



Absent  
without  
*Leave*

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A TEN RIGS TEXAS TALE

## Absent Without Leave

### Product Sample

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## CHAPTER ONE

Aiden O’Leary’s arm stops mid-wipe.

Jake Hardison has just entered O’Leary’s Pub looking as good as Aiden has ever seen him look. A black cotton tee shirt hugs Jake’s well-built torso and disappears into dark blue jeans that fit him like...well, like a pair of blue jeans ought to fit a man. Snug and comfortable, like his own skin. Dog tags clink as he approaches the bar and sits on the stool right in front of Aiden.

His gut quivers and his dick twitches. Even after seven years, Jake has the ability to affect Aiden just by being him. As a member of the United States Armed Forces, of the Army’s Special Forces, he’s larger than life. Not many men could or would put himself in harm’s way or fight for those who can’t fight for themselves. A man who knows what loyalty and honor are all about. A man who can be trusted. Aiden is all about trust right now.

Jake probably doesn’t even recognize Aiden.

The scent of a citrus-based cologne wafts toward Aiden on the cool air Jake has pulled into the bar with him. His overheated face appreciates the breeze.

Jake’s gray eyes wander over Aiden from his head to his shoulders and as far down as the bulk of the bar allows. No doubt Aiden’s whirlwind cleanup of the corner tables has left his face flushed and damp. The one and only guy he’s ever fantasized about shows up in the bar when he’s three-quarters of the way through a shift and probably looking pretty worn out and feeling particularly horny. The fates are just damned cruel.

“Evening, Aiden,” says old Mr. Travis, distracting Aiden from Jake for a

moment as he and Burnley shuffle in for their bi-weekly visit.

“Hey, Mr. Travis. I’ll bring your lager right over.”

Rick slides him the pint glass of dark liquid and Aiden reaches into the biscuit jar.

“Be right back,” he says to Jake and crosses the bar. “How’s the arthritis today, boy?” Aiden asks, kneeling to scratch behind the mastiff’s floppy ears and slip him the biscuit.

“We made it here with only a single stop,” says Mr. Travis. “So a good day.”

“Glad to hear it. And how are you, Mr. Travis?”

“The grandkids are coming to visit soon,” he says.

“That’s awesome. I know it’s been a while. I bet they’re getting big.”

“They are. Braden starts kindergarten in the fall.”

“That’s...wow.”

“Wow, indeed. Now go on and let a man enjoy his beer in peace.”

Aiden rises. “Holler if you need anything.” He steps back behind the bar.

“Sorry about that.”

Jake waves the apology away.

“Now...what can I get for you?” Aiden asks.

“The best thing you’ve got on tap.”

The rumble of Jake’s voice rolls over Aiden like a shock wave in slow motion, eliciting thoughts of tangled sheets and tangled limbs. Which is ridiculous. As far as Aiden knows, Jake is as het as they come.

He swallows and says, “Coming right up.” Voice cracking is a near thing. Fuck.

The few hookups Aiden has had since he and Joe broke up had served their purpose. Connections with another human being, superficial though they were, and getting off. The one guy he’d dated had wanted to take things slow. Slow is all well and good, but Christ, a man has needs.

Aiden has had a crush on Jake with his gray eyes and dark hair since the tenth grade when Aiden’s brother Sean started high school, joined the baseball

team, and started bringing teammates home like stray dogs. Aiden in no way resembles Jake's high school dates. First of all, he isn't female. Neither is he curvy, busty, or blond.

During college, Aiden had been determined to transform himself from geeky nerd to Greek god. Working out and buffing up had been a priority. He'd wanted to shed his high school image, to return from college looking like the kind of guy he wanted to go out with. A guy like Jake. His base looks though...strawberry blond hair and pale skin were a gift of his Irish heritage. Any sort of heat, real or metaphorical, and his face turns an unflattering geranium color. Sadly, there's nothing he can do about that. Prince Harry and Rupert Grint have made being ginger cool, so he's learned to accept the downsides.

Aiden sets a disposable coaster on the shiny mahogany between Jake's elbows and places his beer on it. Glancing at the large clock on the wall behind him, he says, "Kitchen closes in fifteen. You need anything else?"

A soft scoff leaves Jake's mouth. "A place to stay." He sips his beer, eyes never leaving Aiden's.

Like tumblers in a lock, pieces slip into place. *Holy shit.*

Jake Hardison is fucking gay.

Or at least not entirely straight, considering all the girls he may or may not have screwed in high school. A charge crackles between them. Is Jake intimating what Aiden thinks he is? Aiden's stomach loops as if he were riding the swinging ship ride at Six Flags Over Texas that he hates so much.

Jake's gaze remains focused, steady, expectant.

Heat prickles along Aiden's collarbones. He glances at Devon Cavanaugh who sits at the end of the bar, head resting on his arms. He's been still for a good twenty minutes.

"Ah, well, we don't really serve that here, but..." Does he dare? "I don't know if you remember me, we—"

"Aiden O'Leary," Jake says, eyebrow rising as he takes another taste of his brew. "Salutatorian of the class ahead of mine in high school; member of the band,

saxophone, if I remember correctly; and XO of our JROTC battalion.

“Your brother Sean and I played baseball together. Yeah, I remember you just fine. You’ve changed a bit though.”

He doesn’t say “for the better,” which Aiden hears anyway. He isn’t offended, though; he knows what he was in high school. “Which definitely begs the question of why you even noticed me back then.”

Jake’s Adam’s apple bobs with the long swig of beer. “Believe it or not, there is more to people than just their looks. Even in high school. Even to smart ass jocks.”

“All right, well.” The heat creeps from Aiden’s collarbones to his neck. What the fuck is he supposed to say to that? “I live above the bar at the moment, and I have an extra bedroom. It’s yours if you’re interested.”

“Yeah?” Silver gray darkens to battleship gray, and Jake’s voice comes out gruffer than it’d been a moment ago.

Heat curls low in Aiden’s abdomen and he nods.

“I’m interested. Thanks.”

Jake’s eyes never leave Aiden’s face, and the intensity of Jake’s gaze makes his dick sit up and take notice.

Finding his voice, Aiden says, “The bar closes at one and I’m stuck here till then, maybe a quarter after. You’re more than welcome to head on up whenever.”

“I’m good here.”

Aiden nods and rinses and wrings out his bar cloth.

Kent Shaffer, Tim McAllister, Scott Hudson, and Ben Thompson push through the double doors talking over each other and laughing and claim Aiden’s attention. Thank goodness. If he spends too much time thinking about Jake Hardison spending the night, he might spontaneously combust.

“Hey, guys,” he says, following the foursome to their usual spot in the corner.

Scott and Ben sit close and tangle their ankles together under the table. A tendril of wistfulness curls around Aiden’s heart. He misses that kind of closeness.

“Aiden, my man, what’s up?” asks Kent, extending his hand.

Aiden slides his hand into Kent's and shakes his head. He resists looking in Jake's direction. "Not much." Just the most exciting thing to happen to him since Coldplay came to North Texas.

Kent raises a brow as if sensing Aiden's evasion. They've been friends a long time, but now's not the time or place for *that* conversation.

"We missed you at the high school, although we did kick Dooley's ass," says Tim, grinning from ear to ear. "That's why we're here. For a celebratory drink. The usual?"

Aiden nods. "Sorry I missed the epic takedown. Johanna's daughter had a recital, so we traded shifts." Although what with taking Jake home tonight, he can't be entirely sorry he missed the weekly pick-up basketball game. He turns his attention to Ben. "How're Misty and your parents?"

Ben pulls his gaze from Scott, and both of them look up at Aiden. Ben says, "Everyone's good, thanks. Misty's lamenting the end of the school year, but Ma is celebrating."

Chuckles rumble around the table.

"Can't say as I blame her," Aiden says. "Teaching high schoolers isn't for the faint of heart."

"Middle schoolers are no picnic either," says Tim. "A principal's job is never done."

"Let me get your drinks."

Aiden finds a tray with three bottles of beer and a Long Island Iced Tea ready and waiting. "Thanks, Rick," he says and whisks the drinks back to his friends.

They banter with him while he cleans and closes down sections of the bar. This late, he's not really expecting any other patrons since everyone knows when O'Leary's Pub locks its doors. Despite the distraction of his friends, there's a conversation going on between Jake and Rick that has piqued his attention. They're both military, although Rick has been out of the service for close to twenty-five years now. Aiden has no idea what they could be talking about, and the possibilities are making him nervous.

His friends head out shortly before midnight and Rick leaves shortly after. The last diehard stumbles out the door at five minutes till one. Aiden turns the deadbolts, slips the slide locks into place, and swipes a hand over a bank of light switches. The faint glow of rope lights provides enough illumination for him to traverse the bar. But, hell, he's spent half his life in this bar and can navigate it in the dark.

A mild case of nerves assaults him—he is about to do dirty, sexy things with Jake Hardison of all people.

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Jake marks Aiden's progress through the bar. The wide shoulders, the bulges of his biceps stretching the sleeves of his tee shirt, the trim waist. Aiden tosses his half-apron to the bar and slides his hands down the front of his denim-clad legs. Long legs, muscular thighs.

*A-hem...* he's pretty sure they're on the same page, but still.

"You ready?" Aiden asks.

Jake's been ready for the last half hour. Watching Aiden move around the place once his friends left, bending over to clean tables or nab something from the floor, the way his jeans hug his ass. Jake has a raging boner. Only one way to get rid of it.

But that's not what Aiden means. "Lead the way."

Jake follows him down the narrow hall, past the restrooms, to the back of the establishment. The door on the left leads to the kitchens, the door straight ahead is the emergency exit. Aiden pushes the metal bar a couple of times and seems satisfied that it's properly locked. Tugging a key from his front pocket, he opens the door to the right marked PRIVATE, and Jake shadows him up the stairs. Light from the alley streams in through the stained-glass window, highlighting the breadth of Aiden's shoulders. Jake adjusts his cock.

Jake had walked into O'Leary's with the intention of having a beer and then crashing at the motel farther up the highway. As soon as he'd seen Aiden behind the bar, as soon as the grenade of mutual attraction had exploded between them,



he'd planned a mission: getting into Aiden's bed and body. If nothing else, he'll leave town with a memorable and eminently satisfying fuck under his belt.

But in the four hours he's been here, Jake has listened to Aiden trade quips with his customers and his friends as well as the bartender, Rick. Aiden asked about new babies and old grannies. He even keeps a tub of dog treats behind the bar for a customer with a dog.

Smart, sassy, sexy. Funny, friendly. Caring, compassionate. Did he mention sexy? Gorgeous body aside, what Jake wouldn't give for a person like Aiden in his life.

Unlocking a second door at the top of the stairs, Aiden pushes into a tidy little apartment. "Why don't you have a place to stay?" he asks, tossing his keys on the chest-high counter that separates the small kitchen from the living room. Three recessed lights cast small circles of illumination on the shiny granite. The apartment boasts mostly polished wood just like the bar downstairs, but with enough fabric and color to make it a comfortable and inviting living space. Lemon-scented cleaner hangs in the cool air.

"I pissed my sister-in-law off and she kicked me out." He hadn't been joking exactly, but who knew Callie was that much of a prude?

"That bad, huh?"

"I said that maybe she needed a good spanking. She got all het up and replied that if any man, including Brock, ever laid a hand on her, she'd be out the door so fast my head would spin. I explained that in the BDSM community, spanking is used for pleasure as well as discipline." He shrugs. "When things finally clicked in her head, she turned a dozen shades of red and made me leave."

Color creeps up Aiden's neck. "Are you into that?" he asks.

Jake shakes his shorn head. "Not really. But I read a lot. There's almost always time to kill while traveling, and there's always something to learn, so I read."

Jake finds himself pressed to the wall with Aiden's hands on his ass and Aiden's tongue in his mouth, but he sure as hell isn't complaining. They're equally

matched as far as height and heft go, and the solid weight against him is a nice change of pace. His own strength won't be much of a concern.

Aiden grinds his cock against Jake's and the friction, despite four layers of clothing between them, sets Jake's blood on fire and his hips surge forward without much input from his brain. He hasn't fucked a man in years, and he's forgotten how much the hardness of a man's body turns him on. Aiden's is powerfully built and hits every tick box on Jake's list.

Aiden kisses across Jake's jaw and noses beneath his ear. He sucks lightly on the skin at Jake's pulse point before pulling back to ask, "Can I mark you?"

Aiden's blown pupils take Jake's breath away. "Fuck. Yeah. But only under my tee shirt and shorts." His voice has gone gruff under the onslaught of Aiden's attention.

Aiden's fingers slide under Jake's shirt, pushing the cotton up. Jake takes a moment to yank it off. Aiden sucks a bruise into his left pec before licking away the sting. He works his way down Jake's torso, and, fuck, what a turn on. The hickeys will probably fade by the time his leave ends and he returns to Florida though. Unless Jake can convince Aiden to spend all his free hours in a bed with him for the next week or so.

Jake gasps and peers down his body. Aiden noses at Jake's cock. Big eyes, more black than brown, peer back. Jake's mouth goes dry at the look of want that paints Aiden's face with high spots of color.

"I want your dick in my mouth," Aiden says.

Jake's hips buck in response. "*Hoo ah.*"

Aiden unbuttons and unzips Jake's jeans, tugging them and Jake's black briefs down to hug his thighs. Jake's cock, heavy with need, falls forward. Aiden grips the shaft before taking the tip into his mouth. Jake groans and drops his head to the wall at the delicious sensation. He can't remember the last time he got a blow job.

Aiden licks a stripe up Jake's cock before mouthing at his balls, running a nose along the crease of his thigh. Then he's back to sucking, hollowing his cheeks

every time he pulls back.

Jake settles a hand on Aiden's head. "That feels really fuckin' good."

Aiden hums and the vibrations travel up Jake's spine and make his scalp prickle.

Jake's thighs and stomach quiver as he inches toward the edge. Aiden starts stroking and swirling his tongue around the head, dipping into the slit. He does it twice more, and Jake's breathing shorts out. His glutes clench and electricity dances up his spine. "Christ, Aiden, I'm gonna come." His fingers clench in the soft strands of Aiden's hair, and his hips push forward for more contact as his orgasm tears through him.

Aiden swallows and, once Jake's done, he rises, looking charmingly debauched. Jake pulls him forward and cements their mouths together in a slow dirty slide of lips and tongues, not minding the taste of himself on Aiden's tongue.

"Bed. Now," Jake gruffs. He wants to see Aiden's body. Wants to take him apart.

A small lamp illuminates Aiden's bedroom. Pictures of the O'Learys litter the surface of the dresser. Several shirts are draped over the wing of the moss-colored chair in the corner, and socks and underwear are piled on the seat. Jake's only interested in the unmade queen-sized bed.

Aiden's stepping out of his pants and underwear and stripping off his socks. Jake's firming up again at the sight of all that pale flesh and Aiden's sculpted ass. He peels off his own clothes in a hurry and tackles Aiden to the mattress, grinding his reburgeoning erection along Aiden's. Jake pins Aiden's wrists to the bed above his head and rolls his hips. They exchange sloppy wet kisses, and as much as Jake wants to get his cock in Aiden's ass, this slower pace is nice too. The easy affection and comforting touch of a relationship is one of the things he misses most since he and Renate filed for divorce. That and her delicious German cooking. The sex was pretty good too. But this... He's missed sex with a man. More than he realized.