



For the  
Love of  
*Scott*

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A TEN RIGS TEXAS TALE

**FOR THE LOVE OF SCOTT**  
**Product Sample**

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First edition.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Marva pushed open the door of the Ten Rigs Kennel and Shelter and glanced around the sparsely furnished space. Yips and barks replied to the jangle of the bell above the door. The *click-click-clicking* of a tiny set of paws announced the arrival of Scott's long-haired Chihuahua, Sylvester.

Sometime since she'd last been inside, Scott had scraped up the old chipped school tile and painted the concrete a light forest green. Someone—probably not Scott—had painted paw tracks in various sizes crisscrossing the room. Picket fencing lined the walls as a sort of wainscoting. It was rather charming in a guy sort of way. Of course, Scott's lone employee, Pammy, had probably had a hand in it.

Sylvester's mostly black face appeared and then he was there, dancing around her, tiny pink tongue hanging from his mouth. If his tail could wag any harder or faster, Marva wouldn't have been surprised to see him achieve lift off.

"Hey, Sylvester, how's it going today, fella?" She bent her achy knees a bit and reached down to stroke his shiny head and scratch under his little chin.

"Where's your daddy, huh?"

Sylvester arfed and did a lap around her.

"*Scott*. Scott Hudson, package for you," she called toward the screen door that led to the outdoor kennel area. "I need a signature."

"Coming, Miss Maple," said a deep voice, followed by hurried footsteps. The screen door opened with a bit of a screech and closed with a bang.

Scott's almost six-foot frame came to a halt in front of her. His chestnut brown hair, while still military-ish in cut, lay smashed to his head on one side and stuck up in random spikes on the other, as if he'd rolled out of bed after a hard sleep with wet hair.

Marva handed him the tiny terracotta-colored slip to sign, which he did with a quick scribble. She passed him the bubble wrap mailer, and he scanned the return address. With a smile, he turned the package over to tear at the closure. Two hard cover books slid out; one titled, 'The Language of Our Canine Friends,' by Gloria Markus and the other called, 'Cesar's Way: The Natural, Everyday Guide to Understanding and Correcting Common Dog Problems,' by Cesar Millan and a co-writer.

Since his return home six months ago, he'd done little but repair the kennel and work with the dogs he inherited. Marva's sources told her he rarely went anywhere, and he was never seen in anyone's company who could remotely be considered a significant other. The changes in the kennel were evidence of his dedication.

"Deputy Dawg, you need a boyfriend," she said. Someone to put a spark in his eye and perhaps a hitch in his giddy-up-and-go.

His head bobbed up and the dark velvet brown of his eyes met hers. He snorted. "Yeah? What would I do with a boyfriend?"

"You work too hard, and life is meant to be lived. Find a little happiness for yourself, would you?"

A wan smile quirked his pale pink lips. "I wouldn't even know where to look."

"The Christmas Festival is just around the corner, Deputy. You've volunteered to help. Just...be open. All right?"

The corner of his mouth curled up in another shy smile and he nodded. "I will, Miss Maple. I promise."

Marva slapped the counter. "Then my work here is done." With a wink at the hunky young man, she whirled around and strode for the door. "Take care of him, Sylvester, ya hear?"

Two quick yips and a deep chuckle followed her outside and she grinned all the way back to the mail truck.

The list of prospects for young Scott was short. Ten Rigs had its share of gay men, but Scott needed someone special. She snorted softly. "Well, we all need someone special, don't we, Marva?" With a shake of her head, she climbed into the truck. Shifting into Drive, she pulled onto the road and headed back into town.

"Mike? Patrick? Stan?" she wondered aloud. Images of each one flitted through her mind. "Stan's a little too old. And now that I'm thinking about it, Mike's too immature. Who else? Who else?"

A flash of royal blue caught her eye—a motorcycle sped by—and the ensuing rush of certainty had her fist-pumping. "Bennigan Thompson," she mused. "Well, dog-gone—how did Ben not occur to me right away? He's spent a lot of time at the kennel since Scott took it over, between helping out and so-called accounting paperwork. Me-thinks Mr. Thompson might be a bit smitten. And Scott could sure

use some Thompson Family kindness. If Scott and Ben aren't a match made in heaven, I'll turn in my Cupid's bow."

Ben had volunteered to help prepare for the Christmas Festival too. A word in Wanda's ear and those two young men would be paired for a task or two. But how else could she get Ben's and Scott's paths to cross "naturally?" She chuckled. Where there was a will, there was a way. And she definitely had the will.

Marva turned into the post office parking lot and slowed to a stop for the post office patrons exiting the historic brick building. Another chuckle rumbled deep in her chest. "Well, I'll be..." A quick toot of the mail truck's horn brought her the attention of the five women in the crosswalk. Marva stuck her head out the now-open window. "Helen Thompson, come on over here for a moment, would you?"

"Hello, Marva. Mail route keeping you busy, I see," said Helen upon approach. The two of them had gone to school together many moons ago.

Winter's chill had left bright spots of color on Helen's cheeks, and Marva still marveled at how much all the Thompson kids looked like their mother.

"Tis the season and all that," said Marva. "Listen, there's this nice young man, Scott Hudson—took over the kennel?"

Helen nodded. "I remember Scott. Gillian tutored him in algebra. Shame about his leg."

With a nod, Marva said, "He's an overcomer, all right. Anyway, he's out there at the kennel with just those dogs, subsisting on goodness knows what. You make the best pies in three counties, so I was wondering, if you ran across him at some

point, if you'd invite him over for a home-cooked supper and one of those blue-ribbon pies."

Helen smiled. "You didn't need all that flattery, Marva. He was always a sweet young man despite that bastard of a father. Of course, I'll have him over."

"At least I got right to the point," she said with a wink. "And thanks."

With a wave, Helen continued the trek to her car. Marva pattered into the truck yard and parked. If she'd been even ten years younger, she might've skipped across the parking lot and into the building. *Job well done, Marva. Job well done.*

So far, so good anyway. Flattery might not have been necessary, but it ensured that the dinner invitation would happen sooner rather than later.

\* \* \*

Christmas lights lined the edge of just about every structure of the Thompson homestead. Roof lines, porch railings, fencing. Multi-colored lights, icicles, white rope lights.

Scott couldn't help the smile or the lurch in his stomach that followed. His own childhood home had never seen such tender loving care at the holidays. Not even before his mother had taken off. His father had been the Grinch personified. To have had parents who made the holidays special... Well, he hadn't, and crying about having crappy parents at this late date served no purpose.

Holiday cheer stole over him despite his lack of fond childhood memories. Maybe this weekend he'd drive over to the big box store and pick up some lights. He'd gotten a pick-me-up out of the sight of driving up to the Thompson house and

seeing it lit up like the Las Vegas Strip. Since the kennel occupied a stretch of land along the south highway in and out of town, if he lit up the facility, it'd be a sight—hopefully a good one—for anyone driving into or out of town after dark.

Scott pulled his battered old pickup into a space between a huge dark-colored dually and Ben's older-model work truck. A red medium-sized SUV and Ben's motorcycle were parked under a detached carport.

A jumbo-sized wreath with small white twinkle lights blinking from the branches hung on the large expanse of wall between two lit-from-within windows. The draperies were pulled back, revealing the women's-magazine-cover scene inside. One window framed Ben and his niece setting the table; the other showed Mrs. Thompson tossing a salad and laughing. The storybook picture pulled another smile from Scott.

The Christmas lights provided plenty of illumination to the front door. With a press of the button, the doorbell chimed on the other side, and a little girl's voice yelled, "I'll get it."

Scott recognized Ben's responding baritone, although he couldn't make out the words, followed by a high-pitched squeal. The door opened and a wave of warm spicy-scented air washed over him. God, he was hungry.

Ben, with five-year-old Misty perched on one arm, pushed open the old-fashioned wood screen door. "C'mon in." He stepped back to allow Scott room to enter. Ben held out his hand and Scott slid his own into the man's warm grasp. "Misty, you remember Mr. Hudson, don't you?"

She nodded, a wide grin showcasing the missing bottom teeth. “Hi, Mr. Hudson.”

What a cutie and the spitting image of Ben. If someone didn’t know that Misty’s mother, Gillian, and Ben had been twins, he could be, and probably was, mistaken for her dad. Kids had never been on Scott’s radar. Being gay made it a little harder, though not impossible. Factor in his miserable childhood, and remaining childless seemed the better option.

Mrs. Thompson came around the corner. “Hello, Scott, honey. How are you?”

“I’m good. Wore out, but good.” He handed her a small decorative candle thing he’d picked up at the grocery store: a six-inch green pillar candle with sprigs of pine and other random flowery things he didn’t know the names of surrounding the base.

Mrs. Thompson’s eyes widened and a flush of pleasure colored her cheeks. Big blue eyes like Ben’s and Misty’s met his. “Oh, honey, this is lovely. Thank you.” She stretched up on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

Scott ducked his head, hoping to hide his own unexpected pleasure at her gesture. “You’re welcome.”

“Now take your coat off and come on into the kitchen. Grandma Hardy’s goulash is just about ready. The recipe’s been in the family for generations. I hope you’re hungry.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re awful polite, although I must admit it’s a refreshing change,” she said, sending a wink his way.

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Eleven years in the military will do that.”

Collectible plates of all sorts covered the papered walls as he followed her. They depicted cats and birds, as well as the various states that the Thompsons had probably visited on family vacations. Scott had never been outside the state of Texas until he’d gone to boot camp. During the course of his Army life he’d lived in two states, passed through the airports of a handful of others, and did two tours in the Middle East. His experiences of airports and deserts had nothing on the collection of memories Ben must have of his family at Mount Rushmore or the Grand Canyon.

The dining room table was longer than he was tall and appeared to be hand-made. It was stained a deep rich brown and protected by a thick shiny coat of varnish. Eight matching chairs surrounded it. The red, green, and gold plaid place mats were all clustered at one end.

“Sit by me, Mr. Hudson,” said Misty, patting the seat next to hers.

Scott looked back and forth between Ben and Mrs. Thompson. They both played primary roles in raising Misty, and he wasn’t sure who he should ask. “Is it all right if she calls me Scott or Mr. Scott? Mr. Hudson is awful formal for a guy who shovels dog sh-doo all day.”

Misty giggled, her tiny white teeth showing again.

“Sorry,” Scott murmured, ducking his head as slight embarrassment heated his face.

“Mr. Scott is fine, honey.” Mrs. Thompson nodded and then turned toward a doorway and called, “Jed. Come to the table.”

Ben waved at the chair next to Misty and took the seat across the table from Scott.

Mr. Thompson entered the dining room and Scott halted mid-sit and straightened back up.

Mr. Thompson stopped, ran his hands down the length of his suspenders, and cocked his head. “What the hell was that?”

Scott felt a bit abashed again. “Habit, sir.”

Mr. Thompson grinned and held out a hand. They shook before Ben’s dad continued to his seat at the head of the table. “How you doing, son?”

“Fine, sir. Just fine.”

“Ben’s been keeping us up to date on your hard work out at the kennel.”

“Oh, well, just keeping busy, sir.” Another wave of gratification warred with embarrassment. The kennel’d been his sanctuary growing up. It had become his sanctuary again.

“You’re doing a great thing, honey,” said Helen, setting a large pot on the table in front of her husband. Steam curled from the thick casserole, and Scott’s stomach gurgled in anticipation. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d enjoyed a true home-cooked meal.

All this happy-family-ness was completely at odds with his own upbringing. Dinner had been a silent affair before his mother had left, and after, it had been nonexistent. Scott had either been at weight lifting practice or working at the kennel. He'd generally fended for himself, although as part of their unspoken agreement, his father had kept the cupboards and refrigerator stocked.

Scott rose again. "Let me help you, Mrs. Thompson." Helping his hostess was the least he could do for a home-cooked meal.

"Nonsense. You're a guest," boomed Mr. Thompson. "Ben, get up and help your mother."

Mrs. Thompson patted Scott's shoulder while Ben stood.

"Sit, Ma," said Ben. "I'll get the rest."

"Don't mind if I do," she said and slid into the chair to the left of her husband and across from Misty.

Ben returned with a bowl of salad and a basket of delicious-smelling rolls.

Once Ben had taken his seat, Mr. Thompson set his hands palms up on the corners of the table. Misty set one hand in her grandfather's and took a hold of Scott's with the other. Mrs. Thompson slipped one hand into her husband's and the other into her son's, and Ben reached across the table. In an instant, Scott took in the long, tapered fingers and the eyes the color of the pale blue morning glories that had grown wild in the trailer park where he'd grown up, and slid his hand into Ben's. Their gaze didn't break until their chins practically touched their chests.

Mr. Thompson blessed the meal, and everyone dug in.

Grandma Hardy's goulash had been delicious and Mrs. Thompson's peach pie to die for. She'd given Scott a container with a piece for later. Conversation had been lively, and each of the Thompsons had shared something about their day, including Misty. They'd finally convinced him that guests were every bit as welcome to contribute to the conversation. The latest of Sylvester's canine shenanigans had garnered smiles from the elder Thompsons, giggles from Misty, and a fond smile and star-bright eyes from Ben, although the story surely hadn't been that amusing.

The temperature had dropped while they'd eaten and visited, and unlike when he'd arrived, small white clouds appeared with each exhale. The crisp temperatures nipped his cheeks and nose. Burning pine scented the air from the roaring fire Ben and his dad had lit after supper.

Scott inhaled deeply. The air smelled of home and friendship. He fished his keys from his pocket and unlocked the truck. He set the pie on the dash and turned to Ben, who'd decided Scott needed walking to his vehicle.

Ben hadn't bothered to put on a coat, of course, and had his hands shoved in the front pockets of his jeans while he jiggled his arms back and forth trying to generate warmth.

"Hey, uh, a few of us get together to play basketball up at the high school. Our last weekly game until after the holidays is tomorrow night. Around seven," Ben said. "You're more than welcome to join us."

Scott's breath caught in his throat and then he sighed, his excitement immediately crashing and burning. He hadn't played hoops in years. Not since before the bomb took his leg. "Basketball. Me?"

"Why not you?" Ben's eyebrows arched for a moment.

Maybe he really didn't know. "I wear a prosthetic."

"What the hell do I care?" Ben shrugged. "You can play basketball, right?"

Ben's gaze didn't falter, didn't stray to Scott's left foot. The fact that it hadn't meant more to Scott than he could possibly say. "I can't jump."

A snort exploded from Ben's mouth, followed by, "That's bullshit."

"Excuse me?"

"First of all, I've seen you jump. You're all over that kennel building, climbing on the roof, jumping fences—"

"Three foot fences! Jesus." Scott threw his hands up. A three-year-old could jump those things.

"It's still jumping."

If it'd been daylight, Scott would've seen the bright blotches of color on Ben's cheeks that always accompanied an outburst. They'd shared enough animated conversations over the last several months to know. At the moment, however, a conglomeration of reds, oranges, greens, and blues from the Christmas lights covered them both and camouflaged any natural coloring.

Ben's arms flapped back and forth, back and forth. "C'mon, man. It's a pick-up basketball game. What's the big deal?"

Scott stilled. He'd thought sports were a thing of his past, but Ben apparently had no such ideas. He clearly assumed Scott capable of anything a whole man could do. Scott could and did bounce around the kennel, hopping over the short fencing and bags of dog food or piles of random crap. But only the dogs saw him when he fell on his ass.

For a casual game of basketball, the fluttery sensation in his chest seemed kinda girly. But dammit if he didn't want to play. He sucked in a breath, the icy air biting his nostrils. "It's not a big deal," Scott finally said. And suddenly it wasn't. Ben had made it not a big deal.

"Then c-come on." Ben bounced on the balls of his feet now, the cold really starting to get to him. "Sh-shit, it's cold."

"Shoulda put on a jacket, dumbass."

"Up yours." Ben jerked his chin up in a gesture. "You g-gonna play or not?"

There was no stopping Scott's grin. "Okay. Yeah. I'll play."

Ben's dimples appeared in response.

"G-great. S-see you tomorrow." With that, he turned and ran toward the house. "*Drive safe—*" echoed across the space between them, and the bang of the screen door sounded a moment later.

Scott shook his head and climbed into his truck. What the hell had he just agreed to?