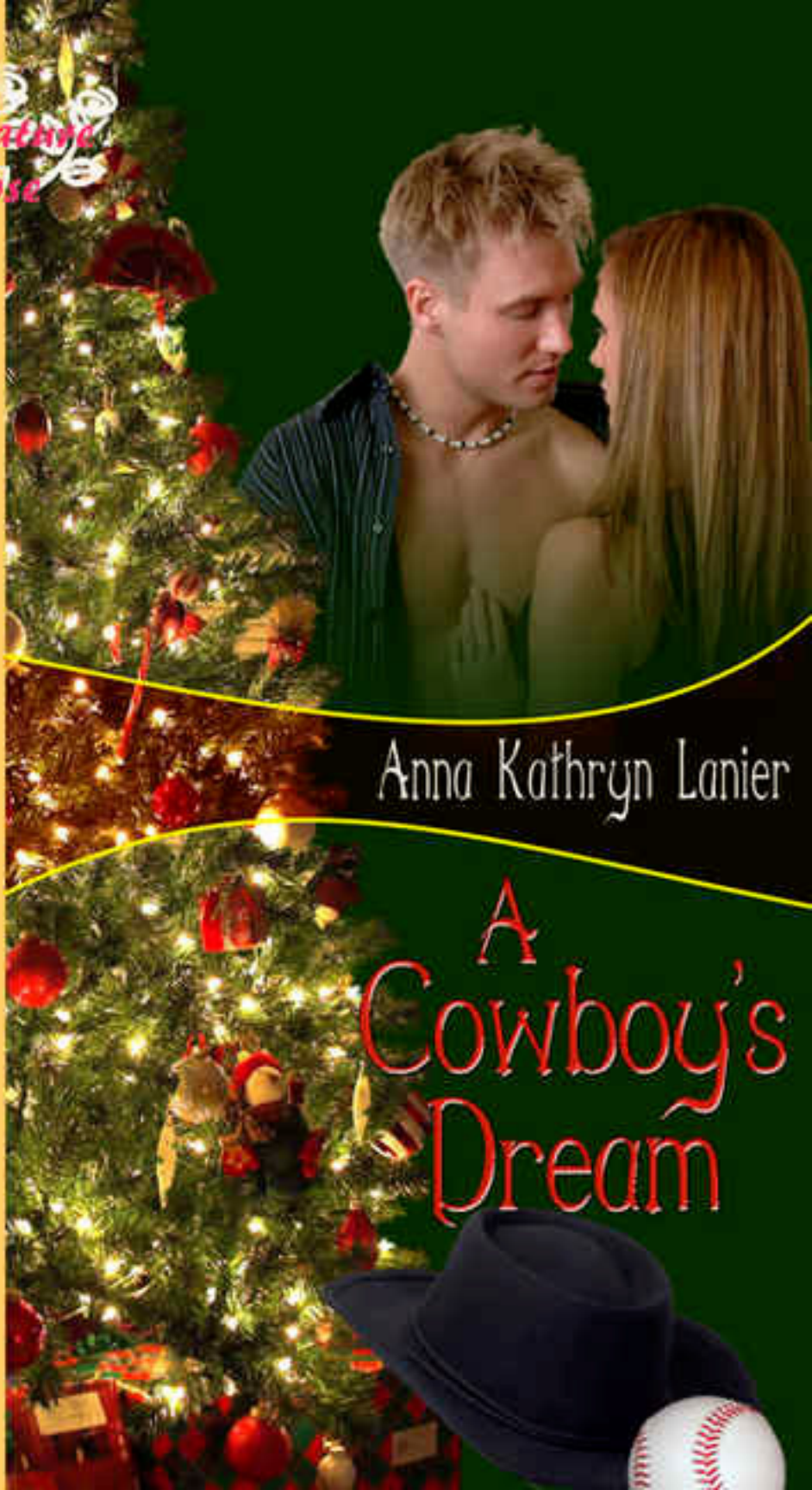


Yellow Rose

*Miniature
Rose*



Anna Kathryn Lanier

A Cowboy's Dream



A Cowboy's Dream
by Anna Kathryn Lanier

The Wild Rose Press

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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First Yellow Rose Edition, 2008

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Dedication

To my daughters, Tiffany and Holly.

Here's a book you can read without going "How'd she learn about that?"

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Comments for The Priceless Gift

"Ms. Lanier hooked me from the first sentence."

~ Jannine Corti Petska

"A fun and sexy read!"

~ Anne Carrole

"Anna Kathryn Lanier has written a wonderful heartwarming story just perfect to stuff in someone's stocking for Christmas!"

~ Highland Lassie's Reviews

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One

"Not again." Leah Smith swore under her breath as she strode into the warm lobby of the Kemah Towers Condominiums. She barely noticed the fifteen foot Christmas tree, glittering in the spacious foyer as her gaze fastened on Marcus Slade, sexy professional baseball player and her upstairs neighbor. *Why do I always run into him when looking my least glamorous?* Jogging may have worked out the kinks, but her old sweat gear made her look like a homeless waif. *Just once, I'd like to run into him when I look hot.*

With his back to her, she was treated to an enticing view of Marcus's taunt denim-clad backside as he leaned against the reception desk. He not only looked as if he'd stepped out of a Home-On-The-Range catalog, in his signature plaid shirt, denims and cowboy boots, he looked one hundred percent male. A well-worn black Stetson sat on the counter beside his elbow as he spoke with the concierge, Mr. Garfield.

She darted a glance about the lobby. Could she get to the elevators without the men noticing her? Just as the thought crossed her mind, Marcus turned his head and met her gaze. She nodded a brief acknowledgement and quickened her pace toward the bank of elevators, intent on getting out of his range of vision as soon as possible.

"Ms. Smith," Mr. Garfield called.

She fisted a hand. Why did the man have to single her out when she was almost home free? Slowing her pace, she glanced his way. "Yes?"

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He gave her a broad grin. "That package you've been expecting arrived."

A thrill shot through her as she pivoted toward the reception desk. Mr. Garfield placed a medium-sized box on the counter.

The concierge wagged a finger. "Don't forget, you promised my missus an autographed copy. She said she couldn't put down your last novel and, well, I have to say, I didn't mind the fringe benefits either." Mr. Garfield, all of sixty, winked at her.

She grinned back. "That's a really nice compliment. I'll bring down a copy as soon as I can."

Her gaze slid to Marcus, who still leaned lazy and nonchalant against the counter.

"Afternoon, ma'am," Marcus drawled.

"Good afternoon," she replied.

His Nordic blue eyes grazed over her body. Even though shivers of desire spiraled through her, she wondered what was he looking for? What could he possibly see under her shapeless gray sweats?

His gaze traveled back to her face and he grinned. She returned a tentative smile, anxious to get out of the hunk's sight when she looked so ... so unspectacular. She grabbed up the box of her latest novel, and staggered a step. She'd forgotten how much forty books weighed. Drawing in a fortifying breath, she turned toward the elevators.

Marcus pushed away from the desk. "May I carry that for you?"

Shaking her head, she smiled. "Thanks, but I have it."

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Reaching the elevators, she shifted the box in her arms and strained to reach the call button. A large, bronzed hand extended past hers to push the disc. She glanced behind her. Marcus stood a foot away, his Stetson atop his neatly cropped blond hair.

"You sure I can't help?"

She rebalanced the box awkwardly. *It is heavy.* "If you're sure it's no trouble?"

"I don't see how it could be, ma'am. You're on my way." He reached for the box, his hand brushing hers.

Fire shot up her arm. "O-on your way?" She rubbed the spot he'd touched.

"Yeah. You live on the sixteenth floor and I'm on the twentieth." He lifted his shoulder, plaid shirt shifting before settling once more. "You're on my way."

She laughed as the elevator doors slid open and he followed her into the small compartment. Every fiber of her being was aware of the Houston Roughrider's centerfielder who took up more than his fair share of the elevator's tiny space.

The polished brass doors slid closed. With a stifled groan, she stared at their reflection in the shiny surface as the car ascended toward the sixteenth floor. As usual, he was impeccably dressed, and she looked like ... *crap*. A lifeless pony tail with sweat drenched tendrils plastered to her skin. The cool December air had chapped her cheeks, turning them red, and not in a flattering way. She was as far removed from the cover models she'd seen him with as a gladiator in a ballet.

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He juggled the box in his arms. "Mr. Garfield mentioned once that you wrote, but he didn't say what you wrote."

She cocked her head and looked up at him, something she wasn't used to doing. Being five feet ten, she stood eye to eye with most men. But Marcus, at six feet four, towered over her.

"He didn't? How odd."

He studied her for a moment, then smiled. "Is it a secret?"

"Now what good would that do me, if I kept my writing a secret?"

"Then what do you write?"

She let out a sigh. "Historical Romance."

He cocked a brow. "Really? You mean those books where a bare-chested man is ripping off the woman's clothes?"

Typical response.

Unfortunately, her newest cover was pretty close to his description. *A Cowboy's Dream* featured a desperado hunk with his shirt ripped open, sculptured pecs and six-pack abs gleaming as he clutched the heroine in a passionate embrace. "Yeah, that would be the books."

His eyes did a slow, seductive scan of her body. "Interesting."

What did that mean?

The elevator smoothed to a stop and the doors opened. Marcus close on her heels, Leah stepped off and dug her keys out of her pocket. She unlocked the door, then turned to take the box from him.

"That's okay. I've got it," he said.

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She bit her lower lip. How often had she'd tried to think of a way to get him into her condo? If she'd known it would've been this easy, she'd have ordered forty copies of her last book and hung around the lobby with the box until Marcus showed up.

"Okay." She pushed the door open and led him into her home.

She glanced around the open, airy living room. A few days worth of newspapers were scattered on the leather couch and an empty glass and half eaten bag of chips sat on the glass-topped coffee table. A bare Christmas tree stood in one corner of the room, four boxes of decorations beside it. Considering she was under a deadline for her next book, it didn't look half-bad.

For a moment, her eyes settled on the baseball reverently held in a glass box on the back of her bookshelf. What would Marcus think if he noticed the signed ball and realized exactly what it and the nearby scrapbook were?

She bit her lower lip. It wasn't as if she'd bought the ball at an auction. Marcus had given it to her himself. It was one of the reasons she'd followed his professional career so closely. Though he didn't know it, she'd had a connection with him from the beginning, but some people might consider the in-depth scrapbook stalking.

And she did *not* want him thinking she was a stalker.

He shifted the box of books and, with a wave of her hand, she gestured toward the granite-topped kitchen bar and away from the bookshelf. "You can put it over there."

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He set the box on the bar, then sat on one of her Maplewood barstool. He stretched his long legs out before him, placed his Stetson beside his elbow and smiled. Her gaze settled on his sensual lips and she wondered what he'd do if she kissed him. Would he be disgusted by her forwardness or would he kiss her back? And what would it feel like to be held in his arms, pulled close to his well-muscled body as her hands undid the buttons of his jeans.

"So, you going to open it?" he asked.

Her gaze darted to his fly, then back to his face. Surely, he hadn't been reading her mind. "Open what?" she squeaked

He quirked a brow. "The box?"

"Oh, right. The box."

She blew out a breath and pulled a steak knife from a drawer. Her hand shook as his eyes watched her every move. She sliced through the tape and tugged open the cardboard flaps. She couldn't hide her smile as forty copies of *A Cowboy's Dream* stared back.

Marcus leaned over and peered into the box. "Mm-hmm."

Her cheeks heated with a blush. She wanted to close the flaps and hide the tell-tale cover. The blond model was every fantasy she'd had of Marcus. Her own blond-haired, blue-eyed cowgirl's dream of what Marcus would be like riding the range, catching the bad guys and saving the damsels in distress.

Marcus reached into the box and picked up a book. She slapped his hand and grabbed for her baby.

"Hey, *I* haven't held that book yet."

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Eyes intent on the cover, he pushed her hand away and held the book out of reach. "Ellen Saxton. 'A New York Best Selling Author.'" His gaze met hers. "No wonder I didn't know what you wrote. You use a pseudonym. My mom reads you."

"Really?" Pleasure spiraled through her. It was one thing for loved ones to say they liked your stories, but hearing strangers liked them never ceased to amaze her.

"Yeah." He raised his gaze from the blurb on the back cover. "So, did you grow up on a ranch?"

She didn't follow his line of thought. "What?"

He jiggled the book in his hand. "It's about cowboys, right? Do you have first hand knowledge of a working ranch?"

"Oh, right. No, I didn't grow up on one, but my uncle owns a ranch. I spent several summers there. He was a big help with the details. Did you?" *Now, why'd I ask that when I already know the answer?*

"Yep. Texas born and bred. My family lives outside Salvation, near Bryan, on a ranch that's been in our family for over a hundred and seventy-five years."

Okay, she hadn't known *that*. Hands on the bar, she leaned toward him. "Were your ancestors here before the Texas War for Independence in 1836?"

"Yep. My great-great ... well, I'm not sure how many greats it was, but great-whatever granddaddy got a land grant for being a war veteran. His son fought in the Civil War." He laid the book beside her hand. "In 1873, he bought a neighboring ranch and doubled the size of the Lazy S." He gazed at her askew, a twinkle in his blue eyes. "He bought it with a dowry he got from his mail-order bride."

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The author in Leah perked up. She leaned in closer across the granite. "Really? They were quite common in the west where women were scarce."

"That's true. Laura Ashton Slade was also a fully trained doctor." He shifted on the stool.

"In 1873?" Her history persona perked up, too. "Now, that wasn't as common. How'd that come about?"

Marcus shook his head. "I'd have to ask my mother. She's the expert on our family history, but I believe she was trained by a relative, rather than attending medical school."

Leah nodded and tucked the information away for future research. Female doctors in the old west did exist, but they were few and far between. The kernel of a possible story started formulating in the back of her mind.

Chewing her lower lip, her eyes settled on Marcus. *Crap*. With her very own cowboy standing in her living room, now wasn't the time to plot out a book.

She straightened away from the bar, brushing at imaginary crumbs.

"So, do you still live on the ranch?"

"Not the Lazy S, but close by it. I bought a spread of my own a few years back. I plan to live on the Triple A after I retire from baseball. I have fifteen hundred acres and several hundred head of cattle. By some standards, it's rather small."

"Yeah, right." She rolled her eyes.

He gave her a boyish grin and picked up the book. "Can I get an autographed copy for my mom? She's going to kill me when she learns I've lived in the same building with Ellen Saxton and never realized it."

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"Sure." Leah reached for a pen. Their fingers brushed when she took the book from his hand. Was it the contact or the thrill of holding her book for the first time that made her breathless?

Choosing the safe bet, she caressed the cover for a few seconds. "It always amazes me to see my words in actual book form. You have no idea what it's like. You live, breathe, eat, and sleep the book. The characters actually come alive and move in with you. You shape and raise them almost as if they were a child." She stroked the cover again. "The end result is this. Opening that box is almost as sacred as giving birth."

Marcus nodded as if he understood. "I'm sure it's the same as hitting a game-winning grand slam in the World Series."

She laughed until she noticed his odd expression, brows knitted and eyes narrowed, yet mouth tilted up in a bewildered grin. Her own smile faded. *Why is he staring at me that way?*

"Well, having witnessed a couple of grand slams, I can tell you they *are* pretty exciting," she spoke quickly into the odd silence. As a season ticket holder for the Roughriders, she'd been in the stadium in October when Marcus hit one during the World Series. Her finger tapped the box of books. "This may not be quite as exciting as winning the World Series, though it may equal winning the pennant."

Marcus grinned and her stomach did a flip. Did he have any idea what he did to her? Would it matter if he did? She had no illusions about her looks. Pretty though she was, she

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was not cover girl material—the blonde, buxom models Marcus appeared to like best.

She returned the smile, pushing away thoughts of Marcus's women. For this moment, he was *hers* and hers alone. Since it would most likely never be repeated, she planned to enjoy it.

Placing the book on the counter, she opened it to the title page. "What's your mother's name?"

"Jean." He leaned over to read as she wrote.

She closed the book and handed it to him. Once again, their fingers brushed and heat sizzled up her arm.

He stared at her hand a moment, then cleared his throat. Raising his gaze to her face, he smiled. "So, how are you going to celebrate?"

"Celebrate? Oh, I hadn't thought about it." She glanced around the kitchen. She hadn't shopped in over a week. When on a deadline, fast food worked best. She lifted her hands palm-up and frowned. "I don't have a beer, let alone a wine cooler."

He went slack-jawed. "You don't have a beer?"

"No, not even a light beer. Though I might have some tequila about." She glanced toward a cabinet near her bare Christmas tree, then back.

He stared, squint-eyed, at her Christmas tree. "Expecting elves to decorate for you?"

She came around the counter to stand beside him, then wished she hadn't. Forget the tequila. His body heat warmed her through the jogging suit and his aftershave intoxicated

her. She blew out a slow breath. "No, aside from the fact I've been under a deadline, I'm a traditionalist."

He glanced her way, blue eyes sparkled with curiosity. "A traditionalist?"

"Hmmm, yes. I decorate on Christmas Eve and celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas, December twenty-sixth through January sixth."

He leaned a hip against the granite bar. "Do you exchange gifts every day then, too?"

She shrugged. "When I have someone to exchange with."

"And you won't this year?"

Great, now she not only appeared to be a waif, she'd sound like one, too. "No. My parents are in Australia doing an archeological dig. They won't be back until the middle of February. I'm an only child."

"An archeological dig?"

"Let's just say I had a very unusual upbringing. I suppose that's why I enjoy writing historical novels. I've been to many of the places I write about in my books."

"No kidding? That sounds exciting." He propped an elbow on the bar and leaned toward her. "Growing up on the ranch as I did, I never went anywhere outside Texas until I played ball for college."

She chuckled. "Not me. By the time I started high school, I had more stamps in my passport than most people have underwear."

His gaze slid lazily down her body. A hot shiver of desire swept through her at the glimmer of interest in his eyes.

"Well, I know one way to celebrate."

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Had his voice dropped an octave? "Do you now?" Had hers risen one?

He pushed off the counter and stepped toward her.
"Hmmm, yes, ma'am. Change into some celebrating clothes and I'll be back in an hour. I know a great restaurant to celebrate grand slams ... as well as book births."

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Two

Marcus crossed his living room and stared at the books neatly lining a shelf. He shook his head—he hadn't kissed her. Oh, he'd wanted to and he was certain she wanted to be kissed, but he hadn't kissed her. He shook his head again.

Since first laying eyes on his raven-haired, downstairs neighbor he'd felt an unfamiliar pull toward her. He'd wanted to ask her out on a date, but wasn't sure how to do it. She wasn't the sort of woman he'd dated since his divorce. He understood those women—they only wanted him for arm candy and a roll in the hay. To them he was a professional ball player they could brag about to their friends. None of them wanted a long-term, committed, monogamous relationship.

From their few encounters, with her down-to-earth attitude and reserved manner, he knew Leah wasn't someone you roped in just for kicks. She had substance and heart—the type of woman you settled down with.

He pulled a book from the shelf and flipped through it before stopping on a familiar page.

His blue eyes darkened and his breath hitched. He was going to kiss her and she welcomed it. His mouth hovered over hers a fraction of a second, then claimed it with savage intensity, claiming her as his very own.

Had Leah observed his eyes darkening and breath hitching? He shifted to loosen his snug-fitting jeans. He hoped she hadn't noticed *that* obvious sign of desire.

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Gritting his teeth, he glanced over the rest of the words printed before him, a pretty hot sex scene. His breath hitched again and he snapped the book closed to return *Colin's Desire* by Ellen Saxton to the shelf holding every book the author had written. The author he hadn't known lived below him, but who teased his desire with her stories *and* her body, giving him fantasies of finding that special someone he could claim as *his* very own.

He booted up his computer and clicked on Ellen Saxton's website. His eyes narrow at the picture glowing back at him from the monitor. How had he not been able to tell she was Leah Smith? She had the same raven hair, the same dark eyes. But he'd never seen her made up the way she was in the glamour picture. Normally, when he spied her, she was dressed casually, like today. That's how he knew her—easy going, laid back. A natural woman.

He clicked through her website. A new page of candid shots showed her at book signings, conferences and with family and friends. He stared at the recently added pictures of a more familiar Leah. There was something about her—there always had been—that he couldn't quite put his finger on. A feeling deep in his soul—almost as though they'd met before. But it was elusive and he could never quite grasp the occasion. Besides, wouldn't she have mentioned it if they had?

Snapping off the computer, he shoved away from the desk. Mysteries were something he disliked and this elusive connection with Leah was a big one.

He hoped to discover some answers tonight.

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Blowing out a breath, he glanced around his own apartment. A decorated tree sat in a corner, boughs of greenery hung from his bar and two stockings were tacked to the wall. His mom, knowing he wouldn't decorate since he was heading to his brother's for Christmas, had decked the halls for him.

Looking around, he decided he liked Leah's idea of decorating on Christmas Eve and keeping everything up until Epiphany. It put the meaning of Christmas back into the holiday.

Turning, he headed into the bathroom for a quick shower. It'd been a long time since he had felt so excited about a date. Could this be the beginning of *claiming a woman as his very own*? If so, he sure didn't want to blow it.

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Three

The mouthwatering scents of seared steak wafted around Leah as Marcus escorted her into the world famous Kemah Steak House. Her stomach grumbled, a reminder she hadn't eaten since early morning.

The hostess greeted Marcus by name and he smiled warmly in return. Leah glanced at him, wondering how often he came to the restaurant. Celebration dinners should be rare, not weekly—unless you found an excuse to celebrate every little thing. But what made them special then?

She slid into the booth and mentally shook her head. No matter what Marcus did in the past, this was *her* celebratory dinner. She smiled as he sat opposite her and determined to enjoy his company for as long as she had it.

The hostess handed them menus. "Would you like something from the bar, Mr. Slade?"

Marcus placed his Stetson on the booth cushion and raised a brow to Leah.

"Whatever they have on tap will be fine," she said.

He grinned and nodded. "Two beers, please."

Glancing at his 'celebration clothing,' she was glad she'd summed him up right. She'd nearly put on the nine hundred dollar designer gown she planned to wear to next month's charity fund raiser. However, at the last minute, she went over what she knew about Marcus Slade. Celebrity though he may be, he was still a cowboy at heart. Instead of the silk and satin confection she'd thought to wear, she pulled on crisp

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blue jeans and a simple button-up blouse. The result matched his jeans and western-styled shirt well.

Leah opened the menu and glanced over it. "You're a man after my own heart. There's nothing better to celebrate with than a cold beer and a good steak."

He jerked back as if surprised. "You mean to say you'll actually order a steak?"

"Of course." She laughed, pushing her hair behind her ear. "What's the point of going to a steak house and not ordering a steak?"

He opened his mouth, but then shut it for a moment before uttering, "Truth be told, most of the women I know don't eat much meat."

That was no surprise. Most of the women she'd seen him with were the size of twigs—except in the bosom area—and probably ate weeds.

"Well, I hope you brought along your charge card," she teased. "I haven't eaten much today and I'm starving. I plan to order a *really* big steak with all the fixings to celebrate."

Marcus laughed. "Honey, the day I can't afford to buy a pretty lady a steak is the day I'll hang it up for good."

Her heart fluttered at the endearment. Sure, it was common enough for Texans to drop *honey* and *darling* like hello and good-bye, but still, hearing it from Marcus made her insides quiver.

When he glanced down to study his menu, Leah released a small sigh. Since she was a Roughrider's fan and a season ticket holder, she'd known who Marcus was before he moved into The Towers. To say she had a crush on him was probably

an understatement, but she'd never suffered from delusions, either. Leah Smith, plain, average daughter of nomad archeologists just wasn't the type of woman the major league outfielder dated. As much as she wished differently, she shouldn't read more into this 'date' than what it was—a friendly, celebratory meal.

The waiter appeared with their beers and she turned her thoughts back to the present as Marcus asked him for a few more minutes before they ordered.

He tapped his fingertips on the table. "Can I confess something?"

A confession? This should be good. Leah sipped her beer and nodded.

He licked his lips, then took what seemed to be a fortifying drink. "I know what you write."

She laughed. "Yeah, I know. You were there when I opened the box. You said your mom reads me."

"No ... I mean, yes." His cheeks pinked to a cute shade of embarrassment. He stared intently into her eyes. "I mean, I've read everything you've ever written."

The world stopped moving. Hadn't a character in one of her novels said that once? Now Leah knew exactly what it meant. "N-no, you couldn't have."

He gave her a sidelong glance. "Darlin', one of these days I hope to have you in my home and you'll see all your books displayed on the shelf I have dedicated to you, or rather Ellen Saxton, and then you'll wonder just when I bought them all."

And I thought I'd be seen as a stalker. A shelf dedicated to me? Wow. She swallowed a mouthful of her beer and watched him carefully as he continued.

He caught her gaze and held up his hands. "Now, don't go thinking I'm weird or anything. I just want you to know now I bought them over the last four years, ever since I first read one of your books. I think I picked it up at an airport."

Hmm, well, I do have shelves of my favorite authors. I just never thought someone would have one dedicated to me, let alone that person would be a man.

She knew men read romance novels. A recent report said they made up twenty-two percent of romance readers. She studied Marcus, someone she'd consider one hundred percent male. She'd never picture him, or any pro athlete for that matter, being part of that twenty-two percent.

"Why did you buy a romance novel? More important, weren't you afraid of being teased by your team mates?"

He laughed and twirled a fork in his fingers. "Nope. Four of them asked me for the book before I finished it. You'd be surprised how many of us athletes read romance. It's a great way to kill time in hotels, airports and airplanes."

"You know, that's unbelievable." She pushed her hair over her shoulder and leaned back. "The romance market should be putting ads in sports magazines."

He nodded. "Probably be very good advertising."

Leah chewed on her lower lip, still surprised to learn he read not only romance, but her books, too. "So, was mine the first romance novel you ever read?"

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"No, ma'am." He laid down the fork. "I've been reading romance for nearly twenty years, ever since I was fourteen and had leukemia. I spent a year in and out of the hospital, my mom doggedly by my side. To keep us both from going stir crazy, she read to me what she liked to read—romance novels."

He leaned across the table and whispered, "It wasn't until later that I learned she left out some of the best parts."

"Really?" She leaned forward, too. "What do you consider 'some of the best parts?'"

His eyes twinkled with merriment. "The love scenes, of course."

"Of course." She raised her brows in amusement.

Marcus cleared his throat. "Anyway, after I picked up that first book I searched out all of your other books and passed them along to my mother. She loves your work, too. We've had discussions on them and your characters. Her favorite is *Knight of Honor*. Mine is Bridget and George's book, *Knight of Lust*."

Leah swatted him on the forearm. "I don't have a book called *Knight of Lust*. Bridget and George's story is *Knight of Duty*."

Marcus's gaze searched her face, settling for a brief moment on her lips. Her mouth went dry and she licked her lips. His eyes darkened for a moment.

"It should have been called *Knight of Lust*," he said. "George was certainly a lusty enough fellow."

Leah's cheeks burned. She licked her lips again and his gaze flicked to her mouth once more. *Is he thinking of the*

love scenes I've written, the kisses and the passion my characters shared? Does he think I'm as good as I write?

She shook herself free of those thoughts. "It's what makes them romance heroes, Marcus. Of course, after the hero meets the heroine, he lusts after her, but only until he falls in love with her."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Leah. Seems to me, even after your heroes fall for the fair maidens, they lust after them and continue to do so until their dying day."

Leah grinned. "'Tis the Happily-Ever-After Syndrome."

"Happily-ever-after," he muttered. "Is that something *you* believe in?"

Leah thought of her almost marriage to a low-down scoundrel. Having betrayed her in the worst way, she sometimes questioned if happily-ever-afters really existed outside of romance novels.

Meeting Marcus's inquisitive gaze full on, she wondered if he believed. He was, she knew, divorced from his high school sweetheart. Their seven-year marriage had ended several years before without children.

Leah looked away from his gaze. "I don't *not* believe in it. I just haven't found my knight of honor, duty or lust yet." She glanced at the menu in her hands. The words swam before her eyes. She ought to decide what she wanted to eat. Instead, she was too aware of the man sitting across from her to concentrate on the menu. She finally cleared her throat. "What about you, do you still believe?"

His blue eyes pierced hers with enough intensity to burn her soul.

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"You mean do I still believe in love?" He shrugged and stared into his beer, his nod barely perceptible. "For a few years after my divorce, I didn't. I'd loved Kristi for so long I didn't think I could love another woman. We were seventeen when we started dating, twenty when we married. She was there during my college career, my time in the minors, my big break with the majors."

He looked at Leah, then glanced away, as if the thoughts were hard to bare. "She's not a bad person. She just didn't know what she wanted for herself. Turned out, it wasn't me." He shrugged as if to displace the pain. "Seems as soon as I made it big, she wanted the small town life again, but how could I turn back? I'd fought too hard to get where I was. I'd dreamed of being in the majors since I was a kid." He sipped his beer. "She served me with divorce papers, went back to Salvation and married the owner of the car dealership." His gaze returned to Leah. "I'm not looking for the kind of love I had with Kristi. That was a teenage lust love. Now, I want someone I can laugh with, I can share with, I can talk with and listen to. I guess what I really want is a best friend who is also my lover."

Leah sucked in a breath. That was more than she ever expected him to reveal.

He reached over and toyed with her fingers. "After Kristi left me, I was insecure. Women flocked around me and I enjoyed the attention. I didn't feel like such a loser."

Leah felt his pain. Worse, she understood it. The only difference, when Greg betrayed her, she'd not had a bevy of

male hunks beating down her door. She couldn't blame Marcus for taking what was offered.

"I was engaged once," she said. "*Colin's Desire* had just come out and was, as they say, an overnight success. I was busy traveling to promote it and planning the wedding. He said I wasn't there for him." She brushed back her hair. "Personally, I think he was jealous of my success. He'd never read any of my books. He said he would after we married, but I heard him tell his friends that I wasn't a *real* author since I only wrote romance novels." She fisted her free hand. "I can't believe I was still going to marry him after that remark."

"I take it you didn't marry him, after all?"

She withdrew her hand from his and clasped both hands on her lap. She gave an ironic laugh. "No. Two months before the wedding, he dumped me for a blonde whose bra size was bigger than her IQ."

He grimaced and jerked away to sit against the booth's back. She thought of the women he normally dated. From her observation, the woman Greg dumped her for strongly resembled the type Marcus dated.

She glanced at her less than average-sized breasts. That was one area she couldn't compete against them in.

"I'm sorry, Leah."

So was she. Breasts were always something men seemed to fixate on and she really did wish she had larger ones. She gave an inward smile. Fortunately or unfortunately, however, one wished to look at it, God had given her a high IQ instead a large bra size. If not for that, she'd have married Greg and never written another word.

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She met Marcus's gaze and realized he wasn't talking about her breasts. She mentally shook herself. Was he apologizing for the way Greg had treated her? She waved away his concern with her hand.

"I was too, at the beginning, but what I know about him now, well, he did me a big favor by dumping me. That happened five years ago and he's on his second divorce already."

"Did he sour you on happy endings, though? Do you still believe?"

The intensity of his tone surprised her. She'd never expected the conversation to turn so personal.

"Is there hope?" he asked.

Hope for what? She ran a finger over the rim of her beer glass, staring at the amber liquid. What would he say if he knew she fantasized about him being her best hope for finding true love? Not that it could be a real possibility—how could she compete with the drop-dead gorgeous women he dated?

"Marcus! How are you, darling?"

Raising her gaze from her glass, she watched in horrified fascination as a buxom woman in a low-cut top and tight, leopard-print skirt kissed Marcus full on the lips.

Marcus visibly stiffened and pushed the woman away. "Monica, what are you doing?" He swiped his hand across his mouth, wiping the bright red lipstick onto his palm. Grabbing up a napkin, he cleaned off the lipstick.

She waved a well manicured hand in front of them and batted her eyes. "Having dinner, of course. Which reminds

me, I invited you to my dinner party last week and you didn't come."

"I told you I couldn't make it." He frowned, then smiled at Leah. "Do you know Leah Smith? Leah, Monica Ross."

The woman stared venomously at her.

Leah forced a smile. "How do you do?"

Monica shifted her gaze back to Marcus. "I'll be upset with you if don't come to my New Year's Eve party. *Everyone's* going to be there."

His fingers flexed on the table top. "I'm going to be out of town."

A redhead, similarly built and dressed as Monica, approached the table and draped an arm over the woman's shoulder. "Monica, we're being seated. Oh, Marcus! It's good to see you again. I thought you were going to join me in Colorado for some skiing over the weekend?"

Leah picked up her menu and examined the choices before her—and she wasn't thinking of the food. She could get up and smack both women upside their perfectly coiffed heads. She could get up and leave the restaurant. Or she could get up, go to the ladies room and scream in frustration. She took a long swig of her beer and stared at a picture of a baked potato piled high with all the fixings. Smacking them would be her favored option.

"Why don't you join us for dinner?" Monica asked. "There's no need for you to eat alone."

Leah snapped her head up. *Alone? Just what the hell am I? Furniture?*

"Oh, you must, Marcus," the redhead pleaded.

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His lips thinned and annoyance clouded his blue eyes. "I am *not* eating alone. However, Leah and I would like to *be* alone."

Both women swiveled their heads towards Leah and it was all she could do not to roll her eyes. No telling what they thought this dinner was about, but they certainly didn't think it was a date. Well, she agreed with them there. It wasn't a date. It was a friendly, celebratory meal between two people who would probably never dine out again with each other. If only the bimbos would go away and let them enjoy it.

Leah had never actually seen a woman pout, but here was one not three feet away, sticking out her fat bottom lip a mile and all for Marcus's benefit.

"Oh." Monica turned back to Marcus and kissed him again, though not quite as seductively as before. "Do come to my New Year's Eve party, Marcus. I'll be disappointed if you don't."

The red-head seemed to have a bit more sense than Monica. She refrained from kissing Marcus, though she did throw him a sensual smile as the women turned to leave.

"Sooo," Leah said, looking back at the menu. "What are you ordering?"

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged off his apology but it didn't quite displace the ache she felt in her heart. "You can't control how other people act," she replied.

She glanced at the retreating women. The evening wasn't as bright as it had been before their arrival. There was no way she could beat those types of women at their game. The

sooner she faced that, the sooner her heart would get over its ridiculous hope and move on. She returned her gaze to the menu.

"Having my date ignored is not something I'm used to."

She glanced up and smiled. "Being ignored is something I'm very used to, so don't let it upset you."

He sat against the booth's padded seat and studied her. "Why would you say that?"

He can't be that clueless. She laughed and waved a hand toward Monica's group of beautiful people. "Take a look at the women you hang out with, Marcus. Would you honestly look twice at me if we were all standing in the same room?"

He rubbed a hand roughly over his mouth again. "For those women I'm nothing more than a celebrity. Did you notice that neither one of them asked me how I was, nor what I'd been doing? Both just complained to me about not showing up at their shindigs."

"And yet, you continue to see them."

His eyes went icy and his back stiffened. Then the demeanor softened and he shook his head.

Leah held up a hand. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. It's just that I haven't eaten since this morning, and I tend to get cranky when I'm hungry. Shall we order our meal before they run out of steaks?"

He blew out a breath. "No, I'm sorry. We're supposed to be celebrating your newest release, not letting the kitchen run out of food." He picked up the menu. "All right, darlin', what are you ordering? I need to know if I have enough

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money on me to order my own steak or if I'll have to go with a salad."

She forced a laugh, hoping it would return the joy to the evening.

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Four

Marcus frowned. Leah withdrew from him as the meal went on. The two rounds of drinks Monica's group sent over didn't help matters. He mentally kicked himself. Damn Monica and every other woman he'd been with since his divorce. Sure, he was a red-blooded man and having sexy women cling to him did things for his ego and libido, but he was tired of it. He wanted more and none of the women he'd been dating could give him the companionship he now desired.

He couldn't take back the past few years and he didn't know if he wanted to. He just wished it hadn't walked up and kissed him. He'd been trying for a year to get a foot in Leah's door and he sure as hell wasn't going to pull it out now, not even if she slammed the portal on his toes.

He glanced her way, his breath catching at the way her creamy skin contrasted with her dark silky hair. Leah was a stunning woman in her own right. Midnight black hair, green eyes, high, exotic cheekbones. Tall and not matchstick thin either. There was something to hold onto with Leah and he wouldn't have to stoop to do it.

She was also a down to earth woman. The few times their paths crossed at the condo's parties or swimming pool, she'd never put on a fake smile or gushed all over him. She was warm and friendly, but also unfazed by his celebrity status. That in itself was refreshing.

He suppressed a smile as he thought of their meeting earlier in the day. She'd all but given him the brush-off,

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uncaring that she stood in front of the year's World Series' Most Valuable Player. Nor did she care that she looked as if she'd just come off a five-mile run, which he suspected she had. None of the women he'd dated would have been caught dead in that comfortable jogging suit without makeup, but Leah had no problem being herself.

He only hoped he hadn't blown his chance to see just how well she'd fit in his arms. His heart wondered if Leah was the woman he'd been looking for his whole life. *So, how do I get on her good side again? Make our friendship something long term and more intimate?*

"You're staring."

He smiled at the way she squinted her dark eyes suspiciously. "Is that a problem?"

She knitted her brows. "I don't know. I'm not used to being stared at by good-looking men."

"I hadn't realized the men in Houston were that blind."

She laughed and the soft sound twined its way around his heart.

"Does that line usually work?"

"I don't know. I've never used it before." He grinned and reached for her hand. She clasped her fingers around his palm and tentatively smiled back.

* * * *

"Do you want to go to Bubba's Bar?" he asked thirty minutes later as he opened the car's passenger door. Contrary to its name, Bubba's Bar was one of the better country-western bars in Houston, renowned for hosting some

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of the best country bands in the nation. Three nights before Christmas, though, Marcus figured a local band would be playing.

"Sure." Her gaze flitted down his body, then back up. "Do you Texas Two-step?"

"Hell, yeah. What God-fearing, Texas-bred boy doesn't?"

She slipped into the car and smiled. "I received Bubba's flyer earlier this week. One of my favorite groups is playing tonight."

"Great!" He closed the door and nearly ran around the car to the driver's side. He hoped her good mood continued at the bar.

The drive was short and full of conversation as they discussed their favorite singers and reminisced about some of the concerts they'd each attended. He took it as a good sign that she shared his musical interests.

After finding a table and ordering their drinks, he led Leah onto the dance floor. One thing for sure, she could two-step with the best of them and seemed to enjoy it as much as he did.

After a boisterous *Cotton-Eyed Joe*, followed by a line dance, he led her back to the table and their drinks. She collapsed into the saddleback chair, flushed, out of breath and satisfied—just how she'd look after a bout of love making.

He drew in a slow breath and reigned in his thoughts. There were a lot of steps that needed to be taken before they reached that particular dance.

"Oh, goodness. I haven't danced like that in months. This was a nice idea. Thanks."

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Marcus pulled his chair close to hers and grinned. "It's been a while for me, too."

Watching Leah's glowing eyes, he was glad he'd read her right. Monica and her friends didn't like honky-tonks, as they called them, uncouth and low-class by their standards. He'd always wondered what they'd do if they discovered he was co-owner of Salvation's one and only bar. He and his younger brother had bought it from Old Man Johnson. If people thought Bubba's was rustic, they hadn't seen The Red Door Saloon on Main Street, Salvation. Marcus was sure it was the original 1860's building that had housed not only a saloon, but a brothel as well.

He watched Leah. *I bet she'd be interested in knowing that. She sure seemed curious about my ancestors earlier. I'll have to remember to tell her about my bar later, when it's not so noisy.*

They watched a few dances while recovering from the exertion of the three they'd done. Out of the corner of his eye, he observed a young man approach their table. He fisted a hand as the man tipped his hat and asked Leah to dance.

She smiled politely. "Thanks, but I'm still catching my breath from my previous whirl around the dance floor."

Nodding to them both, he turned away. Marcus watched him retreat, his muscles relaxing more with the lengthening distance of the man.

"You could have danced with him," Marcus said, hoping he sounded far more congenial than he felt.

She leaned forward and whispered, "Did you note how tall he was?"

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Marcus glanced at the retreating figure, then back at Leah.

"He was a good five inches shorter than me," she said.

"With me sitting, I doubt he realized it. But he sure would have when I stood up."

Marcus laughed. Being shorter than his partner wasn't something he'd ever experienced. "It was nice of you to spare his feelings." He moved his chair closer to hers so he could hear her better over the music.

She sipped her beer, then grinned. "I've been taller than most of the males I've know since I was twelve. A good number don't take being with a taller woman very well."

He leaned in close, their faces only inches apart. "I wouldn't know about that, but I do know about the hardships of kissing a woman who's over a foot shorter than me."

She shot him a hard glance and opened her mouth to speak. Before she uttered a word, her eyes narrowed at something behind him. A finger tapped him on the shoulder and red-tipped nails slid into view down his arm.

"Marcus!"

What the hell is Monica doing here? He jerked around. Her group of friends stood with her. Four of them gaped about the bar, as if they'd never seen one before.

Tight-lipped, he nodded to them. "What are you doing here?"

"I was talking to Judith on the cell," Monica explained. "She said she saw you pull into Bubba's Bar. We thought we'd come join the fun."

With the scraping of chairs, people he didn't invite squeezed around the table. Monica pushed her chair between

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him and Leah, while Edmund Steward, a first class playboy, sat on the other side of Leah. His obnoxious cologne overpowered the smell of anything else.

Before Marcus could reach over and yank Edmund from his seat, Monica was on her feet, pulling him to his.

"Come on, Marcus. Dance with me."

"Monica—"

She wrenched at his throwing arm. "You skipped my dinner. You at least owe me a dance."

No, he didn't, but he'd have to make a scene to stop Monica and he didn't want that. Just his luck, the band struck up the first slow dance since he and Leah arrived. Monica smiled like a cat with cream and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

He glanced toward the table they'd just left. A malicious smile curled his lips as Edmund helped Leah out of her chair. The bastard was at least two inches shorter than her. Marcus caught her gaze and she pointedly lifted her chin.

Damn it. This wasn't how he'd plan things to go.

Monica moved against his body. In the past, he'd have reacted in a base manner. Now he wondered what he'd ever seen in such a shallow woman. Disgust tasted like bile in his throat, but he didn't know if it was more for Monica or himself.

"What are you up to?" He frowned down at her. Artificially violet-blue eyes blinked at him. This was at least the fourth tint he'd seen on her.

"What do you mean? I just wanted to dance with you." She moved her hips against him. He tasted bile again.

"I'm with another woman."

Monica laughed. "Who is she, your publicist?"

Marcus stopped dancing and Monica stumbled. She fell against his body, making no attempt to move away from him.

"What makes you assume she's my publicist?"

"Why else would you be with *her*?"

"What does that mean?"

Monica searched the dance floor and he followed her gaze until he spotted Edmund and Leah.

"Really, Marcus. Just look at her. She's as plain as they come."

"She happens to be an awarding winning writer of over a dozen books." Monica's laugh grated his nerves.

"A writer? Well, that explains the bookish looks. Oh, that's why you're with her. She's writing your biography, isn't she?"

He glared. One thing Leah didn't have was bookish looks. Another thing she didn't have was a mean bone in her body. He dropped his hand from Monica's arm and turned toward Edmund and Leah just as the playboy nuzzled against her ear and squeezed her bottom.

Jealous rage surged through his body.

Leah jerked back and slapped Edmund across the face. Before Marcus could push his way through the crowd, she fled the dance floor, stopped at the table long enough to retrieve her purse and ran out of the building.

Monica jerked his arm again. He glared at the woman.

"Let's get one thing straight, Monica. Whatever little relationship there was between us, is over. Don't ever call me again."

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He pulled his arm free and rushed into the parking lot to find the woman he wanted to be with ... and not just for the night.

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"Leah?"

She stopped punching numbers into her cell phone and glared at Marcus. Why couldn't he just leave her alone?

"I'm sorry. Let me take you home."

"No, it's fine." She pulled her gaze from his concerned face and continued punching numbers. "I'm calling Tessa to come get me. Go back to your friends."

His hand covered hers, preventing her from continuing. "I'm leaving and we're going to the same place. Let me take you home."

She tightened her grip but he pried the phone out of her hand and closed it. Humiliation and anger washed through her. She focused on a streetlight across the parking lot to regain her control.

"What did he say to you?" he asked gently.

She didn't need to ask who he meant. She could still feel Edmund's groping hands and clammy breath on her as he whispered into her ear. It had been a long time since she'd been so insulted. She blew out a breath and debated whether to tell Marcus what was said.

"Leah?"

She squared her shoulders and focused her glare on him as she clipped out her response. "He said if you were letting me hang out with you, I must be a good lay and he wanted to see just how good."

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His jaw tightened and he sent a threatening glance towards the bar doors. "I'm sorry. I never realized that I called such a bunch of jerks friends."

She managed a grim smile. "I guess when you're popular, you can do as you please and to hell with other people's feelings."

She reached for her cell phone, wanting to call Tessa and get the hell out of there, but he held it above her head.

"No," he said firmly. His face was grim determination, with a bit of guilt. "I'm not leaving you alone to wait for someone who may never show."

"So, you get to insult me as well, huh? As if I'm too stupid to take care of myself, you have to save me?"

His brows knitted in shock. "I'd never insult you, Leah. But be reasonable—"

She glowered at him.

"I mean logical. It's late, your friend may already be in bed and we *are* going to end up in the same place. Let me return you home, safe and sound. Please?"

She really didn't want to drag Tessa out of the house at this hour of the night. And he did say please. Angry as she was, Leah relented to his request and allowed him to lead her to his car.

She turned on the radio to fill the silence as he drove her to The Towers.

* * * *

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Marcus walked Leah to her condo, wondering how he could put things to right. She unlocked the door, but didn't open it as she faced him "Thanks for dinner."

"Yeah, well, this wasn't the evening I planned."

She shrugged. "You can't control the world, Marcus, or how people behave."

"But as you pointed out, I can control who I spend time with."

"No," she shook her head. "I was wrong to tell you who you should be friends with."

"Even if I want you to?"

Her brows knitted. "I don't understand."

"Maybe this will help." He slipped his arms around her waist, pulled her close and claimed her mouth in a hot, exploratory kiss. His tongue slipped between her lips, tasting the beer she'd drank and something distinctly Leah. Lust raged through his veins, pooling low in his belly.

Her hands slipped over his chest and around his shoulders, pulling him closer. The intensity of the kiss increased as she tangled with his tongue. He skimmed his hands over her, taking in the feel of her curves.

He explored her through her clothing, eliciting a moan from her. She felt right in his arms and he wanted more, needed more.

He undid a button on her shirt, pausing to see if she protested. When she didn't, he moved on to the next until he could slip his hand into her bra. The heat of her skin sent fire racing through his veins. He traced circles around her nipple and deepened his kiss.

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The intoxicating scent of Leah swirled about him, while her enticing kisses drove him to the edge of reason. He gently squeezed her breast in his hand.

He endured the maelstrom of emotion and need until he neared the breaking point. Slowly—reluctantly—he pulled his hands away from her body and lips away from her luscious mouth and rested his forehead against her brow. He didn't want a one night stand with this woman. He wanted a lifetime.

"Leah," he whispered. "We can't." God how he wanted to make love to her, plunge into the warmth and passion he knew she held within. But making out in a hallway, feeling her up like some lovesick teenager wasn't the way he wished to go about it. Now was not the time, this was not the place.

He lifted her hands off his shoulders, squeezed them and took a step back. She looked well and thoroughly kissed. His gut tightened, but he stood firm.

She pulled her hands free and lifted shaky fingers to his chest. She splayed them over his heart as dark, passion-filled eyes stared up. "Why not? We're both adults." She drew in air with heavy gulps, just as he was doing.

"That doesn't have anything to do with it." His gaze dropped to her open blouse and the tantalizing view of creamy flesh revealed there. He drew in a deep breath.

She closed her eyes for a second, and the passion faded from her face. "I understand."

Her hands shook as they quickly buttoned her blouse. She glanced up, then dropped her gaze once more. "I really did

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enjoy the dinner, Marcus. Thanks." Reaching behind her, she pushed open her door.

No one had ever given him a cold shoulder before, but that's exactly what Leah was doing. *How can she turn off her passion that quickly? What the hell was going on?* "Listen, I want—"

The shrill of a phone pierced the air and Leah dug into her purse. "That's my mom's ring. I need to take this." Her gaze clashed with his for a moment, then she ducked into her condo. "Thanks again."

Disoriented at the turn of events, Marcus stared at the closed door. *What the hell just happened?* He blew out a pent-up breath. One minute he was half-way to seeking his dream, and the next, he was standing alone in the hallway. He fisted his hands and glanced down at his feet. At least they hadn't been squashed in the door.

Too bad he couldn't say the same about his heart.

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Six

Hot cider simmered on the stove filling Leah's condo with its spicy scent. A crescendo of voices nearly drowned out the orchestrated Christmas music filtering through her stereo speakers as Leah glanced into her living room and smiled.

Nearly a dozen of her friends milled around, waiting to help her decorate her home for the Twelve Days of Christmas. She watched her friends mingle, delighted that the tradition, started several years ago, continued. Though it had sprung up because she and several girlfriends discovered they'd be alone for Christmas Eve, the gathering had grown to include boyfriends and husbands.

The timer on the oven went off and Leah removed the Angels on Horseback. She put the oysters wrapped in bacon on toasted bread, then carried the platter to her dining room table, already laden with an array of food.

"Leah," Betsy called. "When do we get to exchange the gifts?"

She grinned at the short, plump brunette who was impatient when it came to the gift opening. "You know we don't do that until the tree is decorated." Leah glanced at the still bare evergreen. "And if you want to get to the good stuff before midnight, I suggest you get the guys busy putting on the lights."

Betsy grinned and hurried back to the group of men, who inevitably congregated together to talk sports and cars.

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Tessa, a good friend since their freshman year of college, filled a plate with food and stopped beside Leah. "You've been pretty quiet tonight. What's up?"

She knew Leah better than anyone, so it wasn't surprising she couldn't hide her upset over Marcus from Tessa. Still, she straightened the forks on the table to delay her reply. "I haven't had time to tell you, but I had dinner with Marcus Slade the other night."

Her friend's plate of food tipped and a couple of olives rolled onto the floor. "What? Oh my God! You've been trying to snag a date with him for a year now. What happened?"

Leah glanced around to see if anyone was listening. Satisfied they wouldn't be overheard, she gave a quick run down of the disastrous evening. When finished, Tessa gripped her by the arm and dragged her into the relative quiet of the kitchen.

"What the hell do you mean he stopped because of your body?"

Leah gave her a scathing look. "Come on, you've seen pictures in the society pages of the women he's dated. Well, I saw several of them up close and personal. I'm not built like they are and he was reminded of that when he, uh, felt me up. That's when he stopped the seduction." She felt the heat of a humiliation brush over her as she remembered how he'd pulled away from her less than perfect body.

Tessa put her untouched plate of food on the counter top. "So, you think he stopped seducing you because he was reminded that, what is it you always say, 'your IQ is bigger than your bra size?'"

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"Why else? My gosh, if he'd asked me, I'd have invited him into my bed right then and there. But he didn't, he pulled away and told me we had to stop. With the constant reminders of his other dates, can you blame him?"

"You're saying, he just wants to be friends?" Tessa pulled a glass and bottle of wine off the granite bar and poured a drink.

Leah didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "So it seems. You know guys, it's sex or friendship ... no mixing."

She grabbed the drink out of Tessa's hand and gulped half of the Charbonneau down.

"That was for me," Tessa said dryly.

"I needed it more."

"Yeah, you may be right there."

Leah stared at her friend and cracked a smile. "Chalk it up to a nice dream while it lasted. At least I won't have to see him for awhile. He's going out of town for the holidays." And she'd have time to adjust to their just being friends. "Come on, let's see how Betsy and the guys are doing with the lights."

As they turned to leave the kitchen, the doorbell rang redirecting Leah. She planted a smile on her face and flung the door open. The greeting she planned froze on her lips.

Marcus, as handsome and sexy as ever, stood there smiling.

What is he doing here? Her heart skidded to a stop, then thundered into a full gallop.

"Merry Christmas, Leah," he said cheerfully.

Her fingers gripped the door. "Merry Christmas, Marcus. What can I do for you?"

Someone started an off-key sing-along as *Rudolf-the-Red-Nosed-Reindeer* came over her stereo. Marcus gazed past her shoulder. His brows drew down. "Oh, you're having a party. I thought you'd be alone."

"Hey," Joe, Betsy's husband, came to stand behind Leah, but his attention soon focused on Marcus. "Aren't you Marcus Slade, the Roughriders's centerfielder?"

"Yes."

This wasn't good. Joe was a huge Roughriders fan. There was no way she could quietly get rid of Marcus now. Leah swallowed the rest of her wine in one gulp.

Joe wheedled his way between her and the door and stuck out a hand. "Joe Hood. Glad to meet you. Congratulations on winning the World Series."

Marcus shook hands and smiled. "I didn't do it all by myself."

"Hey, come on in. You're just in time to untangle the Christmas lights."

Leah jerked her gaze to Joe. "Untangle the lights? They weren't tangled. How'd they get tangled?"

Joe shrugged. "I dunno. Betsy just sent me over here to get you to help out. But now we got Marcus."

Why Joe thought Marcus was staying, let alone could do a better job of untangling the lights than she could, she had no idea. But before she could stop him, Joe had dragged Marcus across the room to the tree and the group standing around it. She followed, noting how a fielder's mitt couldn't hold a

baseball any tighter than his jeans held his behind. Why did he have to be so damned sexy?

And why was he here? She heard him tell the floozies the other night that he was going out of town. She'd look forward to not seeing him for a while. It would have given her time to mend her heart.

She watched for several minutes as he warmly greeted her friends, glancing her way once and winking. She couldn't deal with his flirting, not when he didn't mean it. As soon as there was a lull in the conversation, she pulled Marcus away.

Once in the kitchen she said, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not. You're friends are very, well, friendly. Though, I didn't mean to intrude on your party."

She set her empty wine glass down on the counter and crossed her arms. "Then why are you here?"

"I was supposed to go to Salvation and my brother's for Christmas, but my sister-in-law's father suffered a heart attack. They had to go to Oklahoma to be with her family. I found myself alone and remembered what you said about decorating tonight. I thought I'd come see if you needed help." He quirked a sad smile. "I see that you don't."

She didn't reply. Her thoughts were in turmoil and her heart in an uproar. It elated her he remembered what she'd said in passing, but she hadn't seen nor spoken to him for the last two days—not since their disastrous date.

His blue gaze turned to her and she forced a smile. *Why are you really here?* "This is just a gathering of my friends, who, like you, don't have family to be with tonight," she found herself saying instead. "You're welcome to stay."

He stepped closer and touched her arm. "I was hoping—"

"Leah, do you have any more spinach dip?" Leslie, glasses slipping down her nose, blonde hair in her signature bun and dressed as if for court, entered the kitchen. "The dish on the table is empty."

Leah gave Marcus an apologetic smile and opened the refrigerator. "Sure. It's right here. Anything else we're low on out there?"

"Um, just crackers" She smiled at Marcus. "Hi, I'm Leslie."

Leah reached for the container with the dip and put it on the counter as Marcus shook Leslie's hand.

"Marcus Slade."

Leslie leaned against the counter, knocking over a half empty bottle of beer and a wine glass. "Oops! Sorry, Leah." She grabbed a dishcloth and sopped up the spill. She glanced over her shoulder at Marcus. "Someone said you play ball?"

"That's right."

She rinsed the cloth out in the sink, then inspected the wine glass. "No nick or crack, thank goodness." She carefully put the glass down and pushed her glasses back up her nose. "Well, Leah's the baseball fan. Me, I don't know a pop fly from a field goal."

Marcus laughed.

"Merry Christmas," Leslie said, taking the container of dip from Leah and returning to the dinning room.

"Leslie is a corporate attorney," Leah explained. "She's the youngest partner her firm has ever had." She gave Marcus a sidelong glance. "Just so you know she's not a typical, clumsy, blonde airhead."

"Oh, Christ," he muttered. "I really messed things up didn't I?"

Leah pulled a box of crackers from the shelf and arranged them on a plate. "What do you mean?"

"You're defending your friends to me. You think I think Leslie's not intelligent because she doesn't know sports. How does that reflect on what I think of you?"

She picked up the plate of crackers and turned to leave the kitchen. "It doesn't. We're friends, that's all."

"Leah—" Marcus started.

"Leah," Betsy interrupted with a giggled yell from the living room. "Come tell the guys they have to put the angel on last."

She didn't have another private moment with Marcus for the next few hours as she directed the decorating and continued to stock the table with food. Shortly after the angel finally topped the tree, she found herself in the kitchen again—this time with several of her girlfriends.

"So, Leah, is the Roughrider going to help you decorate the bedroom?" Betsy teased.

Leah felt the heat of a blush. "Of course not, we're just friends."

Isabel snorted. "Right, and I believe that. Marcus has been mooning after you since he got here."

"You're imagining things." Leah plucked at a piece of tinsel stuck to her cardigan, belying the increased tempo of her heart at the thought of Marcus mooning over her.

"No," Tessa said. "She's not imagining things. Why didn't you tell me you'd invited him to the party?"

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"I didn't invite him," Leah said defensively.

"Hmmm, so," Tessa mused. "With all his friends to whom he could spend the evening with, he comes to *your* place."

"The operative word being *friends*," Leah replied.

"Oh, she's serious," Leslie said. "She really does think he's just being friends." She took Leah by the shoulders and turned her toward the living room where Marcus stood tall among the men. "Girl, if you could see the way his gaze followed you around the room, the longing in those gorgeous blue eyes, you wouldn't be doubting his actions for a moment."

Leah cracked a smile. "You've been reading romance novels again."

"Yeah, a really good friend of mine just released a fantastic cowboy story. Blond hair, blue eyed hunk ... hey!" Dawning lit Leslie's eyes. "Oh my God! You based your cowboy on *him*," she finished in an excited whisper.

"Well, they're usually based on someone." Leah said, ducking her head from her friend's prying stare. Uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was going, she searched for a topic that would distract her friends. Glancing at the clock and noting it was near ten o'clock, she grasped the one subject sure to make them stop talking about her private life. "Time to open the gifts!"

In general, each person brought one gift and then a free-for-all took place as someone opened a gift of choice and the next person chose their own gift to open or stole the already opened gift. Just as everyone was settled to begin, Leah realized they'd be one gift short.

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"Oh, wait. I forgot to add my gift." She jumped from her chair and went into her bedroom. She always kept extra items on hand in case an emergency gift-giving event such as this popped up. Snatching up a gift card for a movie theater chain, Leah put it into a gift bag and stuffed it with tissue paper.

Rushing into the hallway, she ran into a solid wall. Rubbing her sore nose, she glared into Marcus's face.

"That's my gift, isn't it?" He sighed, his blue eyes clouded with worry. "I threw things off. I'm sorry."

Her world went off-center by the genuine concern he showed. This close to him, she could feel the heat of his body, smell his aftershave. She wanted to forget she had a house full of friends, drag him into her bedroom and kiss him until he forgot she wasn't his type of woman. She forced a smile. "Not to worry. I always have extra presents on hand." She handed him the bag. "Here, you can put it in the gift pile if it'll make you more comfortable."

"Taking you out to lunch to pay for this will make me more comfortable."

Leah sighed. No matter how hard she wished it otherwise, she couldn't handle being *just friends* with Marcus. Friendly lunch dates, occasional movies and hanging out wasn't what she wanted with him.

Instead of answering, she led him back into the living room, and the annual gift brawl began. Watching her friends fight over gifts was always a treat and added to the merriment of the night, even if it didn't quite hold to the meaning of it.

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Not long after the exchange was over, the party broke up. Tessa and Leslie were two of the last to leave and they exchanged a look with Leah as Marcus adjusted the angel on the top of the tree.

"I think you're wrong about him," Tessa whispered as they hugged good night. "I'd give him a second chance if I were you."

Leslie pushed her glasses up her nose and kissed Leah's cheek. "I concur with Tessa. He's mooning after you, don't let him get away."

Leah rolled her eyes and pushed her friends out the door. She faced Marcus, the angel precariously crooked on the top of the tree now.

"I hope you had a nice time," she said.

He nodded. "I did. Thanks for letting me stay. I really didn't mean to intrude."

She crossed to the dining room, tight lipped. "You didn't intrude. It was a party. The more the merrier, right?" She removed plates of food from the table.

"Would it be all right with you if I stayed and helped you clean?"

She met his gaze and refused to read more into the hope lurking in his eyes. No doubt it was just a friendly offer. "Sure."

They worked in silence while the stereo continued to play Christmas music. She was aware of Marcus every step of the way. His body radiated heat as he stood beside her rinsing the dishes before she put them into the washer. Every time their hands brushed together, desire sparked up her arm.

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When she put the dish soap into the washer and closed the door, she came to a decision. It was time to put her foolish, schoolgirl dream away.

"Marcus, I have another gift for you."

He raised an eyebrow. "You don't have to do that."

She smiled. "No, it's okay. I think it's something you should have. Besides, in a sense, it's yours anyway."

He cocked a brow, curiosity lighting his eyes.

She went into her bedroom closet, where she'd placed both the scrapbook and the box holding the baseball after their disastrous date. She reflected for a few moments how she came to possess it and the fanciful dreams she'd had for years afterward. It was past time to put those away. Gathering the box and the scrapbook in her arms, she returned to the living room.

Marcus stood in the middle of the room, hands on his hips. "What do you mean, it's mine anyway?"

"This is a ball you hit during one of your first games as a major leaguer." She handed him the box. "I'd say that makes it yours, wouldn't you?"

He took the box and removed the glass top. He lifted the ball off its stand and turned it in his hand, stopping when he came to the writing on it.

"I can't believe you have this," he whispered. "How did you get it?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

He looked up from the baseball. Awe etched his face. "Try me."

"I was the one who caught it."

His eyes widened. "No way."

"Yes, way." She tapped the book in her hands. "I have a still picture taken from the television film in my scrapbook. It was authenticated by the network."

"But, how'd you get my autograph?"

"After the game I offered the ball to you, but you said no, I could keep it. You signed and dated it, and handed it back to me. Then you kissed me on the cheek," she said, touching the spot his lips had caressed for a second years ago.

"So, we did meet before," he mumbled under his breath. He flicked a quick gaze over her. "I was still on cloud nine, but I remember something like that happening." He met her stare full on. "Jesus, I can't believe *you* are the person who caught my first major league homerun."

Her heart broke at the joy in his eyes. It was the way he looked all those years ago. It was the ecstasy she'd fallen in love with. She gave a tight-lipped smile. "As if I knew you'd be my upstairs neighbor way back then. I was staying with my aunt and uncle for the summer, between my junior and senior year of high school. We went to the game and well, the rest is history."

He reverently rolled the ball in his hands. "For the past few years, I've actually been looking to see if anyone was offering this for sale. Wow. Thank you." He appeared amazed, his voice stunned. "I really don't know what to say, Leah."

"You don't have to say anything. As I said, it really is your ball, not mine." *Just as you really aren't mine, no matter how I wish it to be otherwise. Some fantasies are better put to rest.*

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He placed the ball on the coffee table and took the scrapbook from her. She held her breath as he flipped through the pages. God, now he'd think *she* was a stalker instead of just a crush-filled fan.

Without commenting on the contents, he snapped the book shut and put it beside the ball. "What happened the other night?" he asked.

Her brows knitted. What was he talking about? Then she knew. Wasn't her heart breaking enough without him bringing that evening up?

"I-I don't know what you mean. When?"

"When you slammed the door in my face."

She evaded his stare by collecting crumpled napkins. "My mom was calling. I needed to talk to her."

"I thought we had the beginning of something that night."

"I did too," she let slip out, brushing her hair over her shoulder. "But then reality caught up with us, didn't it?"

He followed her into the kitchen. "You mean Monica and company? Certainly the evening didn't go as I'd planned, not with her interfering. But I did think we had a connection."

She threw the napkins into the trash can. "Of course we do. Friendship is a great connection."

He leaned a hip against the granite and frowned. "Friendship? As in buddies and nothing more?"

"Yes and it's okay. I know I'm not the type of woman you prefer to date."

His gaze dropped down her body and back up to meet her stare. She pulled her cardigan closed and crossed her arms under her breasts.

"You think I stopped kissing because of your body?"

She chewed her lower lip. He was really going to make her say it? She fisted her hands. "When you realized I didn't have everything you're usual dates have, yes."

He glanced to her bosom. "You know, I pity the damned fool who taught you that you weren't a passionate woman. Not only did he mess you up, he really missed out on a good thing."

God damn, Marcus berated. Did she really think he stopped because she wasn't a full-figured woman? That he didn't want to sleep with her because of her perceived lack of physical attributes?

Wait, that would mean ... there had been a spark of interest in her, too. He squared his shoulders. She'd wanted more than just friendship. Yet, now she was willing to accept only that from him. She was putting away her desire, her ... *damn!*

His eyes narrowed and he thought of the scrapbook. His career, in black and white, with a splash of color here in there, was laid out in loving detail. Newspaper clippings, magazine articles, internet gossip and game programs filled the pages. He'd only seen one other scrapbook so thorough—his mother's.

It was love that inspired his mother to archive his career so well. Was love what motivated Leah to do so, too? He narrowed his eyes. If it was love, how to convince her now was not the time to abandon that love? He glanced through the bar opening to the ball sitting on the coffee table and bit back the vulgar word that came to mind.

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Leah was letting go of her dream. "And that's why you gave the ball back to me tonight. You're moving passed your girlhood fantasy?" he confronted. She blushed and turned away. He gripped her arm and forced her to look at him. "You've had a crush on me since I kissed you at that game, haven't you?"

She jerked her arm free. "I certainly have not! I may have at the time, but I'm a grown woman. I don't have crushes."

So, he was right. She did have feelings for him and was upset because she didn't think she measured up to his standard. What she didn't realize is that she was so far above his standard he'd shied away from her because he felt inadequate. Hope enveloped his heart. It was time for both of them to set aside their uncertainties.

"Yes, you do, but unlike other women, you write about them. You put them in your stories and live them through your characters." He pulled her into a tight embrace, determined to make her face the truth before he let her go again. "Well, I'm here to tell you, Leah, it's damned time to stop living through your writing and to start living your own life."

His mouth found her lips and his tongue slipped between to taste not only the wine she'd drank, but Leah herself. He groaned when she slid her hands around his neck.

As a match to gasoline, his lust flared. What was it about this woman that made him as randy as a teenager? He let the torture go on for several minutes before he pulled away. Passion-dazed dark eyes made him groan, but he was

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determined to have his say before he let that passion flare any further.

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear, Leah. I meant what I said to you the other night. I'm ready to settle down, ready to find the one I want to spend my life with. My heart's telling me that's you." He cupped her face with his hands. Her eyes watered and her lips trembled. "I understand that my past relationships haven't been the best proof of what I'm looking for. I understand that you've been told time and again you make a better friend than girlfriend. But I don't want to be just your friend. I don't want to pal around—I want a relationship. Someday, sooner rather than later, I want marriage again." His thumb caressed her kiss-swollen lips. "And I want to find out if I can have that dream with you."

She sucked in a breath and he saw the confusion, the wariness in her eyes. He itched to shake sense into her, but she had her own demons from the past to contend with, and he had to be patient while she worked through them.

"You never answered my question the other night," he said to guide her. "Do you believe in happily-ever-afters ... is there hope?"

He knew he wasn't mistaken about his conclusions. She'd been attracted to him, possibly since that day she'd caught his homerun. But now he remembered the dark-haired schoolgirl, as excited for him as he was and he'd wanted her to have the ball as a remembrance. He'd signed and given it back to her, then kissed her check in shared excitement. Maybe that was when their souls connected. Perhaps that was

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why he'd been attracted to her since seeing her jogging around the neighborhood a year ago.

Her watery smile brought him back to the present.

"Marcus, there's always hope and a chance." She placed a warm hand on his cheek. "And I'm willing to take one on you."

He captured her lips for another heated kiss and pulled her flush against him. Leah opened her mouth under his ardent demand and kissed him back with all the passion he knew she held. This time, he didn't plan to stop, but he had one more thing to ask before they went all the way to home plate. Slowly, he broke the kiss.

"Tomorrow I'm driving to my ranch in Salvation. Will you come with me?"

She laughed as a tear slid down her cheek. "Yes, I'd love to."

In the distance, the clock struck midnight. Christmas morning.

"Merry Christmas, Marcus. You've given me the best present I could ever hope for."

"So have you, darlin'." He kissed the tear away. "You've given me a cowboy's dream come true."

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