It was just a part of his life, a part of who he was, and nothing to be ashamed of. But he still burned with embarrassment every time he had to confess the facts of his childhood. "My parents were itinerants, and since I'm a sub-contractor, I've never been tied to any one place."

There wasn't a trace of judgment on Shawn's face. Rather, his eyes brightened, and his smile returned. "What's the most interesting place you've ever been?"

Dario thought Shawn probably wanted to hear something exotic and romantic. Something that could take his breath away. But there was nothing exotic or romantic about fields of lettuce, or strip malls in suburbia.

"San Francisco is always beautiful. I spent a year in New York, but I thought it was too claustrophobic. Lots of work, of course, but...everybody lives on top of each other back east. I did love Phoenix. It's beautiful and the most agriculture you'll ever see is somebody's vegetable garden."

"I don't think I could live somewhere I didn't have room to

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move around,” Shawn mused. “I need to be outside too much.” He rubbed at a fading scratch on the back of his hand. “I’ve always wondered what it might be like to live up north. Someplace like Wyoming and Montana, where they actually get a real winter.”

“Oh, God, you don’t want that. The worst year of my life, we were trapped in Idaho. We had been up there for the potatoes and I don’t remember, I guess we didn’t get on the road in time. We were basically renting what remained of a barn, and I didn’t think it was possible to be that cold and survive it.” Dario shuddered at the memory. “That was another reason I needed to get out of New York. Too damned cold.”

“Well, you certainly don’t have to worry about that here.” His head cocked in curiosity. “Where are you staying? At the motel?”

“Yep. It’s pretty close to the site, and much easier than trying to find a place around here to rent.”

“Well, if you were ever going stir-crazy there...” Shawn pushed the shreds of his straw wrapper away and finally dropped the straw in the glass, his gaze anywhere but at Dario. “I’ve got a great widescreen. Saved up for months to get it. If you get tired of that little set you’ve got at the motel, you can always come over and watch mine.”

“Thank you. That’s very...kind.” Dario wasn’t in the habit of watching television, and didn’t understand the appeal of an expensive widescreen, but that hardly mattered. He couldn’t remember the last time anybody invited him into their home just to keep him company. Just to be nice. Even when he was with Ruby, he had been lonely. Starved for a connection, an attraction, that they simply didn’t share. Not that he necessarily shared any sort of connection or attraction with Shawn. He was just a nice guy, trying to be friendly. “Where do you live? Here in town?”



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Shawn shook his head. “No, out east of town, off Morris Road. The house isn’t much, but I’ve got a couple acres all to myself. It’s nice. Quiet. Plenty of space for a man to forget about the rest of the world sometimes.”

“There’s not much to get away from around here, I’d imagine. Still...” Dario grinned. “There’s probably not that much to stick around for, either.”

“Consider it a standing invitation, then.” The way he smiled shouldn’t have been so appealing, but it had a way of enticing Dario to forget why he’d come to Crows Landing for just a few minutes. “I’m not a bad cook, either. When you’re tired of turkey dinners and chili fries.”

“Oh, you’ve said the magic words. I can live without television, but I never, ever refuse a home cooked meal. Do you usually invite strangers to your home for dinner?”

“No, you’d be the first. But maybe by the time you come on out, we won’t be strangers anymore.”

“No, we’ll at least be acquaintances by the time we finish up lunch.”

Shawn’s answering smile warmed him straight through. And it didn’t even occur to him to try to compare it to Billy Ray’s.

## CHAPTER 3

Dario quite liked his job. Mainly because he had chosen it himself, and so he always felt like he had the option to unchoose it, and find something else to do with his time. As a child, he had never considered being a glazier at all, until he met a journeyman in Fresno. He had been just shy of eighteen, and Tomas had been patient with him, remarkably kind, and even sympathetic when he realized that without some sort of intervention or aid, Dario would be moving from town to town for the rest of his life—and that life would be considerably shortened by the strain the work placed on his body. When he offered to make Dario his apprentice, Dario didn't even have to think twice. He had accepted with a gratefulness that bordered on worshipful.

He stayed with Tomas until he was twenty-five. The house and

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wife followed in quick succession after that. Twenty-one years later, Dario couldn't remember if he had even wanted a house or a wife, but it seemed like the natural progression at the time. But standing still for too long made him itch. He had heard the expression *itchy feet*, but he never realized it was the literal truth until his shoes felt too tight, and he fidgeted constantly, trying to shake the feeling of an army of ants marching down his instep.

That need to keep moving had faded with time, though Dario still found himself looking out his window if he stayed in one place for too long, wondering what else was out there, realizing he had nothing to miss when he left it behind.

Dario quickly fell into a routine in Crows Landing. By the end of his first week there, his voice was rusty for lack of use, and his stomach was in complete rebellion after three days of chili fries and two days of very unimpressive nachos. He went back to the bar every night after work because he wanted to run into Shawn again, but Shawn was a no-show. That, or Dario simply kept missing him. By Friday night, Dario knew two facts. First, he couldn't eat at the bar again and keep his sanity. Second, he really wanted to hear Shawn's voice. It was only due to the combined force of those two facts that he hopped in his truck and drove east on Morris Road, looking for the house that matched Shawn's description.

It wasn't hard. Farmland stretched along either side, broken only by the occasional building. Shawn's low-slung ranch broke up the monotony, and he pulled into the long, winding driveway, bouncing along until he came to a stop behind Shawn's dusty pickup. Shawn had been right. The house itself wasn't very remarkable, with faded pale siding and black shutters. But the yard was another matter. He'd turned that into its own haven, with a

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cobbled path leading to the front door, carefully planted shrubbery that took advantage of the low water/high heat combination of the area, and the occasional vivid bloom of an unexpected flower.

Dario climbed out of his truck and looked around. A gazebo was nestled out of view from the road, with a long swing coaxing any and all nearer. It would offer blessed shade from the unforgiving sun, without sacrificing the view.

The front door slammed. “You found it okay,” Shawn called out from the narrow porch.

“I did. I hope you don’t mind me showing up here unannounced, but I didn’t have your number.”

“No, no, that’s fine. I guess I should’ve thought of that when I made the invitation.” He held the door opened and swept an arm toward the house. “Come on in.”

“Thanks.”

Dario stepped into Shawn’s house with a heavy sense of familiarity. Not because he had ever been there before—as far as he knew the house hadn’t even been standing thirty years ago—but because he had already spent several hours with Shawn. And the man’s personality informed every decision, every aspect, of his home. He couldn’t help but smile when he saw that the widescreen television held an obvious place of honor in the living room.

“This is a nice place.”

Shawn shut the door behind him, locking in the artificially cooled air. “Thanks.” He took several steps toward an entrance that clearly took him to the rear of the house and then hesitated. “You want a beer? I haven’t actually started dinner yet. I was just going to throw together some spaghetti, but if you want something else, I can probably dig something up.”

Shawn could have offered anything for dinner, and Dario

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would have happily accepted it. Partially because he was happy to see Shawn, and partially because that was how Dario had been raised. “Beer and spaghetti both sound great. I’m not putting you out or anything, am I?”

“Oh, no, I always make a ton.” He headed back to the kitchen, motioning for Dario to follow. “I can freeze it for later when I don’t feel like cooking then.”

The kitchen was much like the rest of the house—simple, but lived in. Pots of fresh herbs were on the long window sill behind the sink and more greenery was scattered throughout the room. Shawn wasn’t just into being outdoors. His thing was obviously for plants, no matter where they were.

Shawn retrieved a beer from the fridge and popped it open, handing it over before picking up a half-empty bottle already sitting on the counter. “I’m actually really glad you stopped by. I wasn’t sure if you were just being nice about my offer or not.”

Dario took a long drink before answering. “No, I thought about coming over earlier this week, especially after...well, I had hoped to see you at the bar again. But I figured it would be better to come by when I didn’t have to be up at five the next morning.”

“This *is* better.” Shawn didn’t waste any time getting out the ingredients for supper, rooting around in cupboards for pans and pasta as he spoke. “We don’t have to worry about getting cut off, and we don’t have to put up with all the noise or nosy waitresses interrupting us all night.”

Mention of a nosy waitress brought her warning back to mind. What had she said? That Shawn was *weird*. Dario didn’t understand that, because Shawn seemed completely normal. He apparently had the impulse to feed strangers, but that wasn’t a problem for Dario. Nothing about his house screamed a warning.

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Plus, Dario just felt at ease when he was in the other man's presence.

"The lack of noise is a plus. As for nosy waitresses...do you two have a history or something?"

Water rushed into the large pot as Shawn started to fill it. "Not a history, not really. I mean, I've known Chrissy most of her life. But she's a lot like a lot of the rest of this town. They have certain ideas on what they expect from people who stick around. I just never matched any of those."

"What sort of ideas, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Like getting married and having kids." Though his back was to Dario, there was an obvious tension in Shawn's voice. "That isn't ever going to happen with me."

Some instinct kept Dario from barreling forward with the next obvious question. Didn't fit in well in a small town, with obvious distance between himself and his family, and no prospects for a family despite a good job and a nice home. There seemed to be only one obvious conclusion to be drawn, and Dario didn't know quite how he felt about that. Definitely unnerved. And more than a little intrigued.

"At one point, did Chrissy maybe hope it would happen between you and her?"

The casual lift of a shoulder. "There's no telling with Chrissy. Maybe. A long time ago before she realized it was never going to happen. Don't get me wrong, she's nice enough. Just..." The rest of it trailed off, words unavailable. Or perhaps, unnecessary.

"For what it's worth, you're not missing out on much. I've been married once and almost married a couple of times, and I wouldn't recommend it."

"Oh?" When Shawn turned back to set the pot on the stove, his

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brows were drawn into a tight frown. “How come it never stuck with you? All your moving around?”

“No. Yes. Well, yes, but not in the way you probably think.” Dario waved his hand. “It’s...complicated or something. I always felt like I needed a home base, you know? I...I used to fantasize about having a nice house, not unlike this one. Some place solid. Some place that was mine. Something I’ve never had before in my life. And a wife naturally fits in that sort of fantasy.”

“Yeah. I can see that. Well, for others, anyway.” With the water going, he went back to the refrigerator. “It’s weird, isn’t it? I’ve always wondered what it’s like to move out of here, move around and see more of this world, while you just want to settle down. Must be that saying, the grass is always greener, or something like that.”

“I don’t think I really want to settle down,” Dario admitted softly. “At least, not the way I’ve always thought I was supposed to.”

Shawn jerked, dropping two of the tomatoes he’d pulled out of the crisper. One broke with a splat on the tiled floor. “Damn it,” he muttered. Straightening, he set the other vegetables onto the counter and went back to the sink. He didn’t say a word while he wet a rag, or wiped the mess up. Not until he’d rinsed the washrag under the tap. “So. Does that mean you know what it is you do want, or are you still trying to figure it out?”

“Still trying to figure it out.” He took another swallow from his beer. It wasn’t the alcohol loosening his tongue. He hadn’t consumed enough for that. Shawn was listening to him like he actually cared about what Dario had to say. “Maybe that’s why I was looking for Billy Ray.”

Shawn picked up his beer and drained the rest of the bottle.

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“I’ve been thinking about him, ever since you mentioned you two were friends. Remembering more of the details. Like his hair. How it was so blond, it looked white. Before he left town the first time, I was half-convinced he was an angel.” He smiled ruefully as he pulled out a cutting board. “The things you believe when you’re six, huh?”

Dario closed his eyes. White-blond hair hanging over baby blues, a smile that promised both sin and grace, and hands that were always clean, always smooth. He very well could have been an angel. Except when he whispered in Dario’s ear. No angel could talk like that. No angel would know those words, would urge him to keep his eyes closed, would know how to drop his tone to the very level that vibrated through his bones.

“Someday, I might tell you about the things you believe when you’re sixteen.”

“Someday, I hope I get the chance to hear it.”

When Dario opened his eyes again, Shawn’s head was bent, his knife flying over the green peppers he was chopping up. His hair was blond, too, though Dario didn’t think any amount of exposure to the sun would turn it white. This was warm honey, his shaded jaw slightly darker. His cheeks were freshly red from the sun, and there were new grazes along his knuckles. Shawn could never be thought of as an angel. He was too closely bound to the earth.

“You might. Someday.” He tapped his bottle. “Do you have another one of these?”

“Sure.”

Another trip to the refrigerator came with two more beers. When Shawn held it out, their fingers touched, his warm, Shawn’s icy cold. Shawn’s nostrils flared, and his eyes jumped away, though it took a few seconds more for his hand to retreat as well.



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“Shawn, I think...” Dario’s voice faded. He didn’t know what he thought. Shawn might have been gay. Shawn might have been attracted to him. Shawn might even want Dario to stay awhile after dinner. He didn’t want to be caught flat-footed, and he didn’t know how to ask. “I was engaged. I mean, last week. Before I came out here.”

“But you’re not now.” Shawn didn’t set down his drink. He brought it to his lips and downed half the bottle, licking his lips to catch a stray drop. “Because you wanted to find Billy Ray. And instead, I found you.”

“You’re right on both counts.” Dario took a deep drink, mainly for something to do. “I haven’t decided yet how I feel about that.”

“Except you showed up on my front door.” He came around the edge of the counter until he stood directly in front of Dario. Slowly, he folded his hand over Dario’s on the bottle and guided it downward. “So maybe you do know.”

Dario knew he could pull away from Shawn’s touch. The younger man was a bit broader than him, but not so strong Dario couldn’t break free. Of course, Shawn wasn’t using his strength to hold Dario in place. Something about the texture of his skin, and the weight of his fingers, kept Dario in place.

“I am glad you found me.”

The V-neck T-shirt Shawn wore revealed the steady throb at the base of his neck. Under Dario’s gaze, it quickened, its hypnotic pace an echo of something familiar, something long missed. Muscles worked beneath his tanned skin, and Dario’s throat tightened with every inch Shawn’s hand guided his to the counter. Together, they put down the beer bottle, but its absence didn’t cleave their hold. If anything, it took away Shawn’s excuse not to entangle their fingers further, stepping closer until they almost—

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but not quite—touched.

“If you hadn’t shown up, I would’ve come looking for you.” His breath was slightly sweet, fanning gently across Dario’s chin. “Because I can always use a friend.”

Billy Ray had once stood that close to him, invading his personal space, overwhelming him with the scent of sunshine and sweat. Dario had been confused then, but excited, and almost immediately addicted to the rush of physical contact, his ears buzzing and straining for any warning of interlopers. That same rush overtook him now, and Shawn wasn’t even touching him. If he didn’t want Shawn to touch him, that was the moment to say something. He couldn’t ignore the reality, or pretend he didn’t understand. He squeezed Shawn’s strange fingers—they were so much larger than Ruby’s, and rougher, too.

“You don’t have any friends around here?”

A small shake of his head. “They always leave.”

So many different emotions whispered through those three simple words. Melancholy. Longing. Need. Desire. Dario understood each on its own. He understood them even better bundled together like that.

The roar of his blood deafened him to anything else Shawn might have said. Shawn’s other hand came between their bodies, touching the faded hem of Dario’s shirt, around his hip, back again, no contact of skin to skin but it burned through his muscles just the same. Thick lashes ducked, unmistakably fixing on Dario’s mouth.

The kiss was inevitable. The fact that it was practically tender was almost harder to take than the kiss itself.

The contact threw Dario thirty years into the past, and for a moment, he felt Billy Ray’s mouth. The only other man who had

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ever kissed him. While Bible verses and hymns swirled around his mind and on Billy Ray's breath, they had kissed in the dark, as far away from their families as they could get. But his mind only lingered on Billy Ray for a moment. Because now it was Shawn's firm lips, and the hint of Shawn's tongue against his mouth, and the soft sound of Shawn's sigh. He closed his other hand in Shawn's shirt, fisting the material to hold him close as he parted his lips. He didn't know if he needed the contact, or if he merely craved it. Either way, he didn't want Shawn to end it.

A whimper preceded the harder press of Shawn's mouth, the probe of a tongue hungry for what Dario wanted to give. Shawn pushed his hand beneath Dario's shirt to more firmly grasp his hip. When the new alignment rubbed cock to covered cock, Dario groaned at the thrill of knowing he was the reason for Shawn's arousal.

Shawn changed angles, deepening the kiss with the scrape of whiskers and the stab of his tongue. The heat engulfed Dario and threatened to consume him, just from the power of desire come to fruition. He leaned against the edge of the counter to borrow from its strength, but Shawn added to it by sliding his grip farther around his body, finding the taut flesh of his ass and cupping it instead.

Dario had spent so many hours of his life daydreaming and fantasizing of being in just that position. Trapped, held, devoured. It was always Billy Ray's lips and hands, his slight body, but Dario realized there was nothing necessary about Billy Ray. Not then and there, in Shawn's kitchen. It was difficult to dwell on the past anyway while Shawn plunged his tongue into Dario's mouth, and his body covered his. When they broke apart, Dario's chest burned and his blood ran hot and near the surface of his skin. He

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immediately missed Shawn's taste, and he acted without thought, pressing his face to Shawn's throat, inhaling deeply, and kissing a path back to Shawn's lips.

The fresh attack defeated whatever restraints Shawn had placed upon his desire. His fingers dug into Dario's ass, dangerously close to the crease and the promise of more, while his teeth joined the onslaught at his mouth, nipping at lip and tongue to encourage Dario to do the same. He'd released his hold on maintaining the distance between them, as well. In order to fully embrace Dario in his arms, Shawn bent Dario's behind his back, using their joined hands as leverage. Their chests molded together, and the sudden added heat sent a new throb to Dario's cock.

Dario wanted to tear at Shawn's shirt and finally reveal the body he could feel beneath the material. He felt the perfectly defined ridges of muscle in his chest and back, saw them when Shawn flexed his arms. His body was hard, like it had been carved from stone, and Dario just knew that it would all be the same, even brown, baked by too many hours in the sun. Dario didn't believe he had planned for any of this to happen, but it seemed inevitable. There was nobody around for miles, and no other sounds except the crickets chirping their nightly chorus. There was absolutely nothing to stop Dario from grinding his erection against Shawn's, or moaning for more when Shawn caught his lips with perfect teeth.

Callused fingers slipped inside the back of his jeans. "I want to touch you without these in the way," Shawn rasped.

Dario was barely aware of the pants, or anything that wasn't Shawn's mouth. "Then get them off. Please."

Shawn untangled their hands, pulling away the necessary inches to find the button of Dario's fly. The kisses didn't stop

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while he freed it, nor while he yanked the zipper, but when his hands shoved inside the material to grab both jeans and underwear, he tore away, gasping for breath, and pushed them down.

Dario clutched at his shoulders, already missing the pressure of his body against him, but Shawn slipped through his grasp, following the path of Dario's clothes to the floor. He ended on his knees, his head level with Dario's groin. Hot breath washed over his aching cock, and he looked down to see Shawn watching him through his thick lashes. Understanding passed between them at that moment, and he watched, his throat tight, his chest tighter, as Shawn tilted his head and skimmed his lips up the length of his shaft.

One hand remained on Shawn's shoulder, and the other went to brace himself against the counter. Shawn's hair was golden in the kitchen's dim light, and Dario couldn't stop staring at the rich color. It anchored him as Shawn repeated the slight caress again and again. It wasn't quite a kiss. It was more than a kiss. His flesh throbbed and his skin stretched so tight he thought it might split open. When Shawn dragged his mouth up to the crown, his tongue darted out, almost playfully. Dario was sure he had never felt anything so hot in his life. The brief touch burned him.

The soft plop of fabric with the muted clink of his belt startled him into realizing Shawn had managed to get his jeans and his shoes off without Dario even noticing. He was too focused on the sensations arcing through his cock, down his thighs, into his gut, threatening to make his knees buckle. Shawn smoothed his hands up the front of his legs, hard enough for it not to tickle, but the closer he got to Dario's balls, the harder it got not to beg for more.

Shawn ended with his broad, powerful hands on Dario's hips. The tips of his thumbs stroked along the dark hair at the base of his

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cock, in tandem with the up and down of Shawn's lips. When Shawn stopped again to lick across the glistening slit, so did his hands, fingers digging in just as his tongue dug for the pre-come.

Dario might have remained motionless, breathing hard, staring like he was trying to burn a hole into the top of Shawn's head, but the need to touch him back finally spurred him to move. He ran his fingers through Shawn's hair, stroking him lightly, testing his reaction. Shawn glanced up once, but his attention remained on Dario's shaft. He cupped the side of his face, caressing the whisker covered cheek, delighted by the rough texture against his thumb.

His exploration came to a sudden stop when Shawn closed his lips around Dario's crown, sucking it into his mouth. Dario's knees nearly buckled, his muscles turning weak, and he might have fallen except for Shawn's hands, still spanning Dario's hips, holding him against the counter.

Though he kept expecting it to happen, Shawn didn't take more of Dario's length into his mouth, seemingly content to suckle at the head. His tongue swirled around the ridge, maddeningly thorough in every sweep, only to occasionally break free of the tempo to chase across the slit for more of the fluid dripping from his cock. The pressure he maintained was even more intoxicating. He sucked hard enough to make the lack of heat around his shaft unnoticeable. Dario didn't even give it a second thought while he drowned in the ecstasy Shawn created.

He was lost enough not to notice when one of Shawn's hands strayed. He only snapped from the fire consuming his crown at the light squeeze of rough fingers on his balls.

"God, Shawn, I..." He gulped for breath, swallowing the words. He didn't know what to think of any of this, except he couldn't remember the last time anything had felt so perfect. But

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he already wanted more from Shawn, and not just more of his mouth. Dario was almost desperate to feel Shawn's body against him, his solid chest pressed to Dario's back.

Shawn released him, though when he sat back on his heels and gazed up at him with faint lines between his brows, his hand continued to massage Dario's sac. "What? Do you want me to stop?"

Dario recognized the slightly quizzical look on Shawn's face. Except, usually it was feminine brows pulled into a question, and a feminine mouth asking the bewildered question. For the first time in his life, he meant it when he said quickly, "No, no, I don't want you to stop. I want more of you."

The frown smoothed into a smile. With a grace that belied his size, Shawn rose to his feet again, pinning Dario against the counter with his clothed body.

"I should get undressed, too, then." He nipped almost playfully at Dario's lips. "Unless you'd like to do it for me. I can promise I'll more than make it up to you."

Dario didn't need any further coaxing. His hands were already traveling up Shawn's chest, gathering up the material as he went. Shawn was maybe only an inch taller than him, but he felt much bigger than that. Or, rather, Dario felt much smaller. Every newly exposed inch of skin made Dario's mouth water. He managed to get the shirt over Shawn's head and tossed to the floor before he gave in to the urge to nibble at the salty skin. With his mouth attached to Shawn's chest, he began unbuttoning his pants.

His estimations on Shawn's body hadn't been generous enough. There wasn't an ounce of fat on the man, nothing soft and pliable to make him forget just who it was he touched. Hair darker than what was on his head curled around his flat, succulent nipples,

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narrowing into a taut line that traveled straight to his stiff cock.

He grasped it before the jeans were even off, unable to resist its heat, its hardness. The shaft throbbed against his palm, and when he stroked it once, the muscles in Shawn's ridged abdominals twitched against his mouth.

"Jesus, yeah, just like that," Shawn encouraged. His hands molded over Dario's shoulders, onto his chest, to tweak his nipples. "I hope you want to be fucked. It's been too long since I've wanted someone as much as I want you."

A thrill raced down his spine, but Dario didn't know what to make of it. For as much excitement as he felt, there was a little bit of fear, too. Was he *really* going to do this? Was he really going to let somebody other than Billy Ray take him? Standing naked in a near stranger's kitchen seemed to be a great way to get to some basic truths. Like the fact that a part of him had always been faithful to the memory of the boy he had loved.

"I do want that. But it's been a long, long time since..."

His hesitation gave Shawn a respite to haul Dario to his feet. "So I'll just be extra careful." He cupped the back of Dario's head and held him still as he fused their mouths together for a long, sweeping kiss, long enough for Dario's legs to start to feel weak again. "I know how to make it feel good for you. Better than good. All you have to do is trust me."

Dario wasn't sure if trust really had anything to do with it at that point. He needed Shawn. At that point, he couldn't walk away or deny him. "I trust you. I want...everything you want."

Shawn's slow smile did just as much to help put Dario at ease as the careful massage of his nape did. He kicked off his jeans the rest of the way before separating, then took Dario's hand to lead him out of the kitchen.



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His heart thumped. He was really doing this. Walking through the wide hallway. Watching the tiny dimples at the top of Shawn's firm ass. Stepping into a dark room that was quickly flooded with light when Shawn flipped a switch on the wall.

The room was clean and simple, the queen-sized bed dominating its center. Shawn didn't automatically lead him toward it, thankfully. He stood in front of Dario and grasped both of their cocks in a single grip, watching Dario carefully for any sign of discomfort.

The bed was something new. He didn't even have a proper bed when he knew Billy Ray. They had settled for the back of the pickup truck, or a pile of hay behind the barn, or the soft grass of an open field. Dario wouldn't say that he didn't want to use the bed, but the sight of it still brought him up short. It made the whole thing more concrete. Even as Shawn squeezed his cock, he couldn't take his attention away from the bed.

Shawn's gaze followed his. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just so...normal."

The smile returned. "I think you might be the first person to ever call me normal."

"You're pretty normal from where I'm standing." Dario smoothed his palm down Shawn's arm. Normal probably wasn't the right word, either. "And it's not what I'm used to. But I like it."

"Good." Using his hold on their cocks, he backed up slowly toward the bed. "I like you, Dario. I want this to be great for both of us."

When Shawn came to a stop, he wrapped his other arm around Dario's shoulders and pulled him into another long, searching kiss. He thought he could become addicted to the way Shawn kissed. It was utterly intoxicating. He didn't hold a single piece of himself

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back. It felt like he kissed with his entire body, and by the time they sank to the mattress, any misgivings or hesitation had completely flown from Dario's mind.

The bed gave Shawn freedoms he hadn't taken in the kitchen—liberty to smooth his hand down Dario's flank, to rub their cocks together until he had no idea whose pre-come coated his shaft, to nudge his knee between Dario's thighs to better expose his balls. Each time Dario thought he'd adapted to the new sensation, Shawn added something new, something exciting, to arouse his body even further.

Dario followed Shawn's example, taking the liberty to explore Shawn's body. Every touch revealed a new surprise. It wasn't because he didn't have much experience to compare the situation to. Every surprise was purely a result of Shawn's unique response, his smooth skin, his unbelievable body. He became intimately acquainted with Shawn's throat and chest, shuddering as Shawn touched him in turn.

Gradually, he found himself on his back, the soft comforter cushioning him against Shawn's weight. He had no voice to question it. Shawn kissed him with a fierce abandon that stole breath, thought, will. His hands became stronger, pushing him into the mattress, probing behind his balls, taking what he clearly wanted, what Dario wanted to give.

Dario didn't suspect what Shawn had planned until he was more fully pinned beneath the other man's body, his legs spread. Shawn teased his hole with the tip of one finger, circling it and pressing inward, giving the slightest hint of what was to come. Dario pulled away from a hard kiss long enough to gasp, "Like this?"

Confusion flashed behind Shawn's eyes. "How else?"

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“He always...I’m used to it being from behind. You surprised me.”

Shawn’s hand retreated to come forward and skim along Dario’s cock. “I prefer it this way, but if you want something different...”

Dario knew Shawn meant it. If he said he did want to be facing the bed, Shawn would agree, regardless of his preferences. Then he could stare down at the strange bed and pretend it was grass. Pretend it was Billy Ray behind him, with his white hair. Pretend to capture a little bit of what he had come to Crows Landing to find. He could get that, if he wanted it. But that realization brought another.

“No. No, I want you.”

A pleased smile replaced the confusion, genuine surprise at Dario’s declaration in his eyes. The kiss that came next was softer than its predecessors, but deeper in intent, sending quivers all the way to Dario’s soles. He widened his legs before Shawn could ask for entry again, and hooked his heels around the back of Shawn’s thighs.

The unspoken invitation brought a groan from Shawn’s chest. “I should get the stuff before I forget myself,” he murmured.

Instead of releasing him, Dario tightened his legs. “Don’t stop.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” But his fingers kept moving, coaxing the tight outer ring to relax enough for one to push in all the way past the second knuckle. “I made you a promise.”

It always hurt. Eventually, that burn would turn into something else, but Dario wasn’t going to hold Shawn to a promise he couldn’t possibly keep. “It’ll be fine.”

“I’ll make it better than fine.” He nuzzled Dario’s throat, licking at his Adam’s apple, nibbling down the center of his chest.

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His body slid down, too, his cock bumping against Dario's sac as he descended. "But I won't stop."

When Shawn's mouth reached his groin, Dario braced himself for the soft heat of his mouth on his cock once again. Shawn did lick him and skim smooth lips over his crown, but he didn't linger there. Instead, he moved lower, his whiskers catching against Dario's sensitive skin as he pushed his legs wider. Dario didn't know what to expect. He didn't even know he should be expecting something. Until he felt Shawn's tongue flicking over his hole, licking the skin he had just been teasing with his finger.

Dario opened his mouth to ask what Shawn was doing. But the answer to that was obvious, and Dario didn't want to waste time talking. Especially since Shawn was stealing his breath from him.

Strong hands braced against his thighs, holding them up, holding them apart, holding him open enough for Shawn to explore every inch of skin normally hidden away. Dario's cock lay heavy and throbbing against his stomach, and his balls ached. Shawn traced his opening in endless circles, the air cool against his wet skin. Occasionally, teeth nipped at his flesh, but then Shawn would drag his tongue over the sore spot, and Dario would forget anything but the pleasure spiraling through his midsection.

It did more than spiral when Shawn bypassed licking him for digging his fingers into Dario's ass, pulling his cheeks even farther apart, and sinking his tongue deep inside his hole.

Dario's eyes rolled back, and pleasure he had never even conceived of rolled through him. Every muscle clenched, his stomach and groin tightening until he thought he couldn't take it anymore. Even then, though, he didn't voice a hint of protest. He couldn't do anything that might make Shawn stop. His tongue was so soft, so hot, sliding against nerves that hadn't been touched in

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years and were all the more sensitive for it.

Small, hungry sounds began to join each deliberate thrust. They reverberated into Dario's body, until his balls throbbed in time with them. One hand fisted the blanket at his side, but his other went straight to his cock, pulling at the length with more strength than he normally used. He almost thought he could come just from this, and had to squeeze against the crown to hold the sensations at bay.

He cried out when Shawn's mouth disappeared, only to choke it back when Shawn replaced his tongue with three long fingers.

"You're so tight." Shawn twisted his wrist, screwing his fingers in even deeper. "I'll probably bust as soon as I get in you."

"Me, too." Dario gasped. Shawn pumped his wrist, pushing his fingers even deeper into Dario's channel. He lifted his hips, pushing for more until the pressure was too much, then trying to twist away. Shawn ducked his head, capturing the tip of Dario's cock between his lips. His tongue fluttered over the skin, licking away the fresh pre-come. Dario tried to bite back his shout, but Shawn's tongue against his tender flesh was too much on top of everything else. "Please, Shawn."

"Okay."

He hadn't expected the soft agreement, but Shawn clearly wanted this as much as he did. His hand and mouth fell away, and he crawled up Dario's body until their eyes aligned again. Propping himself up on one knuckled fist, he reached between them to angle his cock down, blindly seeking out the hole he'd just abandoned. Dario spread his legs wider to help, but the first nudge against his opening was awkward and slightly painful, especially when Shawn pushed forward and the tip finally breached the tight ring.

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Dario was not prepared for that. Despite all of Shawn's effort, he was not prepared. Not for the pressure, or what way his flesh stretched to accommodate Shawn's shaft. He wasn't prepared for the weight of Shawn's body covering him, pinning him down. He pushed forward another inch, forcing himself deeper. Dario considered pushing him away and apologizing, explaining he really couldn't take this. Except, Shawn claimed another inch, and everything Dario should have said remained buried in his throat. He cupped the back of Shawn's head and dragged him forward until their mouths finally touched again.

It helped. It coaxed him to forget the momentary pain and get lost in the hot swelter of Shawn's skilled mouth. It gave him something to cling to when the tremors overwhelmed his muscles, and his arms and legs quivered with each encroaching inch. It reminded him of everything he had missed, and everything he had longed for, without eradicating the wistful memories of Billy Ray. Instead, Shawn shuttled them to the sidelines, demanding without uttering a word that Dario be in the moment and take what he offered. Because he was real, and he was here, and he wanted Dario as badly as Dario wanted him.

It was better like this, facing each other. Dario could kiss him, could watch the pleasure dancing in his eyes, cling to him, even exercise a bit of control over Shawn's rhythm. It just felt right, and Dario didn't want to lose that sense of being filled. Of being surrounded. Would he have felt like this with anybody else? Or did it need to be Shawn's muscled body, Shawn's tender mouth, Shawn's careful rhythm? Dario didn't know the answer to that question, and he wasn't sure it mattered.

When Shawn stopped moving, Dario knew he has fully sheathed. His body burned, but not just from the cock in his ass,

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from the heat pouring from Shawn's skin and the strain of his own muscles as he clung to Shawn's back. Sweat darkened the hair at Shawn's temples and gleamed along his jaw. Dario got a taste of it when Shawn bent to kiss and suck at his neck.

"Just give me a sec," Shawn murmured.

"You're not going to burst, are you?"

"Not yet. It's just...been a long time."

"For me, too." Dario released a shuddering breath. "I can't believe...this. I can't believe it."

"Believe it." The second he needed had passed, apparently, because he started to rock, sliding out of Dario's passage without losing the closeness of their upper bodies. Dario's trapped cock rubbed along Shawn's ridged stomach, the sweat and pre-come adding to the friction. "Even if I don't think I've ever felt anybody as good as you before."

Dario knew he had never felt anybody like Shawn. Even Billy Ray had never felt like this. He tightened his grip on Shawn, moaning with each soft thrust. The pain was completely forgotten. In fact, he couldn't remember ever feeling pain. Now all he felt was deep satisfaction. It rolled through his body and settled in his bones and made him ache for more. He remained still at first, letting Shawn move the way he wanted, but it didn't take long before he rose to meet each thrust.

"Yeah, just like that." Shawn's husky voice punctuated his hard strokes, any fears he might have had about harming Dario long gone. Dario hooked his legs again, and Shawn sank even deeper. Shudders rippled through him. "Oh, damn. Damn." He dropped his forehead to Dario's shoulder and pistoned even harder.

"Don't stop." He turned to skim his mouth across Shawn's temple. The taste of his sweat made Dario's cock twitch against

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Shawn's ridged stomach. By the time they finished, they would be drenched, trembling, and weak. The thought was like a fuse beneath his skin, sparking and burning. "Faster."

Shawn obliged without a word, with kisses along his collarbone, with shattering thrusts that tore into his ass. His free hand scratched along Dario's hip, but when Dario lifted to give him room to slide it beneath him, Shawn withdrew, forcing it between their bodies instead. His nails raked down Dario's shaft before he found a grip. Dario stifled his hiss of pain by sucking hard at Shawn's neck.

"When you come, I want to taste you." Shawn grunted between thrusts now, the sweat dripping onto Dario's cheek. "I would've swallowed if you'd let me blow you."

"Taste me. Anything...anything you like." It took everything he had to force the words out. He was so close. He closed his eyes for a moment, and a thousand broken images slashed through his mind. Grass, soil, hay, blue eyes, blue sky, pale skin, torn shirts. It all spiraled inside of him until it turned in a shapeless whirlwind. When he opened his eyes, Shawn's face was right above him, his full mouth parted and perfect. He groaned, capturing Shawn's lower lip as his balls pulled tight. The groan turned into a shout, barely muffled against Shawn's mouth and pleasure exploded through him.

His release didn't stop Shawn. Instead, it drove him harder, his teeth catching against Dario's lip as their kisses grew erratic. Dario tasted blood, but he didn't know if it was his or Shawn's. He didn't care. His senses were overwhelmed—the smell of his come, the taste of Shawn's sweat, the fire radiating through his veins. Shawn slammed into his clenching ass one final time before his body stiffened. His breath stopped. Dario felt every jerk of his cock,



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every blast coating his walls. And yet, in that moment, he still wanted more.

Shawn stopped moving, but Dario didn't let him go. He didn't want to lose the comforting weight from on top of him. He wanted to prolong that moment—the contact—for as long as he could. Even though he knew he couldn't prolong for very long at all. Maybe just seconds. Certainly no more than minutes.

Shawn eased back, but only enough to pull his sticky hand free. He turned away from Dario's mouth, and Dario opened his eyes in time to watch Shawn lick the come from his fingers.

"You weren't kidding?"

Shawn paused and smiled. "Does it bother you?"

"No. Just...surprises me. Like everything else."

"A good surprise, I hope."

"You've been a very good surprise."

The smile softened. "So have you." He shifted his weight. "I'm not crushing you, am I?"

"No." He absently ran his fingers up and down Shawn's ribs. "I'm fine. But...I think I smell something burning."

Shawn regarded him blankly for a moment, before his head snapped back to the door. "Damn it." He pushed up and pulled out, grimacing when Dario winced. "Sorry. That's the water for the spaghetti. I'll go take care of it." Come smeared over his stomach and cock, and as he stood, he grabbed a few Kleenex from the nightstand. "If you want to clean up, the bathroom's the next door down. You can help yourself to whatever you want."

"Thanks."

He rolled off the bed, but something all too familiar settled over him. Something that made his gut churn until he thought he was going to throw up. *Guilt* was the best word he could use, but

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that wasn't quite right. Every meeting with Billy Ray followed the same pattern. Anticipation, followed by excitement, then unbelievable pleasure, and finally, this strange heaviness. Regret was mixed in there, and more than a little bit of fear. He couldn't even stand to look at himself in the mirror while he washed the come and sweat from his stomach.

The soft touch along his hip startled him into dropping the washcloth. Shawn's hand came around and picked it up from the sink, resuming Dario's task as Shawn pressed gently into his back.

"I'd still like to fix you some dinner," Shawn said. "Do you want me to start it now, or do you want to shower first? Or we could just go back to bed."

His stomach growled at the mention of food, and Shawn's face was so open while he studied Dario in the mirror. "Why don't you do that while I shower?"

"We're probably more likely to eat that way," Shawn skimmed his free hand up to Dario's chest, toying with the hair. "Though I can't promise I'll be able to stop jumping you once we're done."

Dario smiled. "I wouldn't ask you to make that promise."

His instincts were shouting at him to get dressed and run to the safety of his motel room before anybody caught them. But nobody was going to catch them, and for once, Dario didn't want to worry about anything.

## CHAPTER 4

Shawn slept like the dead, his arm flung above his head on the pillow, and the sheet pulled down low around his hips. Dario was careful not to disrupt him when he got out of bed, but he let his gaze linger before going in search of his clothes. His body was immaculate, and now that Dario knew each inch of it, Shawn seemed even more perfect than before. His rumpled hair stuck up in all directions, and sleep took almost a decade from his face. Only a decade separated them, and yet, he seemed so much younger. He couldn't even believe that a man like Shawn would want anything to do with him.

He slipped from the bedroom and found his clothes tossed over the couch in the living room. He dressed with one eye on the bedroom door, waiting for Shawn to emerge. Waiting for Shawn to

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demand to know just where he thought he was going. The world was still dark, and he could easily stay in bed for another two hours, maybe even three. He could wake up slowly, with Shawn wrapped around him, and sleepily agree to a breakfast of pancakes and eggs. Shawn hadn't actually mentioned pancakes and eggs, but something told Dario the subject would come up if he stayed.

He wasn't going to stay. It would be harder to walk away if he let Shawn talk to him, or, God forbid, touch him.

The truck positively roared in the quiet morning, and Dario winced. He paused, waiting for Shawn to emerge, but he didn't. Without turning on his headlights, he backed out of the driveway and onto the empty road.

The longer Dario drove, the more cluttered his mind became. He could still taste Shawn on his tongue, but he could only see Billy Ray, head tilted, with a questioning look on his face. As if to ask just what he thought he was doing with Shawn, who was really no more than a stranger. Dario didn't have an answer. He had no idea what he was doing, or wasn't doing, or if he would do it again, or if he should have done it at all.

Or if he was just using Shawn to scratch an itch that had started three decades earlier.

The thought made Dario sick, but once it occurred to him, he couldn't dismiss it. Shawn didn't deserve to be used. But if God in His throne asked Dario if he had used the younger man to get his kicks, he wasn't sure he'd be able to deny it.

Sleep was an impossibility, so Dario didn't even try once he returned to his motel room. He sat on the bed with his back against the wall and the paper thin pillow resting over his lap. The television provided voices without content, and for once, it wasn't enough to trick him into believing he wasn't alone. There was only

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one person on the planet he could talk to, and she wasn't speaking to him.

Dario decided to call her anyway.

She picked up the phone as the answering machine clicked on. "Hello?" Ruby said, her voice heavy with sleep.

"Hey, it's me. Please don't hang up. Please."

He fully expected her to. He'd awakened her, he'd left her behind, he'd given her no reason to stay on the line.

Ruby sighed. "What do you want?"

"I've...I'm in the middle of a clusterfuck. I haven't been entirely honest with you, or with anybody, for that matter. Including myself. Now I think I need some help, and you're the closest thing to a friend I have right now."

"I'm the closest thing you have to a friend? That's kind of sad, Dario."

"Yeah, it kind of is." Dario looked up to the ceiling. It was easier to talk to her if he thought he was just talking to the wall. "I never mentioned it, but I was in Crows Landing before. I lived here for several months when I was sixteen. I had some...friends here. Well, one friend."

"Is that why you took this job?"

"Yes. I thought I could find him here. I probably should have known better, but his name is Billy Ray and I needed to find him. I...I was in love with him. I thought I might still be."

His declaration was met with silence. It didn't surprise him. He was more surprised she was still listening to him at all. But he'd needed to hear the words with his own ears, though they still seemed more than a little unreal.

"Him. This...Billy Ray." His name sounded like an epithet on her tongue. For her, it probably was. "You're in love with a guy?"

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Dario exhaled slowly. "Yes. I never told anybody. I thought if I got married, if I did everything I was supposed to, these feelings would go away. But it's been thirty years, and it hasn't worked."

"You've been trying to forget this guy for thirty years, and you're only now figuring out you can't?" She sounded more awake, though not necessarily better. "I'm sorry. I don't...this isn't how I saw my Saturday starting."

"I'm sorry, I didn't see this coming, either. I should have waited to call you. Or maybe I shouldn't have called you at all. I'm just...I'm confused. He's not here, and I've met somebody."

"Somebody. Are you confused because it's another woman and you thought you were in love with a guy? Or...because it's another guy, and...it's a guy?"

"It's a guy," Dario said softly. "Somebody from here, though I didn't know him before."

"Oh, Dario." Bedsprings squeaked. He envisioned her rolling over and cradling the phone in the curve of her neck and shoulder. He'd seen her do that once with a ridiculously early call from her mom. "I guess when you come out, you really come out, huh?"

Dario snorted. "Is that what I'm doing? I hadn't really thought about it like that."

"Did you do anything with this other guy? Wait. I'm not sure I want to hear the answer to that."

"That's why I called. I spent the night with him and I like him. Well, I think I like him. I'm worried that I just...I was just...fuck, Ruby, I don't know what I'm doing here."

"It sounds like you're doing just fine. Does he like you?" Her voice took a hard edge. "He didn't kick you out or something, did he?"

Dario smiled despite the fact that he wasn't in a smiling mood.

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“He didn’t kick me out. I left before he woke up. I was a little bit freaked. I didn’t know if I could handle waking up with him.”

“But you went there, thinking you were going to find that other guy. That Billy Ray. What’s the difference?”

“The difference is...Billy Ray was my first. He was the only guy I had ever been with. Not to go into too much detail, but it was always so rushed and I always felt so guilty. But it’s different when you’re in somebody’s house, in somebody’s bed. It’s more serious, isn’t it?”

“And traveling a thousand miles to find a guy you haven’t seen in thirty years, leaving me behind...you’re not trying to tell me that *isn’t* serious, are you?” She sighed. “I’m sorry, Dario. I guess I just don’t get it.”

“I don’t think I get it, either. I’m not going to find Billy Ray. Ever. And I don’t know how to let it...him...go.” Dario wiped his hand over his face. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have dumped all of this on you.”

“Well, you could’ve picked a better hour to call, that’s for sure.” But her tone was lighter than it had been. “Listen. I can’t tell you how to do any of that. I’m still trying to wrap myself around the fact that you like guys. But, you know, it seems to me you thought something was going to change for you by finding him. You *wanted* something to change. Is it worth it mooning after this Billy Ray for the rest of your life instead of maybe finding something real for you to hang onto?”

“I did want something to change, but it wasn’t you, Ruby. I hope you understand. I did...I did want to be the man you deserved. And you’re right about the other thing, too. I can’t let somebody else slip through my fingers because of a guy I knew when I was a kid.”

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"I just wish I'd been right about us."

"I know. Sometimes, I wish you were right about our relationship, too. I'll let you go now. Maybe you can get a few more hours of sleep."

"Somehow, I don't think that's going to happen. Bye, Dario."

\* \* \*

Dario didn't speak to Shawn at all on Saturday, which was probably for the best—though he wasn't sure. He missed Shawn. It was strange to miss a man he barely knew, one he had barely spent any time with, but it was undeniable. He didn't just miss having a mouth to kiss, he missed Shawn's mouth. He didn't want to just talk to anybody, he wanted to talk to Shawn. He missed Shawn's shy smile and the eager light in his eyes. He spent all of Saturday thinking about everything he liked about Shawn and not making the effort to call Shawn once.

He needed to get his mind straightened out. Ruby had been right. Ruby was almost always right. Except when she thought he would be a good husband for her, but he wasn't going to hold that against her. Pining after a guy he hadn't seen in thirty years was pretty ridiculous when there was finally somebody in his life who felt *right*.

Somebody he had only known for a week. Barely a week. He didn't even know if Shawn wanted a relationship, or a one-night stand, or a six-month fling. Or anything at all, really, since he might not be impressed with the fact that Dario had snuck away like a thief in the night. It never seemed this difficult when he was with women. With his first wife, Sarah, and with Ruby, he simply dated them until they made it clear they were looking for something more than just a boyfriend. Then he proposed. But none of the women in his life invoked Billy Ray's ghost, and dating



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them never constituted a major life change.

Ruby had said he was coming out. She seemed willing to accept who and what he was. Or maybe she had just been trying to get off the phone because it was six in the morning and he had sounded like a mad man.

He woke up early Sunday morning and considered simply staying in his room until it was time to go to work on Monday. But he still needed to speak to Reverend Peck, and if he could get the chance to see Shawn, he wanted to take it. Maybe it would be easier to get his own thoughts in order if he understood what Shawn was thinking.

Despite the early hour, the church door was unlocked. He founded Reverend Peck in the front pew, his head bowed. From the back, it looked like he was praying. Dario approached cautiously, wary of disturbing the man during a private moment with his God. But as he got closer, he realized that Peck was actually studying his Bible, a pencil in hand as he read the Gospel of John.

“Excuse me, Reverend?”

When that young face tilted up at him and smiled, Dario almost turned on his heel and ran. Peck hadn’t even been alive when he’d known Billy Ray. He presided in this small community where guys like Shawn were considered weird and locals felt it necessary to warn strangers about him. Would Peck see it on Dario? Would he be able to tell that he’d let another man take him to his bed and spend hours making him feel better than he’d ever felt in his life?

But the smile remained steady, the eyes friendly. If Peck saw anything, he kept that knowledge hidden.

“Yes? What can I do for you?”

Dario sat in the pew across the aisle, turning to face Peck. “I

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was wondering if you could help me out on my search for somebody I used to know. I lived here for a few months when I was a kid, and I made friends with Billy Ray Waters. I know that his father passed on, but I was wondering if you knew anything about Billy Ray?"

Peck frowned thoughtfully at the name's mention, but shook his head when Dario was done speaking. "I don't know very much, I'm afraid. He filled in here after his father died, but he didn't stay for long." Closing his Bible, he stood and gestured toward the closed door behind the pulpit, leading to his private office. "He's on the newsletter mailing list, though. Would you like his contact information?"

Dario rose to follow Peck, but stopped short when he heard the reverend's question. Somehow, he had never expected that Peck would be able to provide something so concrete, so tangible. He hadn't expected the wild goose chase to actually come to an end.

"Yes, that would be great. Thank you."

Peck led the way around the pulpit and through the door. "I'm not sure how current the information is, but since his name's still on the list, someone is still at the address we have." He glanced back when they reached his office. "Did you try searching for him online already, too?"

"No." Dario smiled sheepishly. "I don't even own a computer. I figure I got by fine without one for so long, it's never been a priority."

"That seems like it would've been a lot easier than moving out here to find him." Peck went straight to his desk, letting Dario close the door behind them. He turned on the monitor and opened a browser window. "You two must have been very close."

Dario's spine stiffened. "I moved out here to work. I'm just

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looking up some old friends while I'm here, that's all."

"Oh, I'm sorry." His fingers flew over the keyboard. Something came on the screen with a long list of names and addresses. "Well, then, who else would you like to know about? Might as well get them all right now if you can."

"Thanks, but there isn't anybody else. I was only here for a few months. I didn't know anybody except Reverend Waters, Billy Ray, and a few other itinerants." Dario smiled a little. "You probably wouldn't know how to track them down."

The printer off to the side hummed as it started to spit something out. "Finding God's lost lambs is a lot easier with technology on my side." His hand hovered on the mouse. "Do you want me to see if I can find anything on Billy Ray as long as I'm on?"

"You'd be willing to do that? I'd really appreciate it, but only if it's not an inconvenience for you."

Peck grinned, looking more like a kid than he had before. "It's just a matter of typing. It's really not that hard." The sound of the keyboard filled the room for several seconds. Dario edged closer to the desk to better see what Peck pulled up. "Well, it looks like that address we have is probably still valid."

Over the desk, Dario saw it was a California address. His heart leapt to his throat. Despite California's size, nothing was greater than a day's drive away. He could find Billy Ray by that night, if he really wanted to.

"Is there anything else? Like, if he's married, or pictures, or something?"

Peck clicked on a link. A series of thumbnails appeared on the screen. "It doesn't have too much about his personal life," he mused. "But it looks like he's fairly active in social programs.

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Like...oh."

"Like what? It's not anything bad, is it?"

Now, Peck looked uncomfortable. "I guess it depends on your perspective." He clicked on a picture of a large group of men and women, then clicked again to bring up a blog entry that had the photo prominently displayed. "He's been very vocal about gay marriage. It looks like he helps with fundraising for a group called Equality California."

Dario leaned forward, narrowing his eyes to study the photo. The man had some extra weight around his stomach, thinning white hair, and thick frames hiding his blue eyes, but there was no doubt in Dario's mind. That was Billy Ray. Billy Ray with his arm around the shoulders of another man. The caption beneath the photo identified the other man as Howie Wench, Billy Ray's "new husband."

Dario glanced over to the young reverend. "What's your perspective?"

Peck's cheeks flooded with color. "I'm afraid my perspective wouldn't make me very popular around Crows Landing."

"Well...I'm not from Crows Landing." Dario shifted his attention back to the computer monitor. "He looks happy, doesn't he?"

"He does. It's a shame others can't see that, too."

Dario straightened, but he couldn't quite bring himself to look away from the browser. He didn't know the story of Billy Ray's life. He didn't know how he met Howie Wench, how long they knew each other, or what their wedding was like. He didn't know anything about Billy Ray, except for those few months during a hot summer when both of them needed something. Well, that wasn't quite true. He knew one other thing about Billy Ray. He looked

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like a man who was genuinely content with his life.

“Thank you for helping me with this.” He backed toward the door. “Maybe these computers aren’t really more trouble than they’re worth.”

“Wait.” Peck came from around the desk and picked up the sheet of paper from the printer. He held it out to Dario. “You forgot his address.”

“No, thanks, but I don’t think I’m going to need it after all.”

Peck paused and looked down at the sheet in his hands. “If you’re sure. Though I think if I’d made a strong enough impact on someone’s life that they wanted to speak to me after so many years, I’d want to know about it.”

Dario wasn’t sure Billy Ray needed to be told about this particular impact, but he inclined his head and accepted the offered paper. “Thanks again for your help. I’ll let you get back to what you were doing before I came in.”

“Will I see you at today’s service?”

Shawn would probably be there, and Dario didn’t know how easy it would be to face him. Not that he could avoid Shawn indefinitely. He would run into the other man sooner or later. “Yes. I’ll even be on time today.”

Peck walked with him out of the office. “If there’s anything else you need my help with, I’m more than happy to oblige. All you have to do is ask.”

## CHAPTER 5

Shawn sat behind him again. Dario glanced over his shoulder once or twice, but Shawn never glanced back. He bowed his head during prayers, sang along with the songs, stood and sat with the crowd, even greeted his neighbors. The last had been slightly awkward. Shawn accepted his offered hand, shook it, but didn't say anything. Dario didn't take that personally. It's not like they could have had any sort of discussion right there in the middle of services. The folded piece of paper in his pocket also weighed heavily on his mind. He didn't think he would show up unannounced on Billy Ray's front door, but maybe he could drop the man a note? Or find his phone number?

After they were excused from the pews, Dario decided to wait just outside the church door. He hoped Shawn wouldn't walk right

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by him like he wasn't there.

A few people greeted him as they walked past. Hank, from the site. Mrs. Cooper, from the motel. The young girl from the gas station who always called him sir. He smiled and nodded at each, but always, his gaze returned to the door, ready for Shawn when he emerged.

The sunlight caught Shawn's blond hair when he came out, making it appear lighter than it normally was. His smile to Reverend Peck was polite but distant, and he didn't linger over the handshake, even though his gaze came to rest on Dario. The smile faded, but Shawn had to go past him to get to the street. Dario remained firmly in place, waiting to see what he was going to do.

His pace was slow, torturously so. When he stopped in front of Dario, the distance yawned between them, especially when Shawn shoved his hands into his pants pockets. "Good sermon today," he commented, his voice oddly neutral.

"It was," Dario agreed, though he couldn't even remember the topic of the sermon. "Are you heading over to the Blue Goose?"

"No, I was going to do some gardening today." He glanced up at the wisps of cloud streaked across the sky. "It's a good day to be outside."

"It is. Not too hot, especially for the time of year. Well, maybe I can buy you a beer later tonight after you're done?"

Shawn opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again as someone passed behind him. He watched some of the other congregation drift out to the parking lot, his hands fidgeting in his pockets.

"You don't have to do that," he said, still not meeting Dario's eyes. "It's okay. I understand."

"You...understand? I don't...let me buy you a beer, okay?"

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Please?"

"Why?"

"Because I want to explain what I did."

"You don't have to. Honest. I know how these things work. Why people leave." His smile was bittersweet, the step he took a retreat. "I told you I wouldn't make it hard for you."

Clearly Shawn wasn't going to agree to dinner or a drink. Dario didn't know if protests about how he was different would make much of a difference, either. But if there was any chance that the two of them could have something between them, Dario couldn't just nod and walk away.

"Can I join you in the garden? I'd like to get my hands a little dirty."

His request finally drew Shawn's attention back to him, the clear hazel eyes searching his. He understood Shawn's reaction. Hadn't he done exactly what Shawn had said everybody else did? Ruby had said it, too, when she'd realized he'd actually taken the job in Crows Landing. He'd left. He'd been leaving his whole life. Shawn knew that. Dario had told him, after all.

Maybe, deep down, Shawn didn't want to believe in history, either, because he said, "You'd have to go home and change first."

"Yeah, I haven't seen any dry cleaners around here. How about I go change, pick up some beer, and meet you back at your house in about an hour?"

Shawn gave him a short, jerky nod and turned away to head for the parking lot. He took two steps and stopped. "I took out some tri-tip to toss onto the grill today," he said without looking back. "If you wanted to pick up some ice cream, too, you could stick around for dinner after. If you want."

"I will," Dario promised, and the weight sitting on his chest



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shifted. It didn't completely disappear, but if Shawn was willing to mention dinner, that must have meant he was willing to talk.

It didn't take Dario an hour to get to Shawn's house. He changed quickly, was in and out of the store, and then put himself in danger of getting a ticket as he raced out of town. He didn't want Shawn to think he wasn't returning. He didn't want Shawn to change his mind. He didn't want to let himself get distracted from what really mattered by thoughts of Billy Ray. Shawn was real. Billy Ray was a figment now.

The front door was open when Dario reached Shawn's. He let himself inside, and found the house empty. After taking care of the beer and ice cream, he let himself out of the back door and immediately saw Shawn. The very sight of him was enough to bring Dario up short.

He'd changed his clothes, but hadn't bothered with putting a shirt on to go with his jeans. He hadn't bothered with shoes and socks, either, and knelt at the edge of a bed of pink flowers Dario didn't recognize, pulling out tiny weeds that dotted around their roots. Sweat already glistened across his broad shoulders, the muscles rippling with each stretch of his arm, and a streak of dirt bisected one powerful triceps. His faded jeans pulled low on his hips, revealing the dimples at the top of his ass that Dario had found absolutely mouth-watering Friday night.

At the sound of the door opening, Shawn paused and glanced over his shoulder. He was too far away to see the expression in his eyes, but not so far to miss his slight frown. "Has it been an hour already?"

"More like thirty-six minutes." Dario stepped down from the patio and crossed the lawn. "I didn't want to be late. So what are we working on?"

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Shawn swept an arm at the various flowerbeds decorating the back yard. "I try and weed these every Sunday if I can. Or you can dig out the thistles that spring up along the patio. Wherever you want."

Dario dropped to his knees besides Shawn on the grass. He honestly hadn't missed pulling weeds, or the smell and texture of soil, but he didn't want to be on the opposite side of the yard from Shawn. He fisted a clump of green weeds and tugged them free at the roots. "I wanted to talk to you about the other night."

Shawn immediately turned back to the dirt in front of him. "Look, I meant what I said at church. You don't have to. It's been a long time for you. I know you just needed to get your rocks off."

"It wasn't like that. At all. Yes, it's been a long time since I had sex with a man. But it's not like I've been a monk for the past thirty years. I'm perfectly capable of getting my rocks off without... Wait. Is that all it was for you?"

"Because people don't talk about me enough already?" Shawn snorted and shook his head. "I liked you. I thought we could be friends. I didn't even know you'd be interested in something physical until you were already out here. But if that was all I was interested in, I would've kept my prick in my pants a little bit longer and figured out how we could get together somewhere else. Somewhere people might not find out about."

"I'm sorry. I didn't come over on Friday with any... intentions. I've just never been in this situation before in my life. Alone with a guy I really like, in a house with a real bed, and no other relationship holding me back. Nobody around to make me feel guilty. No sense that it was anything except the right choice."

Shawn worked at the weeds, dirt sifting through his fingers with each tug. His nails were already starting to blacken from the

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soil getting beneath them, but his hands were startlingly graceful, like he was a sculptor and the garden his clay. When he didn't respond right away, Dario focused on the work, trying to ignore the desire to press Shawn into speaking.

"I know you didn't have intentions," Shawn said quietly after a few minutes. "I just thought...well, it was all so good. You didn't take off after, and we got to hang out with dinner, and...you stayed. I felt kind of dumb when I woke up yesterday and you were gone. I forgot for a while that you were probably just lonely, too. That you wanted Billy Ray instead."

Dario's chest tightened. He had obviously hurt Shawn, regardless of his intentions. He had the tendency to do that to everybody, regardless of his intentions. "I won't lie to you, Shawn. I thought about that, too. Thought maybe I had come looking for Billy Ray and settled for the closest thing I could get. That's actually why I left. I didn't know if I had any right to stay."

"All you had to do was say so."

"You make it sound like that was the easiest option. Even if I woke you up to tell you, I wouldn't have known what to say. I might have slept with you with because you're this amazing, funny, attractive guy, or I might have done it because the last time I had a dick up my ass, I was sixteen and I guess I just wanted to see if it felt the same. Was I supposed to say that?" Dario tossed a clump of weeds in frustration. "I called my ex-fiancé at six in the morning and spilled my guts because I didn't know what the hell to think."

"Did it help?"

"It probably helped her realize that my leaving was for the best." Dario focused on another clump of weeds, yanking at them with more force than was probably necessary. "She asked me if it

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made any sense to moon after something unattainable for the rest of my life. Especially when I could have somebody—something—real. I wasn't thinking about Billy Ray when we were together, Shawn. It was only you and me."

Shawn's hands stilled, though he didn't look up from the ground. "Did you really think those things about me?"

"What things? That you're an amazing, funny, attractive guy? Yes. I wouldn't have driven out here the other night if I hadn't."

He thought Shawn might have smiled before he bent to reach for a weed at the back of the bed. "When you showed up, I couldn't figure out what I'd done to get so lucky."

"Lucky? You say that like I'm much of a catch."

"You are to me. I spent most of yesterday jealous as hell of a guy I haven't seen since I was a kid."

"I went and spoke to Reverend Peck this morning. He gave me Billy Ray's address, and then searched for him online. Found out he's married now, to a nice looking man named Howie. He seems happy. Not like he's pining over some kid he knew thirty years ago." Dario sat back on his heels and studied Shawn's back. Sweat rolled down the flexing muscles, and it was a little ridiculous how perfect he looked. "I think it looks like he's got the right idea."

"Being happy's always a right idea." He sat back, a slight frown furrowing his brow. "Wait. Was that what you were referring to, or were you talking about something else?"

Dario grinned. "Yes, I was referring to him being happy. Not...anything else."

"I didn't think..." The red creeping into his skin wasn't just from the sun, and he shifted a few feet sideways to work, farther along the bed, farther away from Dario. "So what are you going to do about finding him now? Is he close enough for you to visit?"

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“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t recognize the name of the town, and I don’t think there would be any point to it. I wanted to see him because a part of me thought he had the answers I needed. But I have different questions now, and I know he won’t be able to help with those.”

“What kind of questions?”

“Basic things, like, why did Shawn get into landscaping? Would Shawn be willing to see me again? What’s Shawn’s favorite color? Will I be able to go a whole week without being near Shawn, or should I invite him to meet me at the bar for dinner? Things like that.”

The muscles in the arm Shawn leaned against tense, his free hand hovering along the soil. “Because you found out Billy Ray’s married?”

“No, I already had those questions. Finding out that Billy Ray is married made me realize that I should be focusing on them.”

He was slower to reach for a fresh shoot, his body still wound tight. “Those kinds of answers are easy. I’m just not sure they’re actually going to make a difference for you.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because it feels like you’re settling. Again. And when you figure it out, you’ll leave. Isn’t that what you’ve always done?”

“You barely know me. And you don’t know anything about my previous relationships, or even my time with Billy Ray. It sounds like you’re not really interested in getting to know me at all, and that’s fine.” Dario pushed himself to his feet. “But say that. Don’t try to hold a past you don’t know anything about against me.”

Shawn stared up at him in astonishment. “That wasn’t what I meant. You’re the one who told me how many times you’ve been engaged or married because it felt like you were looking for

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something. You said that was why you were looking for Billy Ray. Knowing my favorite color is purple isn't really going to help you figure out what you want, is it?"

"Maybe I was looking for Billy Ray because for a few short months when I was sixteen, things felt right. I wasn't lying to myself about what I wanted. I didn't feel completely and utterly out of control of my own life. I wasn't lonely—wasn't alone. Just because I had that with him once doesn't mean I'll never have it with anybody again. I hope."

The angry surprise in Shawn's face softened as his words sank in. He didn't know if Shawn got it. Maybe he'd been foolish to think Shawn might. Both possibilities hurt more than he could ever have anticipated.

"I *am* interested in getting to know you," Shawn said. "It wouldn't have bothered me so much yesterday if I wasn't. I just didn't know if I could like you this much and still be okay if you decided later on your life was better before."

"I can't tell you that risk doesn't exist, as much as I wish I could. But I can tell you that I'm old enough and smart enough to avoid the mistakes I've made before."

Carefully, Shawn stood and wiped his hands off on his jeans. "Would that mean no more ducking out without saying good-bye?"

"That's exactly what that means. No more packing up and leaving at a moment's notice. No more sneaking out in the dead of the night."

"Well, I can always do something about that." A playful twinkle appeared in Shawn's eyes. "Like stealing the rotor button off your truck so you'd have to walk if you tried to leave again."

Dario arched his brow. "Somehow, I don't think you're joking about that."

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"If it meant showing you, you don't have to run?" The corner of his mouth lifted. "Damn straight I'm not joking."

Dario gestured at the yard. "How much work have we got left out here?"

"We only just got started."

"I don't want you to be distracted by thoughts of weeding later."

But Shawn didn't move, his gaze steady on Dario. "You didn't come out here to weed. Not really."

"I came out to see you." Dario grinned. "Even if that means working on my day off."

"And we're...what are we?"

"I don't know. I guess we're...we're seeing each other."

Shawn's exhalation was so loud, it could only mean he'd been holding his breath. "Okay. Okay." His smile was the most relaxed Dario had seen since he'd fallen asleep next to him on Friday night. "I'm going to get a beer. Do you want one?"

"Yeah, but..." He caught Shawn's arm and pulled him closer. "One thing first."

Shawn didn't have a chance to ask Dario what he meant. Not that he needed to. Dario pulled him close, intending to claim his mouth in a hard kiss, but when their lips actually touched, all of his intentions changed. Instead of being hard and demanding, he caressed Shawn's mouth, gently coaxing him into a response. Not that Shawn resisted him. He parted his lips, welcoming Dario's probing tongue, his hands going to Dario's hips.

He smelled of earth and pollen, and tasted like sunshine. Dario fought the urge to deepen the caress, especially with the growing hardness against his groin, and chose instead to focus on the heat suffusing his body, how freeing such a simple kiss could be, how

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right. Shawn's lower lip trembled as they parted, but this time, Dario indulged his impulse, catching the quiver between his teeth and gently nipping.

"I'm glad you waited for me after church today," Shawn said. "I'm glad you decided this is worth it."

"I'm glad you agreed to talk to me again." He knew he should let Shawn go, but he ached to taste more. More of his mouth, more of his skin. But he barely strayed from Shawn's mouth before he returned, tracing his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Really glad."

Shawn's grip tightened for a moment, fingers digging memorably into his flesh, but then he was stepping back, smiling at Dario, edging toward the house. "I'm going to get those beers before you make me forget I've got work to finish."

Dario watched him go, the taste of Shawn's sweat and sunshine still lingering on his tongue. Shawn had a point about finishing the work, and Dario wouldn't complain. But he was going to weed like nobody had ever weeded before. After all, the sooner he got that done, the sooner he could drag Shawn into the house and finish what he started.



## CHAPTER 6

Dinner was excellent, as Dario had expected it would be. While they ate, he kept up a constant narration, telling Shawn everything about his life that the other man might want to know. He explained what it was like to spend his entire life traveling for work, how his parents had literally worked themselves to death, how he became a glazier, how he met his first wife, and finally, he talked about Billy Ray. Shawn listened to the entire story with only the occasional interruption. As Dario spoke, he realized that he was sharing details he had never believed he would tell anybody. Like the way it had felt the first time Billy Ray entered him. And how he vomited afterward because the guilt and fear had made his stomach churn.

But by the time they polished off the ice cream, sitting side by

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side on Shawn's couch, Dario was done talking. It might have been because he was starting to bore himself a little. But it was probably because Shawn had a tiny bit of ice cream caught on the corner of his mouth. It was a small, enticing promise of how sweet his lips would taste, of how his tongue would be cool from the dessert.

"You've got a little something," Dario said, leaning toward him.

Shawn remained motionless, though his nostrils flared. His thick lashes dipped to watch Dario's mouth as he got closer, and his lips parted long before Dario touched them. The moment Dario kissed the soft corner, though, snagging the bit of chocolate for his own, Shawn lifted a hand and rested it on Dario's chest.

"Will you stay tonight?" he murmured.

Dario moaned his answer. It was barely a word, but as he claimed Shawn's mouth in a proper kiss, he was sure that Shawn understood. He tasted like the chocolate he had just been eating, but even better than that was the unmistakable, heady taste that was simply *Shawn*. His fingers curled in Dario's shirt, holding him close as they both deepened the caress. Their tongues slid together, and he was delighted by the way their mouths fit.

Shawn had taken the lead on Friday night, but he held back now, letting Dario take control. When Dario pushed him back against the cushions, he acquiesced without hesitation, and then moaned in the back of his throat as they settled again. His free arm circled Dario's waist, holding their lower halves together. His body was warm and solid, more inviting than should have been possible. So were his kisses.

Dario wasn't in any sort of hurry. He knew he would have to be up early the next morning to make it out to the site, but he didn't care. He was going to take his time with Shawn and make every

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single touch and kiss as thorough, as fulfilling as possible. No caress would end prematurely. It was indulgent, bordering on pure decadence, and Dario loved every second of it. Shawn had put on a T-shirt before dinner, and Dario managed to push it up and over his head with only a tiny break in contact. Just the texture of Shawn's skin beneath his questing fingers made him ache.

His mouth was much slower to follow, reluctant to abandon the swelter of Shawn's even as much as he wanted to taste him everywhere. While he traced Shawn's pebbled nipples, he skimmed his lips over the stubble on his jaw, rough enough to leave a burn behind, smooth enough not to hurt. Shawn tilted his head to give him more room, but it was the bob of his Adam's apple when he swallowed that sent a shiver down Dario's spine. Because that was proof, uncontestable, unfabricated, of Shawn's desire, of how he affected Shawn.

Shawn clawed at Dario's shirt until Dario was forced to straighten and pull it over head. He shivered as his chest touched Shawn's. The heat, the texture, of skin against skin, seemed to be everything he had been waiting for. He shifted back, dragging his chest down Shawn's, then slid up again. His nipple skimmed across Shawn's, and he felt the hard, defined muscles of his abdomen tense and quiver.

"Can we take this into the bedroom?" Shawn asked softly.

That involved separating himself from Shawn—a feat Dario didn't think he could accomplish. On the other hand, he did enjoy having the space and comfort that Shawn's large bed provided. He pressed a hard kiss to Shawn's mouth, then jumped to his feet, and pulled Shawn to his, in a fluid motion.

"It's probably a good idea to do this now, before I really get carried away."

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Shawn entwined their fingers and, though Dario didn't need the reminder of where the bedroom actually was, led the way through the house. Dario suspected that, given the chance and freedom, Shawn would be the sort of man to constantly touch—holding hands, an arm around the shoulders, the casual kiss just because. Perhaps they wouldn't be able to have such displays in town, but that didn't mean they couldn't indulge here at Shawn's home.

Like the soft brush of Shawn's thumb along the side of his hand as they stepped inside the bedroom.

The first thing Shawn did was flip on the light. Dario hid his smile. No hiding here. Not from each other. Not from themselves.

Dario backed Shawn up against the closed door, teasing his mouth without actually giving him a proper kiss. He skimmed Shawn's lips and chin and cheek, breathing deeply to catch the scent of his skin. Shawn chased his mouth, but never quite captured him. Dario's hands were busy, too, unbuttoning Shawn's pants and seeking out his warm cock. He stroked the length with one palm, and used his free hand to push the pants down to the floor. Shawn caught the back of his head and forced him to hold still long enough to fuse their mouths together again.

The kiss muffled Shawn's needy whimpers, but Dario still managed to feel them. At the back of his neck, where gooseflesh erupted at the cool glide of Shawn's tongue against his. Down his spine, racing along the nerve endings to go straight to his ass. In the pit of his stomach, where the fire they created radiated out to his aching cock and balls. He wasn't sure Shawn had been this hungry for it on Friday night. The absence of Billy Ray's ghost had liberated both of them.

Dario finally broke the kiss and, with mouth watering, moved down Shawn's body. He paused to focus on Shawn's nipples, ran

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his tongue over the ridges of his stomach, and skimmed his lips down the line of his hip, but he really only had one destination in mind. He wanted to finally taste the warm, slick head of Shawn's cock. He wanted to know what it would feel like to have the heavy weight of it resting on his tongue, to have the pre-come smear across his lips. It was one thing he had never tried with Billy Ray, and now it was all he could think about doing.

Shawn rested a hand on Dario's shoulder, massaging the muscle. His erection angled toward the ceiling, thicker than Dario had realized, with a shaft almost entirely smooth except for the single vein running along its underside. Dark blond hair curled around the base, and the sac hung heavily between his thighs. Dario was suddenly glad for the overhead light. It made it possible to see every inch, every twitch of Shawn's muscles. The sight of the clear fluid seeping from the slit was even better.

Without being prompted, Shawn slid his free hand down his stomach to catch his cock between thumb and forefinger, and slowly tilt it down. He visibly shuddered when Dario dared to flick his tongue across the glistening tip.

Shawn tasted better than Dario had expected. Much better. He actually found few things as pleasing as the salty flavor of sweat on flushed skin, but this was beyond that. His taste buds seemed to pop with the tangy pre-come, his throat and jaw tightening in response. The texture was even more unbelievable. Smooth as silk against his rough tongue and wet lips. The musky smell of Shawn's skin was stronger there, making him heady. Dario felt like all of his senses were completely submerged in Shawn. Like nothing else existed in the world.

He opened his mouth wider and fit his lips around Shawn's crown. His shaft jerked at the contact, and his flesh was throbbing.

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More pre-come leaked against his tongue. Dario wanted it all.

He slid down the length, taking in a couple more inches. The weight was unfamiliar, but hardly unwanted, and the combined taste of salt and pre-come enough to make him groan. Shawn jerked when that happened, driving another inch past his lips, but almost immediately retreated.

“Sorry.” He panted. He skimmed callused fingers up the side of Dario’s neck, teasing along his jaw. “I’m just...blow jobs always make me lose it. I’ve always been sensitive that way.”

The thought of Shawn *losing it* did nothing to dampen Dario’s hunger. He wanted to push Shawn over the edge. He wanted Shawn to drown in his pleasure. Most of all, he didn’t want Shawn to realize that he had absolutely no idea what he was doing, no previous experience, no point of reference. He took back the inch, then added another, and another. He didn’t stop until the head brushed against the back of his throat. He had wondered how sensitive his gag reflex would be, and he had his answer when he jerked back, automatically pulling off Shawn’s cock.

“Sorry. I didn’t... Did I get you with my teeth?”

“No, no.” Shawn took a deep, ragged breath. “You don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with, you know. I have zero expectations here, and I know it’s been a long time for you.”

Dario looked away from Shawn’s face. “This is actually a first for me. But I want to do it. I *really* want to do it.”

“You’ve...okay. Well, I’m not going to stop you, but honestly, you don’t have to deep throat or anything. Just relax and do what you can. Trust me. It’s all good.”

Deep-throating probably wasn’t a good idea. At least, not right away. He would work up to that. In the meantime, he would take Shawn’s advice. Shawn still gripped the base, holding it in place in

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front of Dario's lips. He started with his tongue again, because he already missed the taste. He dragged his tongue over the sensitive skin, again and again, cleaning it of the slick fluid, until Shawn hissed sharply and jerked his hips. Dario was ready for that, and he widened his lips, allowing most of the length to slip into his mouth.

He kept the suction as tight as he could, though the texture and taste kept distracting him. Shawn helped by keeping his cock steady, but the way the muscles kept trembling in his stomach and legs testified how hard it was for him to hold back. More than once, he forgot and thrust forward. The friction that created prompted Dario to suck harder, his moans of pleasure now nearly continuous.

"I'm going to come if you keep this up much longer," Shawn warned, his voice rough with desire.

That was the best warning Dario had ever received in his life. He had no intention of heeding it. His cheeks hollowed around Shawn's shaft, and he moved his mouth up and down his length, going slightly faster each time Shawn jerked his hips. There was a low buzzing in his ears, and his own cock strained against his pants, the pain in his tight groin more intense than anything he had ever experienced before. At that moment, he was certain he had never wanted another person more. He closed his fingers around Shawn's hip, digging into the flesh, drawing him forward, deeper.

Any care Shawn had taken in holding himself back vanished. He cupped the back of Dario's head and met every slide down his shaft with a drive forward, grunts and whispers and sounds of encouragement joining together into a continuous stream. His balls slapped against his thighs from the new force, and on a whim, Dario sought them out, holding the sac almost delicately before giving them a little squeeze.

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Shawn shouted. The vein resting along Dario's tongue throbbed, and in the next moment, warm, thick come pulsed from the slit, filling the back of his throat.

For a split second, Dario didn't know what to do. The taste and texture wasn't unpleasant, just highly unexpected, and he considered spitting it back out. But then he remembered Shawn's look of undeniable bliss as he licked Dario's come from his fingers. He tightened the seal of his lips around Shawn's cock, swallowing as quickly as he could and greedily coaxing more, prolonging the orgasm as long as he could.

With a final shudder, Shawn leaned heavily against the door, his noisy breathing the only sound in the room for several seconds. Then, his cock twitched against Dario's tongue, compelling Dario to lick around the head again, and Shawn hissed sharply.

"Fuck, fuck..." He tugged at the back of Dario's head, not hard enough to hurt but enough to make him know it was deliberate. "Stop, please. I'm too sensitive for that right now."

Dario didn't want to stop, but he nodded and let Shawn's cock slip from his mouth. That didn't mean he was done, though. There was still too much of Shawn left to explore. He slid his tongue along the seam of Shawn's thigh, following it to his heavy sac. The fine hair there tickled his lips, but that didn't stop him from gently sucking on the skin before moving to Shawn's other thigh.

"I don't suppose you'd want to take this over to the bed?" Shawn laughed, a throaty, satisfied sound. "Which probably gives away my deep, dark secret. I come, and my legs stop working."

Once again, Dario acknowledged it was reasonable to use the bed, though he resented having to take his mouth from Shawn long enough to move. He stood, only to find that his legs weren't working so great either. He blamed his jeans cutting into his stiff



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cock. He felt like he was going to burst. Shawn moved as soon as he was released, but he didn't go directly to the bed. Instead, he caught Dario around the waist and used his other hand to unzip his fly. At the first touch of his fingers against Dario's throbbing length, a shudder wracked his frame.

"Okay, I lied." A grin lit up Shawn's sated face as he slowly stroked Dario's shaft. "Getting you to stand up was the fastest way to get my hand on your cock."

"You keep touching me like that and I'm probably going to hit the floor again."

"You mean you don't want to fuck me?" Shawn bent his head and nuzzled against Dario's neck, though his hand never stopped moving. "As wound up as you are, I would've thought you'd want to nail my ass into the bed."

Dario moaned. "God, yes, I want to fuck you. You'd let me?"

Shawn lifted his head. His surprised eyes met Dario's. "Hell, yes, I'd let you. You've seen your cock, right? Only an idiot wouldn't want you."

Dario took him by the shoulders and spun him to the bed. They collapsed on the mattress together, Shawn's body hard and welcoming beneath him. "I want to be able to watch you."

His declaration seemed to please Shawn, who spread his legs to give Dario more room to settle. His long, slow pulls at Dario's prick never lessened, though his other hand pushed awkwardly at his jeans until Dario took the hint and shoved them down himself.

"Everything's in the nightstand," Shawn said. "You can use whatever you want."

Dario grabbed the bottle of lubricant and flipped the top open. Only one of the women he had been with would agree to anal sex, and even that was very rare. But he still understood how important

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it was to make sure his partner was ready. He didn't know when Shawn had been fucked last, but he would do everything in his power to minimize the discomfort. He coated two fingers with the cool lube and smoothed it against Shawn's tight flesh. He lifted his knees higher, spreading his legs wider, silently encouraging Dario to continue.

He pushed both fingers inside Shawn's body slowly, working them past the clenched muscle. Shawn let his breath out in a rush, and Dario tried to imagine what it would be like to feel his hot channel clenching around him. He couldn't. Even as the muscles bore down on his fingers, he couldn't imagine it. Because it wasn't just the heat, or the pressure, or the pleasure. It was connecting fully with another human being, without any inhibitions, without letting his thoughts drift to another place, another person. Dario wasn't sure if he had ever experienced that.

Shawn never stopped watching him. Even when Dario added a third finger and began rotating his wrist, all Shawn did was catch his breath and blink rapidly for a moment, until the added thickness was easier to take. He broke up his pattern of stroking Dario, too, reaching farther down to fondle his balls just sporadically enough for it to surprise Dario every time he touched the sac.

Dario continued to fuck him with his fingers until he felt Shawn relax a little. He pulled his hand free and spread more lube over his cock—it was so cold against his heated flesh that he cried out a little from the shock.

“Are you ready?” Dario asked hoarsely.

Shawn nodded, his eyes heavy-lidded, the pupils blown. He looked like he had always been ready. Like he had been waiting for this from the very moment they met. Dario couldn't believe it

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had only been a week since an attractive stranger bought him an order of chili fries. It didn't bother Dario that his whole life had changed in a week, though. He was accustomed to that sort of sudden shift.

He wasn't, however, accustomed to the amazing heat of Shawn's body. As soon as he pressed his slick head to Shawn's hole, the heat threatened to overcome him, but drew him at the same time, until he thrust forward enough to breach the opening.

Shawn cried out at the initial drive, arching away from the bed as his arms clamped around Dario's back. He yanked him down, the force of it strong enough to sting when bare skin came into contact with bare skin, and his mouth when it found Dario's was ravenous. Heels dug into the back of Dario's thighs, urging him forward, but Shawn's sinful tongue, curling around his, teasing into dark corners nobody else had dared, aroused him the most.

It gave him the fortitude to fully sheathe himself in the tight passage, unbelievable muscles squeezing around his shaft. He couldn't breathe. Between Shawn's kisses, and the pressure building beneath his skin, and the enormity of what he was doing, how far he had come, Dario couldn't get his lungs to work the way they were meant to. Shawn's tight embrace didn't help matters, but the last thing he wanted was for Shawn to let go. Nothing had ever felt so good.

Sparks of pleasure shot up and down his spine, then erupted through his entire body. Everything sizzled. Everything felt too hot. When Shawn squeezed around his shaft, all of his muscles flexed in response. He throbbed. Or maybe it was Shawn's flesh that was throbbing. For a brief moment, he couldn't even tell where he ended and Shawn began. He knew he wasn't the only one who felt it. Shawn's face was an open book. He let himself be

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vulnerable, exposed. Let Dario appreciate every second of pleasure and desire dancing in his eyes.

He held Shawn with one hand, and gripped the pillow beneath Shawn's head with the other, using the support as leverage. He rocked backward, easing from his channel, but made up for the loss by pushing his tongue into Shawn's mouth in a slow, demanding kiss.

A whimper reverberated through both of them, its origin unsure.

"Please," Shawn murmured against his mouth. And then again, "Please."

"What, baby? Anything. Tell me."

"Just...don't stop." He tightened his embrace, burrowing closer into Dario's body. "Don't let go."

"I won't. I won't," he promised between kisses. He set a rhythm of long, deep strokes, and Shawn's small pleas turned into low moans. Dario honestly didn't know much he could take, or how long he could continue that way, but that didn't really matter. Not as much as Shawn's hot breath against his neck, or the slick texture of his skin. Each time Dario buried his length inside him, Shawn tightened, holding him until the world tilted around them. But no matter how much the walls spun and floor moved, Shawn was right there, solid, grounding him.

Teeth raked along his sweaty skin, followed by lips, hot tongue, then teeth again to start the process anew. Shawn matched his pace when he needed to quicken, but never lost the strength of his hold. If anything, he gained confidence the harder Dario thrust, scratching along his spine, digging in with his heels. It felt like he would welcome Dario crawling into his flesh, if it was possible.

"Next time, I'm going to ride you," Shawn rasped into his ear.

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“I’ll do it so slow, we’ll make it last all night.”

Dario felt a tingling at the base of his spine. It wasn’t just the thought of Shawn riding him—though he quite enjoyed the thought—but the knowledge that the two of them could be together any night and every night. They wouldn’t have a perfect freedom together, he knew that, but it would be so much more than Dario ever thought of having. Shawn was willing to give him so much more than anybody ever had.

“God...Shawn...I...” He tried to hold himself back, but the pleasure, the satisfaction, the unbelievable sensation of Shawn surrounding him, was all too much. He slammed forward, driving home as his cock jerked. The orgasm washed through him, heating his flesh, making everything tight and fluid at the same time. But he didn’t stop moving, even when a fist closed around his stomach, squeezing with every new bit of friction against his sensitive cock.

Shawn’s mouth found his, sucking away breath while the world fell apart around them. Even when his body finished shuddering, quivers took over, only calming when Shawn smoothed his hands down Dario’s back.

“Have I mentioned how glad I am that you waited for me after church?” It sounded like Shawn was smiling, but Dario couldn’t tell. That would require lifting his head and right now, it felt too heavy to do much of anything with.

“Probably not half as glad I am,” Dario murmured.

“I think that’s a matter of perspective.” He pressed a kiss to the skin below Dario’s ear. “Are you really staying? I know you’ve got to work tomorrow.”

“Yes. I will have to leave bright and early in the morning, though. Would you mind if I came by tomorrow after work?”

“Bring more ice cream, and you can have a standing

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invitation.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

Dario couldn’t move, and he didn’t plan on moving any time soon. He closed his eyes, allowing his mind to drift back thirty years. To the back of his dad’s truck, and the afternoon they left Crows Landing. Dario had seen a young man with white hair that day, and had waved, but he never knew if Billy Ray saw him. Never knew if he had waved back. This time, though, history let itself be rewritten. Just a little bit. This time, Billy Ray waved back as the truck rumbled and bumped its way out of town.

Dario held Shawn a little bit closer. He didn’t have any real expectations of what would happen between them. But Shawn had been sincere about his standing invitation, and Dario had been sincere about every promise he made. As far as Dario was concerned, that was a hell of a good way to get started.

## JAMIE CRAIG

Jamie Craig is the collaborative efforts of Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Both successful authors on their own, they began working together in early 2006. Pepper lives with her husband and cats in Utah, where she attends graduate school, and Vivien resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

\* \* \*

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