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# Back at the Ranch

*Wendi Darlin*

2

COWBOY  
Games

# **BACK AT THE RANCH**

*Cowboy Games 2*

**Wendi Darlin**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

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**BACK AT THE RANCH**

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## DEDICATION

This book is for everyone who asked for Garrett and Clayton's story. I can't tell you what it means to me that these characters touched your heart in *Cowboy Games*. I hope *Back at the Ranch* is everything you hoped it would be.

# BACK AT THE RANCH

## *Cowboy Games 2*

WENDI DARLIN

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### Chapter 1

Clayton's balls drew tight. His ass sang and his nipples were so tight against Devon's smooth chest they stung. He let the memory fade.

He hadn't seen Devon in over a year, at least not in person. And definitely not the way he was seeing him now. Heat crept up the back of Clayton's neck and shot like lightning to his groin. The blue glow of the television flickered and flashed in the darkness of his living room. He reached into his boxer briefs to wrap his hand around his cock. The rigid member pulsed in his hand, hot to the touch. The moaning and tangle of naked bodies onscreen flooded him with desire so thick he could taste it.

"You want this big cock?" Devon said.

The man spread-eagled beneath him answered with a cocky grin. "Fuck yeah, baby. Give it to me."

Devon teased the other man's ass with the broad tip of his dick, then shoved his knees to his chest. Instead of burying himself deep, he bent and licked the man's balls before inching down to eat his ass.

Clayton's butt cheeks clenched tight. Damn! He could remember that tongue. Devon had always been hungry. Too eager to tease. And one hell of a lover. It shouldn't have been a surprise he'd gone into

porn. He was a natural. Fucking was a true talent that Devon possessed in spades.

And Clayton had reached a level of frustration no man should ever endure. Working at the ranch, seeing Garrett every day had him wound tight enough to snap. At first, his on-again, off-again relationship with Devon had been enough of a distraction. But that ship had sailed. Except for the occasional DVD rendezvous.

Garrett Carter was all too real, and more delicious than a man had a right to be, like a piece of candy he just had to taste. Garrett ran Fantasy Ranch with an ordered but easy manner, always ready with a smile, but no-nonsense to the bone and not a hair out of place. Clayton would love to make him drop that anal-retentive façade and fly apart in his arms. There wasn't a thing about Garrett that didn't send his temperature up a notch.

He stroked himself, quickening the rhythm and tightening his grip as tension curled deep in his gut. He needed to come. He needed more than a self-inflicted handjob, but tonight he'd take what he could get.

Tomorrow, he'd report for his week-long shift at the ranch and grow big enough balls to let Garrett know how much he needed him. Tomorrow, he'd put his job on the line for the one man he had to have.

Tonight watching his ex fuck for a buck was better than nothing.

The big man beneath Devon squirmed and squealed as Devon's long tongue lapped at his ass and Devon's fist stroked his monstrous purple cock. Clayton glanced down at his own huge erection. Devon always did like them big.

## Chapter 2

Patches of snow littered the grounds of the ranch, and the cold Wyoming air bit through Garrett's jacket as he reached the bunkhouse and started inside.

"You might want to give them a little warning first." Clayton's voice froze him in his tracks.

He released the doorknob and stepped back from the door. The low but steady beat of dance music pulsed against the dark sky. Laughter and conversation could be heard from inside. "A wild night?"

Clayton emerged from the shadows. "Not any wilder than usual. But I don't think they're expecting you."

In the soft light of the reproduction lantern hanging by the knotty pine door, Clayton's handsome features took on an old cinema radiance that caught Garrett's heart and gave it a squeeze. Fantasy Ranch, a resort ranch where women came for a week of make-believe love, was known for its gorgeous cowboys, but even here Clayton was in a league of his own.

"Why aren't you in there?" Garrett knew better than to think he could fill a bunkhouse with a dozen beautiful gay men and expect them to keep their hands off each other.

Clayton leaned against the exterior wall. The ever-present sparkle in his soft blue eyes had been the vision that kept Garrett awake at night. And tonight it grabbed him by the balls. Relief that Clayton wasn't inside sharing his body with another man flooded his chest. But that was something he needed to get over. The beautiful cowboy was off limits.



He'd worried himself sick three years ago when his brother, Gavin, risked the ranch and fell in love with one of the guests. That had turned out better than anyone expected, but lightning didn't strike twice. Only a fool would dip his pen in company ink. And Garrett wasn't a fool.

The light dusting of the short, neatly trimmed beard Clayton had started to wear worked for him in ways most men could never pull off. Not a thick lumberjack look, but just enough hair to scream masculine sex appeal. Facial hair had never turned Garrett on, but he itched to feel Clayton's textured jaw beneath his hand, against the inside of his thigh, grazing every inch of his body.

Clayton stared at him with a look that penetrated his thoughts and reflected them right back at him.

"Aren't you cold out here?" Garrett asked.

"Not anymore." He gave a low throaty laugh that sent another surge of heat to Garrett's belly. "And that scene's not my speed."

"What's your speed?"

Clayton dipped his gaze slowly from Garrett's eyes down to his boots. "About six-two. Built like a dream and drop-dead gorgeous."

The heat that flared between them when their eyes met again sent the fire that had pooled in Garrett's belly rocketing to his groin. Clayton had never hit on him before. Sure, they'd joked around, like he did with all the men who worked at the ranch. He might have even caught Clayton's lingering glance once or twice. And lord knows he'd imagined that sweet body against his more times than he could count. But nothing more than that. Never more than that.

The crisp night hovered around them and the air practically crackled with tension. Clayton moved closer. Their chests almost touched. His cheek lightly brushed Garrett's, and his voice was barely a whisper. "I want ... No. I *need* to kiss you."

Garrett's blood pulsed in his ears and his cock jumped.

Clayton leaned closer. Their lips barely touched, but Garrett felt the jolt of that connection straight to his boots.

He stumbled back like he'd been punched. Surprise quickly followed by hurt registered in Clayton's eyes, and disappointment settled across his handsome face.

Biting back the desire that whipped through him was like wrestling a full-grown bull to the ground. He didn't stand a chance of keeping it pinned down.

Garrett strode away from the bunkhouse, his breath escaping in clouds around him. He didn't look back and he didn't slow down. He couldn't trust himself with Clayton. Not tonight.

As he approached the big house, a light in one of the second-story windows went out. Gavin and Rebecca were putting the babies to bed. There was nothing about his brother's family that Garrett didn't envy. His children were precious and his wife loved him with everything she had. Gavin had found the kind of love Garrett couldn't seem to wrangle for himself.

He entered through the mudroom at the back of the house and went straight to the office he and Gavin shared. The main part of the house, including the dining hall and Fantasy Ranch office, were open to guests and employees during business hours, but now only the minimal lighting was on and the place stood quiet.

A huge desk, where they both worked facing one another, filled the center of the office. Garrett walked around the corner of the desk and sank into his chair at the far side of the room with his back to the window. Next to his computer lay a simple white envelope, exactly like the one he'd found there the night before.

Still shaken from Clayton's kiss, he ripped open the note. A neatly drawn tic-tac-toe board took up the page. In the center square was a bold "X" and beneath it the words, "Do you know where I would kiss you?" The last note had said the same thing. But more had been added to this one. A circle filled in the box in the upper right corner. And the neat print below the circle read, "I'd wrap you in my arms and never let you go."

Garrett folded the paper and slid it back into the envelope. He leaned back and closed his eyes. Clayton wouldn't play games with him. Would he? How the hell did he know, he hadn't anticipated the kiss. Hadn't seen that coming at all. His gut told him the notes weren't from Clayton. A sixth sense triggered the ominous possibility of a stalker, but his worry meter always ran hot.

"Still reading your love letter?"

Garrett's eyes popped open. Gavin stood in the open doorway, a shit-eating grin on his face and his dark blond hair shorter than he normally wore it. Rebecca's touch was all over the house, and nowhere more than on Gavin. He looked better than ever. Family life suited him.

Garrett leaned forward, offering the envelope to his brother. "It's a new one. You didn't see anybody back here tonight?"

Gavin pulled the note from the envelope. "Nobody's been in the house since the staff left."

"So you think it's one of them?"

Gavin laughed. "One of the waiters with hots for the boss? Maybe." He passed the note back and shook his head as Garrett dropped it into a file with the other one. "You're convinced this is something to worry about? Ever thought maybe somebody just wants to get laid, and they're scared to death you'll beat them with that stick you've got up your ass if they just come right out and say it?"

Garrett was used to Gavin busting his chops, but there was something about the notes that didn't sit well. He could feel it.

"Speaking of getting laid," Gavin said, "you talked to John lately?"

Garrett stood. "No, and I won't be." He brushed past Gavin and headed for his room. He'd wasted too many nights on John. Three years of a long-distance love affair that never gave him half of what he needed, and another four years of sporadic sex that blew his mind, but left him craving something deeper every time John flew into town. The time to move on was long past, and Garrett had finally

accepted it. The next time he fell in love, it'd be with a man who cared enough to put his emotions on the line. A man who wasn't afraid to be a fool in love. Maybe a man who left notes on his desk or said that he *needed* to kiss him.

## Chapter 3

As morning light poured in the window, Garrett stared up at the exposed beams of the ceiling in his bedroom, the same room he'd grown up in. His eyes were drawn automatically to the notch in the wood that had captured his attention since he was a kid. Down the hall his niece shrilled with laughter as Gavin teased her. Rebecca's soft laughter followed. His brother's family was the stuff dreams were made of, dreams that seemed harder to grasp every year that passed.

Garrett crossed his arms behind his head and closed his eyes. In the darkness, soft blue eyes stared back at him. Eyes that lit him on fire and made him want more than he'd ever dared want before. Clayton had captured him the day he first came to the ranch, before that even. Garrett had seen him at the historic movie palace downtown the day he came in and asked about teaching a drama class. Garrett sat on the board and had been a driving force of the old theater's restoration and revitalization. He would have introduced himself that day if it hadn't been for John.

Clayton wasn't the kind of guy Garrett could go up to and not flirt with. Hell, it was a miracle he'd kept his hands off him the past three years he'd worked at the ranch. John and principle stopped him from crossing the line. That and the previous harassment the business had endured from a couple of dickheads on the local police force.

He wouldn't put the ranch on the line to satisfy a sexual itch. Familiar warmth spread across his chest and the question that haunted him repeated itself in his mind. What if Clayton was more than a sexy distraction? What if he was the one?

Garrett sighed. He was crazy to harbor such fantasies, even here on Fantasy Ranch. Clayton looked like a dream but that was all he'd ever be. He was an employee. Off limits. Completely off limits. Even if Garrett was a rule-breaker, he wouldn't break that rule.

He told himself again he'd never put the ranch on the line. He owed his parents and his brother more than that. Their father had poured his life into the land. When he fell ill and the bank almost took the ranch, Garrett and Gavin had stepped in to save what their dad had worked so hard for. Neither of them wanted to wrangle cattle, but they weren't about to lose this place. Fantasy Ranch allowed them both to put their skills to use, and a week at their resort made a lot of women happy.

The noise down the hall faded as Gavin's family made their way downstairs. Garrett looked over at the phone beside his bed. He should call Clayton and at least try to explain why he'd reacted the way he had.

He rolled over and punched the pillow down before collapsing face first into it. God, he wanted that man.

He reached beneath the sheets and slid his hand into his pajamas. His raging cock responded with a throb. It'd been hard as granite when he opened his eyes and getting more uncomfortable by the minute. He squeezed his shaft to relieve some of the pressure, but it wasn't enough. He stroked slowly, firm, solid strokes that tightened the muscles in his back and raised his mental frustration as much as it eased his physical need. He was tired of jacking off. He needed to be buried deep inside a hot, tight body. He needed to feel a smooth chest beneath his, hungry lips on his mouth. Hell, he needed to hear the sounds of a lover. With his eyes squeezed shut, he fucked his hand, biting hard on his bottom lip as the pressure in his balls built. The beautiful face that filled his thoughts added to the urgency of his need. Clayton. Clayton's blue eyes, the soft stubble he wore on his angled jaw.

Garrett could feel Clayton's body beneath his. He could hear his voice, the heavy breath of his excitement. He jerked his cock faster, needing more than his hand could give him.

More than he could ever get from an employee.

Finally. Mercifully. His muscles clenched tight and his dick gave a pulse as heat swirled in his groin. He shot off with a growl and buried his face in his pillow to buffer the sound. His body shook with relief. His chest heaved and slowly his toes uncurled.

He rocked his head back and forth in the pillow. This was no way for a healthy, available man to live. He needed something real, but only one man would satisfy what he was craving. And that didn't do him a damn bit of good.

Slowly he released his cock and got up to change the sheets.

## Chapter 4

After the longest week he'd ever spent at the ranch, Clayton set grocery bags on the counter in his new house. He'd never been more relieved to have his week-long shift end. He'd made a bigger fool of himself than he'd expected to, and embarrassment still prickled at him. Garrett had avoided him since the night outside the bunkhouse. And Clayton had lain awake at night, knowing the man who rocked his world slept a couple hundred yards away.

He opened a bottle of wine and pulled a single glass from the cabinet next to the sink. A week after signing the mortgage on this house with the mountain views he'd always dreamed of, the only thing left to unpack were the grocery sacks.

Not the best time to put his job on the line, but thankfully his family's business profits would be distributed in a week and his share should replenish what he'd used as a down payment and hold him over until he found another job if he needed to. Or until his agent in Hollywood called and told him the next blockbuster marquee had his name on it. He sighed. The dreamer in him would never die.

He preheated the oven and found a baking stone for the wedge of brie he'd bought. Nothing like food to mend a broken heart or piece together a shattered ego. While the cheese cooked, he sliced a fresh Italian baguette and sipped his wine.

He'd wanted Garrett since the minute he'd walked into the office of Fantasy Ranch and applied for a job as a make-believe cowboy. He originally planned to work at the women's-only resort ranch between acting gigs, shuttling back and forth to L.A. The money was great and he could have the best of both worlds, the hot stage lights and the cool



mountain breeze. All he had to do was spend a week befriending the women who came to the ranch, let them pretend to fall in love if that's what they wanted. He'd met some wonderful women, many of whom he'd still be in contact with if the ranch rules allowed it.

He poured olive oil into a skillet and squeezed a clove of garlic through his garlic press to jazz up the bag of fine frozen Italian cuisine he'd brought home for dinner. The fresh garlic perfumed the air and his stomach growled. He dumped the bagged meal into the oil and garlic. His first home-cooked dinner in his new place. Maybe if he expanded his repertoire in the kitchen he could land a man like Garrett. He snorted and gave the Tuscan Chicken Portobello a stir before he pulled the brie from the oven. There were better avenues to a man's heart than through his stomach, and he knew how to travel those streets just fine.

He slugged back a bigger swallow of wine. Who in his right mind tries to plant one on the boss?

He spread brie onto a slice of the baguette and lifted it to his lips. His teeth sank into the soft warm cheese just as a hesitant knock sounded at his door.

Clayton groaned. He wasn't in the mood for company, especially not from any of the party boys from the ranch.

He stirred his Tuscan Whatever and poured himself another glass of wine. The knock sounded again. Clayton's eyes drifted to the door but he dug into the last grocery bag and put a box of frozen waffles into the freezer. He had a bottle of chocolate syrup and a tube of toothpaste in his hands when the knock came again.

"Clayton. It's Garrett. I know you're home. I saw you through the window."

Clayton froze. His heart pounded and his eyes flitted to the open blinds on the bay window in his breakfast nook. Shit. His hand went to his hair. The toothpaste box nicked his ear and he swore again.

Time to pay the piper. He threw the stuff on the counter and straightened his shirt. He was wearing the same thing he had worn to

work at the ranch, jeans better suited for horseback riding than showing off his ass and a shirt right off the rack of the local Western Wear.

“Clayton?” Garrett’s deep voice vibrated in his ear and trickled down his spine. The man owned him and he didn’t even know it.

He steadied himself as he crossed the room. His boots pounded out a confident tempo, but his heart fluttered like a leaf. He put every bit of his acting skill into play as he pulled the door open slowly.

The scent of Garrett’s cologne, the way the soft fabric of his shirt lay across his chest, his gorgeous mouth—there wasn’t a single thing about him that didn’t make Clayton’s body sing. His balls tightened instinctively and his cock stirred.

Garrett offered him a bottle of wine. “Your new place is great.” He cleared his throat. “Mind if I...Can we talk?”

“Come in. You’re just in time for a drink.” Clayton led the way into the kitchen and pulled down a wine glass. There were words that needed to be said, but his throat was locked down tight. He poured the merlot and turned the stove down.

Clayton had worked at Fantasy Ranch for three years, letting women from all over the world pretend to fall in love with him for a week. He’d made a few friends along the way, and he’d made more money than the screens in Hollywood ever threw his way. Garrett and his brother were honest men and easy to work for. But the best part of going to work every day was standing in his kitchen.

Garrett accepted the wine, but immediately set the glass on the counter. “I’m sorry.” His green eyes searched Clayton’s. A sexy frown creased his forehead, and it took all Clayton had not to make a fool of himself again.

“I was out of line,” Clayton said, his stomach curled into a knot and the heat of embarrassment washed over him. “Hitting on my boss.” He half-laughed. “I just thought...I misread you.”

“You caught me by surprise.” Garrett placed a gentle hand on Clayton’s arm and set off a fire in his veins that wine wouldn’t extinguish.

“Why are you here?”

“You didn’t misread me. But...I can’t.” His eyes softened. “Even if I want to, I can’t.” A muscle in his strong jaw jumped and Clayton’s stomach clenched. Garrett’s mouth said one thing, the slow shift of his body another.

Clayton tensed as Garrett’s hand slid down his arm and he stepped closer.

There was no hesitation in Garrett’s kiss. His strong hands held Clayton’s hips. Their lips connected with the same earth-shattering electricity as they had the first time. The kiss deepened, and the first stroke of Garrett’s tongue opened a yawning hunger in Clayton’s belly that left him starving for more.

Heat wound like a vine through his chest. Want and need converged in a fury. He dug into Garrett’s broad back and moaned when Garrett moved closer to press the bulge in his jeans hard against Clayton’s own erection. Garrett broke the kiss, breathing heavily and staring with lust-hazed eyes. He bent close again, but this time he went for Clayton’s neck, kissing and sucking the sensitive skin, licking at the hollow base of his throat. Clayton grabbed his ass, two handfuls of the finest man meat he’d ever held.

“Fuck me. Garrett, please fuck me.” He closed his eyes. He’d never been so desperate. God, he knew better. But he’d rather die of humiliation tomorrow than let Garrett walk away from him tonight. He reached between them, stroking the rough fabric of Garrett’s jeans. “I want your big cock. Please give it to me.”

Garrett nipped at his shoulder. “I shouldn’t be here, but I’ve got to have you.” He pumped his hips, filling Clayton’s hand with what had to be the most magnificent dick on the planet.

Clayton fumbled with Garrett’s belt and gasped for breath as Garrett kissed his way back to his mouth. Their tongues clashed.

Their bodies shook with restraint until finally Clayton held the hot, velvety smooth skin of Garrett's cock in his hand.

Garrett drew in a sharp breath and softened his kiss. The passionate, heated stroke of his tongue was so tender, Clayton's heart stuttered and he felt his whole world shake. Lust had never felt so much like love. This man had moves that should be outlawed, they could ruin a man.

He matched his strokes along Garrett's cock with the slow, mind-numbing kiss, while Garrett undressed him. Garrett's hands moved with urgency. His kiss deepened, and standing there naked in his kitchen, Clayton was two steps from heaven. Clayton's cock stood against his belly and his ass pressed into the cold granite countertop at his back. Their cocks touched and jumped, begging for more. Garrett, his jeans shoved down to his thighs and dark underwear stretched low, gave Clayton's naked body a slow, sweeping gaze.

"You're beautiful." His voice was so low, Clayton's whole body tensed to absorb it.

How many times had he wanted to hear those words, to see this glorious man wanting him? He took Garrett's face in his hand and kissed him again, this time with as much passion as tenderness. Clayton poured everything into that kiss. With every answering slide of Garrett's tongue, his bones melted a little more. His toes curled. Heat flared between them. There was no going back from this. Come what may. There was no going back.

Garrett's cock stretched in his hand, hard as steel. Clayton pressed himself closer. Garrett reached down to grab the back of his thighs and lifted him. Using the counter for support, Clayton wrapped his legs around Garrett's hips and guided his big cock. They both groaned as Garrett slid inside him slowly.

Sweat glistened on Garrett's handsome brow. His dark hair hung in a perfect cut at his temple and his big dick sent tap dancers across every nerve Clayton had. He sank deep, meeting Clayton's mouth with a kiss before he started to fuck him in a rhythm that shattered

what was left of the ground beneath Clayton's feet. His balls drew tight. The rush of blood echoed in his ears. Garrett wrapped his hand around Clayton's dick and in two strokes his whole world shot off like fireworks in a midnight sky. He dug his hands into the countertop, panting as Garrett's hand pulled every last drop of cum from him.

## Chapter 5

Clayton woke but didn't open his eyes. The weight of Garrett's arm pressed into his side. A hard cock teased his thigh and a warm chest brushed his back. He didn't want to change a single thing about this moment.

Behind him, Garrett stirred and his lips came down on Clayton's shoulder. "Good morning, beautiful."

"If I'm dreaming, don't wake me up," Clayton murmured.

"Don't open your eyes. Keep dreaming." Garrett's voice held a seductive note that sent a shiver down Clayton's spine.

Garrett kissed his neck and moved slowly down his back, touching every vertebra with lips and tongue. By the time he got to the base of his spine, Clayton was trembling and begging for more. This had to be what it felt like to wake up in heaven. He could practically hear the angels singing. He reached back, spearing his fingers through Garrett's hair, just needing to touch him, to hold some part of him.

Garrett rolled him over slowly and kissed his chest, teasing one flat nipple, then the other. Clayton squirmed, shifting so he could feel Garrett's smooth cock against his. He reached between them, palming Garrett's balls as the soft steel of their shafts met with a friction that was sure to set the sheets afire.

Garrett's breath turned to pants as his kisses became more urgent, his tongue hungry against Clayton's neck. "I can't get enough of you."

Clayton slid his hand up Garrett's cock in a slow stroke before guiding it to his ass. "Fuck me, baby."

The thick head of Garrett's dick slid against his hole and had him aching for more.

Garrett bit down gently on his shoulder and eased himself inside. "You feel so good." Garrett's words were a whisper and his body trembled with restraint. His skin had the rosy glow of passion and his big muscles strained against his growing need to move. Clayton had never seen a man more beautiful than the one poised above him, driving him mad with his inhuman self-control.

He flattened his hands against Garrett's smooth back and looked him in the eye. "If you don't fuck me, I'm going to die. I swear it."

Garrett buried himself deep and both men moved like they were driven by demons. The sex was explosive, tongues and teeth. Hot, slick bodies frantically trying to get closer. And words that went from sensual to raw truth.

"Your ass is so tight on my cock. I'm going to come so hard." Garrett groaned once before his body shook and his hips slammed against the back of Clayton's thighs. His hot release filled Clayton and his movements slowed. Clayton couldn't take his eyes off the man moving above him. Obviously rocked by the orgasm, Garrett's arms shook, threatening to collapse, but he didn't stop fucking.

The fire of climax hit Clayton in a chain of contractions and mind-erasing bliss. He shouted and reached for Garrett, only to let go again and pound the mattress with his fists. Men had made him come before, but not like Garrett. No one had ever rattled him so thoroughly. Mind, body and soul, there wasn't a single part of him Garrett hadn't touched.

## Chapter 6

The soft Sunday morning sunlight poured into Clayton's bedroom and glinted off the snow on the mountain peaks that were framed in the picture window. Garrett knew he shouldn't be here, but he'd never wanted to be anywhere more. He hadn't been able to tear himself away the night before, and he didn't want to leave this morning. The ranch wouldn't fall down without him for a few hours. Gavin could handle anything that came up, and for once in his life doing the right thing didn't seem nearly as important as being with the man next to him.

"What's your schedule today?" Garrett stroked Clayton's stomach with his knuckles and inhaled the scent of sex on his skin. He was everything a man could want, with his tousled hair and a soft smile of satisfaction pulling at his lips. Garrett let his gaze slide over his lover's body. The pale trail of hair that sprouted below his belly button and disappeared beneath the sheets tempted him like a drug.

"I've got to meet with the prop designers at noon."

Garrett pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "How's the play coming?" He spent enough time at the theater to know Clayton was coaching a troupe of teenage actors for a production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

"Some of the kids are really talented. It's a good group." He picked his head up and twisted toward the clock on the bedside table. A groan rose in his throat. "I can't believe I have to leave you for Shakespeare. But if I don't get in the shower now, I'll be late."

Garrett coaxed his lips into another kiss before rolling over so Clayton could get up. Watching him move with liquid grace renewed



the hunger in Garrett's throat. At the side of the bed, Clayton turned back and Garrett reached for him. "Just a little more," he said.

Before Clayton could protest, he bent, licking the tip of his smooth cock, rolling the taste on his tongue. He sucked him hard, holding his tight ass in one hand and the tense muscle of his thigh in the other. Clayton gripped his hair and fucked his mouth, pumping his big, perfect dick in long, slow strokes that let Garrett savor every one.

"God, I'm going to miss you," Clayton said.

Garrett stopped, mouth full of dick, and looked up at him. It was too early to name their kids, but he'd thought they were in this for longer than one night and a lazy Sunday morning.

Clayton pushed his fingers through Garrett's hair and guided his head back down. "Baby, don't stop. I have to fly to L.A. this week. But you keep this up and I'll have to take you with me."

Garrett pulled him back down to the bed and crawled over him. After a scare like that, Shakespeare could wait. The whole world could wait. Clayton wasn't going anywhere.

## Chapter 7

Back at the ranch, Garrett stared across the desk at his brother. “You really don’t think I need to be worried about this?”

Gavin handed the latest note back to him. Another X had been added to the tic-tac-toe board. The line beneath it said, “Another kiss because I can’t get enough of you.”

“I think you need to figure out who’s sending them and put the poor man out of his misery.”

Garrett slid the letter back into the envelope it had come in and filed it away with the others. At least if some psycho was stalking him, the prosecution would have something to use in court.

“You don’t have a clue who it could be?” Gavin asked. A smirk curled his lips. He was enjoying this entirely too much.

“I don’t and it’s getting uncomfortable. Once is cute. Twice might be a bit of a tease. The third time it starts to get creepy. I think it’s time to call the police.”

“The police?” Gavin laughed and keyed on his computer. “Your ass is so tight, if you sit down the wrong way you’re going to pinch your balls off.”

Garrett let the jab slide. After the night and morning he’d spent in Clayton’s arms, he didn’t have a tight muscle in his body. Just the memory heated him to the bone. He glanced at the clock. There were too many hours between now and this evening when he could see Clayton again.

“So where did you sneak off to last night?” Gavin’s slow grin eased across his face and he pushed his shorter, but still untamable, hair back into place.

“The theater.” The lie slipped out too easily, and Garrett’s stomach sank. Gavin would understand. Rebecca had been a guest at the ranch and that hadn’t stopped him from falling head over heels and sweeping her off her feet. But still, Garrett wasn’t ready to admit he was having a relationship with one of the employees.

“Have you talked to John lately?”

He shook his head. He hadn’t even thought about John lately. Clayton took up every spare thought he had. “You sound more interested in him than I am.” John had gone out of his way to help arrange a romantic gesture for Rebecca when Gavin was on the verge of losing her. Funny how he could do more for Gavin’s lover than he’d ever done for his own. But of course, that whole thing had been Gavin’s idea. John just helped him pull it off.

“You really think it’s over with the two of you?” Gavin leaned back in his chair and tossed a tennis ball at the rustic log wall. His thinking ball. He was easy to read. If there was something going on in his head that needed to be worked out, that ball would hit the wall until he had the answer he was looking for.

“It’s over.” Garrett stood up. “I need to go talk to Grier about his guest. Her daughter called this morning. Said she’s got a heart condition that she didn’t divulge on her guest application.”

“You’re not going to put her on bed rest are you?” A frown creased Gavin’s forehead. “Come on. Let the woman have some fun. That’s why she’s here. If she wanted to worry about her medical problems, she’d have stayed home.”

“I’m just going to make sure Grier keeps his cell phone on him, and doesn’t let her do anything that would jeopardize her safety.”

“You’re loosening up in your old age. Either that or you’re getting laid.” Gavin’s chuckle filled the room and the tennis ball landed in the palm of his hand.

Garrett made his way to the bunkhouse. The cool Wyoming air sent a shiver down his spine and his mind reeled back to the last

orgasm Clayton had given him. Leaving that man lying there beneath the sheets alone should've been a crime.

He gave a courtesy knock and opened the door of the bunkhouse. The finest looking bunch of cowboys anybody had ever laid eyes on sat in distressed leather club chairs in the common area and at the bar, coffee mugs in hand. Most of the guests arrived in the afternoon. The first few would be at the ranch within the hour. Garrett poured himself a cup of coffee from the counter behind the gleaming mahogany bar and let his eyes wander around the saloon-inspired room.

The mechanical bull sat motionless. The pool table was set and ready for the next game. The jukebox, silent. The place didn't hold a single piece of evidence of the rambunctious party they'd undoubtedly had the night before. These were his kind of men, and this was the reason he'd designed such a space for them to spend their nights at the ranch in. That and he didn't want them leaving the ranch to carouse in town and showing up late for work the next morning. The cowboys worked shifts, one week on and one week off. Most of them had places out in town. Some commuted from as far as Los Angeles. They were actors and models by trade, and outside Fantasy Ranch there wasn't a whole lot this small Wyoming town could offer.

"Morning, boss," Grier said. "Who put that gleam in your eye? And why wasn't it me?"

Garrett gave the man a quick once over. He was used to the flirtation. Grier flirted the way most men breathed. Effortlessly, thoughtlessly and naturally. Before he could answer, the door to the bunkhouse opened and Clayton stepped in. His eyes landed on Garrett immediately.

"Gavin told me I could find you here." He crossed the room, but nothing in his manner gave away what they had going on. "Can I talk to you for a minute?" He glanced around at the other men. "It's a personal thing."

"We can head back to the office. I'm almost finished here."

Clayton shook his head. "Gavin and Rebecca are in there." He motioned toward the hall that led to the bunks. "Maybe we can just step back here for a second?"

The seriousness of his gesture and the faint line that creased his brow set off warning bells in Garrett's head. His heart started a slow, steady pound. He nodded once and quickly filled Grier in on his guest's medical condition before he followed Clayton down the hall.

The bunkhouse was original to the property, but it had been completely remodeled. Instead of a long open room with a more modern addition of bathroom facilities at one end, the front half now housed the common area, and three bunkrooms with four beds in each took up the back. The whole place had the upscale, rustic charm of a five-star resort, and Garrett was willing to bet it was nicer housing than most of the men had when they were at their own places. His eyes spanned Clayton's toned shoulders and drifted down to the tight ass moving beneath his jeans. Blood pulsed in his cock and his balls tightened. He'd never get enough of that ass.

Clayton stopped outside the door of the room he used on the weeks he worked at the ranch and glanced down the hall toward the lounge area. "If you don't want me half as bad as I want you, you'd better not follow me in here," he said in a low, sexy voice that shook Garrett to the core.

Garrett stepped inside, heart pounding. Clayton reached around him to close the door and then pressed his body close. He slipped his hand between them and flattened his palm against Garrett's crotch, then leaned closer, stroking the edge of Garrett's ear with his tongue.

"I have to have you. I have to suck you, feel your big cock in my hand, taste your cum. I have to. Don't tell me no."

Garrett swallowed hard. "The men..." He made a half-hearted attempt to tilt his head in the direction of the lounge area, but he couldn't tear himself away from Clayton's touch or the warmth of his breath.

“They won’t come back here, and I only need a minute.” Clayton chuckled softly. “This is just going to be a little something to make you want more.”

“I already want more.”

“You’re going to get more. A lot more.” He rubbed Garrett’s cock through the denim and pressed himself closer.

“I want to fuck you.”

Clayton shook his head and dipped low to place a kiss on Garrett’s throat. “Not this time, cowboy. I’m going to suck you until you come in my mouth. You can fuck me later.”

Garrett groaned. His cock had stretched to a burn. He pumped his hips against Clayton’s hand. “Suck me now.”

Clayton’s mouth landed on his in a kiss that took his breath away. His lips were soft and strong. The taste of his tongue sparked a craving so deep in Garrett’s gut, he moaned. There was nothing about this man that didn’t fill him with the need for more. He grabbed Clayton’s hips and pulled him close. Clayton’s hands went to Garrett’s belt buckle and his hard cock ground against Garrett’s erection. The hunger that raged between them left a sheen of sweat on Clayton’s handsome face and brought a flush to his neck that made Garrett want to lay him down and fuck him until they’d both spent everything they had.

Clayton’s tongue heated Garrett’s neck. His hands quickly gained access to his pants, and in one sweet second his fingers closed around his cock. Clayton’s head came up quickly, his eyes dark with passion. “You’ve got the sweetest cock I ever put in my mouth.”

Garrett grabbed the back of his head and pulled his mouth back for another taste. He didn’t trust himself to speak. He was dangerously close to saying things he didn’t need to say. Not yet. Clayton drove him wild, physically and emotionally. They’d spent one night together and already Garrett needed him. Needed. Not wanted. Needed.

He ate at Clayton's mouth and filled his palm with one sweet cheek of his ass. He held tight, but Clayton pulled free.

"We don't have long." Clayton pushed Garrett's jeans over his hips and sank to his knees.

Garrett's chest burned with the breath he held. The same breath that flew out in a heated gust the instant Clayton's lips closed around his dick. Clayton cradled his balls and sucked his cock. One talented finger reached back, stroking the sensitive skin between his sac and his ass.

Garrett speared one hand in Clayton's hair and gripped the doorknob with the other. He could barely stand. Barely breathe. His body belonged to this man and his soul threatened to fly out and latch onto him, too.

"Oh, baby." Breath lay heavy on Garrett's words. Lights and colors flashed behind his eyes. His thighs burned. His legs shook. He was about to take off like a rocket and there was nothing he could do but hang on for the ride.

Clayton slipped the tip of a finger into his ass and swallowed his cock. Garrett bit his lip to keep from crying out as he came in Clayton's mouth. Fucking hell, he'd never been sucked off like this before.

Clayton stood slowly, his hands traveling up Garrett's body, planting kisses on his throat and below his ear before making his way back to his mouth. Garrett held his face in his hands and stared deep into his intoxicating blue eyes. "Can I come over tonight?" He felt like a heel. He should be taking him to dinner, flaunting him around town, doing anything Clayton wanted to do. But if they ran into any of the other cowboys from the ranch there'd be too much explaining to do.

"I've got a class at the theater until six. Meet me there." Clayton didn't wait for an answer. He pressed his lips to Garrett's and opened them in a kiss so tender Garrett's toes curled in his boots. When he

stepped away, Garrett pulled him back for more. There wasn't any such thing as enough. Not with Clayton.

After the kiss ended, the two of them stood facing one another. Garrett pulled his jeans up. The sound of his zipper broke the silence of the room like a bomb, and a smile crept across Clayton's face.

"I could get used to this," Clayton said in a low voice.

Garrett swallowed hard. "I swore I'd never get involved with anyone who worked here."

"So fire me." The challenge in Clayton's eyes was tempered by a glint of humor.

"I'm not going to fire you." Garrett cradled his neck and pressed his thumb gently into the hollow beneath his throat. "But I don't want to have to hide you either."

"Let's just see where this takes us. We'll figure it out along the way."

Garrett nodded. The pager on his belt vibrated, breaking the spell between them.

He checked the screen. John. The message was simple: *Call me, baby*. Garrett's back straightened. The "baby" rang in his mind like an alarm. They hadn't spoken in almost three months. He knew John well enough to know when he was testing the waters for another comeback.



## Chapter 8

The old movie palace's glamour easily made it one of the most romantic places in Wyoming, by Garrett's estimates anyway. Romance was such a forgotten art. If John had realized how important that art could be they'd still be together. Garrett wandered the hall outside the small auditorium Clayton used for his drama class.

He studied the tapestries on the wall, the soft-hued mural and the ornately carved figures that decorated the arch supports along the barreled corridor. This place oozed art, attention to detail, and romance. A man would have to be blind not to see that. John had been blind as a bat.

Double doors opened and teenaged thespians spilled out into the hall. Several of them greeted him by name. When the flow stopped, Garrett started for the door.

Clayton met him in the entryway. "I have a surprise for you."

"You're full of those today."

"You ain't seen nothing yet, cowboy."

Garrett's groin tightened and his pulse quickened as the innuendo of Clayton's words slipped into his blood like a drug.

Clayton ushered him inside. The click of the lock sliding into place shot a current down Garrett's spine.

At the front of the theater, the dark stage sparkled with hundreds of twinkling lights meant to be stars in the night sky over the garden outside Juliet's window. The garden where Romeo overheard her declare her love for him. Juliet's balcony towered above, but it was the garden that took center stage with a soft green carpet of grass and

plants. The twinkling stars and pinpoints of erratically appearing lights flashed like fireflies. Garrett stood in awe.

“You did this?”

“I had help.” Clayton’s arm circled his waist. “I want to lay you down in the garden, baby.” He pulled him close for a kiss, and Garrett’s heart did a somersault. He felt himself falling and the last thing in the world he wanted to do was stop. This was the kind of romance he’d been waiting for, what John could never give him.

Clayton led the way to the stage. Garrett used every ounce of control he had not to take him down before they made it anywhere near the garden. Just the promise of a romantic seduction had him raring to go. Damn he was easy.

They climbed the steps to the stage. Even up close the scenery was breathtaking. The crew had done a tremendous job. Someone had an eye for detail, and nothing sang to Garrett’s heart more.

Near the tree where Romeo would stand as Juliet waxed on about him, Clayton pulled him in for a slow kiss that planted a spiral of heat and want deep in his soul. His breath burned in his lungs. His hands stroked Clayton’s strong back, and his thoughts were lost in the intoxicating scent of his lover’s cologne and the soft natural musk of his skin.

Clayton pulled back slowly but held Garrett securely in the circle of his arms. “You should know I planned this. The minute we started designing the set, I had an ulterior motive. I didn’t know if I’d ever get you here, but I damn sure wanted to try.”

“I’m here.” Garrett’s voice betrayed the effect Clayton had on him. “This is the most romantic thing a man has ever done for me.”

“Then, darlin’, you’ve been with the wrong men.” Clayton pulled him down onto the grass-green carpet, which was surprisingly soft for a stage prop.

Garrett lay on his back, staring up at the twinkling stars. Clayton’s fingers brushed his chest as he worked free the button at the top of his shirt.

“I just noticed the music.” A soft tune drifted from the speakers in the dark auditorium.

Clayton laughed. “The devil’s in the details, and I’m going to torment us both with this.” He moved to the second button. “We’re going slow. I want this to last and last and last.”

Garrett groaned. “Where have you been all my life?”

\* \* \* \*

Clayton’s arms burned with restraint. He needed Garrett naked. Now. He pushed his shirt over his shoulders and bent to tease one flat nipple with his tongue. Garrett’s chest was a dream. Smooth and defined, with just a sparse patch of hair between the rise of his pecs. But heaven lay lower. His abs rose like stepping stones that led to the narrow treasure trail that disappeared beneath his belted jeans.

Clayton kissed his smooth skin, letting his tongue explore the valleys between muscle, and finally the fine hair low on his belly. Garrett squirmed beneath him. His grip on Clayton’s hair tightened and the stage acoustics amplified the sound of his breathing.

Clayton made quick work of his belt and rose to his knees. “You’ve got the sweetest cock. Long, pink, thick. I’m in love with your dick.”

Garrett’s chest heaved. “It’s yours. All of it. But please fuck me first.”

Clayton nodded. “Oh, I’m gonna fuck you, sweetheart. I’m going to have you yelling so loud security’ll bust the door down.”

He pulled Garrett’s jeans over his hips. The restraint he had shown earlier cracked. He’d promised slow, but he moved fast, breathing heavy, his own cock, hard and putting up a fight against his jeans.

He tossed Garrett’s boots across the stage and stripped his jeans and underwear off together. Beneath him lay the most gorgeous man he’d ever seen, naked except for the shirt sleeves still covering his

arms. He let his eyes roam, taking him all in. His hands rode up Garrett's muscled thighs, the hair on them coarse beneath his palms. Garrett's cock bobbed, begging. He spread his legs.

"God. Please hurry. Please. Fuck me."

Clayton made quick work of the top two buttons of his own shirt and grabbed the hem, pulling it over his head and tossing it aside. His boots and jeans were off just as fast. Naked, he crawled over Garrett, letting his cock slide against the inside of Garrett's thigh, then against his balls, and finally his smooth, throbbing shaft.

Garrett moaned.

Clayton lowered himself and spread Garrett's thighs. He bent low. At the first stroke of his tongue against Garrett's asshole, Garrett almost hit the roof. His hips came off the floor. His thighs opened wider.

"You've got me strung so tight." Garrett gripped the carpet and lifted his hips.

That was all the cue Clayton needed. He went in for more, licking his lover's tight ass. The soft weight of Garrett's balls settled against the upper bridge of his nose. His strong thighs pushed against his hands. Everything about this man had Clayton's heart pounding so loud he couldn't hear anything else. Garrett trembled and bucked. Clayton reached for his cock, but stopped himself. He'd promised the man a fuck. And he planned to deliver.

He rose and pried Garrett's hands from the rug. Raising one, then the other over his head he made his domination clear. Fingers laced together, Clayton aimed his cock for that sweet ass and pushed his way inside. Garrett's eyes slammed shut.

"Look at me, baby. Watch me fuck you."

Garrett opened his eyes, as green as the carpet they lay on, but filled with passion as dark as the staged sky above them.

Clayton pushed himself deep, gave one little pump and then warned, "Hold on."

Garrett's grip on his hands tightened.

Clayton fucked him hard and fast. The sounds of their fucking filled the auditorium, ricocheted off the walls surrounding the stage and pounded in Clayton's ears like the beat of an addictive song, a beat he had to dance to. There was no stopping. No self-control. Only the driving need to fuck until they both came completely unglued.

Clayton came hard, burrowing his face into Garrett's neck and trembling from head to toe. "Your ass is a dream," he breathed as he lay on Garrett, their damp chests pressed together. Garrett's still-hard cock pressed into his belly. He shifted, just to feel that ridge of smooth steel move against his skin.

Garrett's arms were wrapped around his back, holding him close. One hand drifted down to his ass and squeezed gently. "You fuck like a machine," Garrett said with a laugh.

"Good, because I can't cook worth a damn."

"Just fuck me in the kitchen, and I'll forget all about eating."

Clayton sucked gently on his neck. "I can do that."

## Chapter 9

Garrett tapped the corner of the daily envelope on his desk and deleted the newest message from his phone. First the notes. Then Clayton. And now two texts from John. Last week he didn't have a man on the horizon. Now he felt like a juggler, a reluctant juggler.

"Another one?" Gavin stepped into the room, his hair still damp from the shower, and baby Ryder in his arms.

Garrett nodded and tossed the envelope to Gavin's side of the desk. "You really don't think I need to be concerned about this?"

Gavin didn't bother opening it. "Somebody's just having a little fun with you. Probably trying to be romantic."

"You're sure?"

"Some fool's in love," Gavin said. "Or lust. Figure out who it is and get yourself laid." He tilted his head toward the infant. "Ryder told me he thinks you're getting some lately. You haven't been half as hard to live with."

Garrett reached over to take the envelope back and straightened the letter inside before putting it in a file with the others. "I got a text from John yesterday. And another today."

"What'd he want?"

"My tight ass."

Gavin grinned and pressed a kiss to Ryder's forehead before handing him to Garrett. "You really don't think you two'll work it out?"

Garrett shook his head. "Go take your wife to dinner."

"I've never seen you play this hard to get." Gavin chuckled. "Guess you're not as easy as I thought."

Rebecca walked in and turned around slowly as Gavin let out a low whistle. He glanced back at Garrett. "I'd love to stay here and solve your problems, but the faster I get her out, the faster I can get back and get her out of that dress."

Rebecca laughed. "I'll eat fast."

"You sure we can't grab drive-through somewhere?"

Garrett wiggled the finger Ryder's tiny fingers were curled around. "Don't worry, little man. I'll teach you better manners than your daddy ever learned."

Rebecca started rattling off instructions for the kids and Garrett waved her out. "We'll be fine. Trust me, I'm better at this than your husband is."

Gavin grinned. "Yeah, but she'll call you every fifteen minutes anyway. We won't be gone long. Savannah's picking out a movie for you to watch with her."

They left and Garrett made his way to the family room to find his niece. As much as he loved living at the ranch and being close to the kids, he'd been thinking more and more about finding his own place.

Lately, he'd spent every night at Clayton's and the urge to make his own home with his own family nagged at him stronger than it ever had before. He toyed with the idea of buying a house and asking Clayton to move in with him. But Clayton had just settled into his new place. He'd have to be patient and hope like the devil Clayton wanted to rush this relationship to the next level as much as he did.

## Chapter 10

Clayton stepped off the plane in Los Angeles, his second home, and made his way through the crowds headed to baggage claim. He shifted his carry-on over his shoulder and hurried outside to grab one of the waiting cabs. Settled into the back of the taxi, he texted Garrett a quick, “On the ground, miss you already.”

It had been so long since he felt this way about a man. He wanted to sing it from the rooftops.

Forty-five minutes later, the cab driver pulled up in front of the corporate offices of Rhinestone Outfitters, the rodeo apparel company that had been in his family for two generations. His father, president of the board, had called him in for a talk prior to the annual board meeting. There were some changes being made to the corporate operations and he said he wanted to discuss them privately. This wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. Business was business, but family always came first. His father wouldn’t spring anything big on him in a room full of people.

Clayton paid his cab fare and pushed open the door to the offices, a massive slab of distressed wood and elaborate ironwork with the company logo carved in the center.

He nodded to the receptionist and made his way to his father’s office, which took up half the top floor.

His mother got up from a chair in front of the desk and greeted him with her usual hug. She toyed with a short curl in front of her ear, the way she always did when she was nervous.



“Son!” His father’s booming voice filled the room. Samuel Lawrence stood and held his arms open. His huge frame matched his voice and his heart.

Clayton hugged his father and took a seat next to his mother.

“We’ve made some big decisions, son. Let’s get straight to it.”

His mother reached over to pat his forearm. An uneasy feeling instantly settled in his gut.

His father cleared his throat and rocked back in his big leather chair. “Rodeo people love tradition and Rhinestone Outfitters has always had a reputation for being a family run company.”

“Is the company in trouble?” Clayton asked. He’d never had much interest in taking the reins of the family business, but he was ready to pull his weight whenever and however his parents needed him to.

“Trouble? No. Your mother and I have decided to retire,” his father said. “We’d like you to come to work full-time for the next year, familiarize yourself with all the vendors. It’s more of a figurehead position than anything, but your input will be taken seriously and you’ll have the final decision on monies spent.”

Clayton’s head spun. Full-time? He’d worked at his parents’ company in one minor capacity or another since he was sixteen years old. But his career path was theater, not rodeo fashion. And now more than ever, his home was in Wyoming, not Los Angeles.

Clayton turned to his mother with what must have seemed like a plea for help.

She patted his arm again. “You can still do theater, dear. This is L.A. If you can find places to act in Wyoming, you can certainly find your fill of it here.”

“And if I don’t want to do this?”

His mother glanced toward his father and then straightened the hem of her rhinestone-studded skirt.

“We’ve gotten an offer. We could sell.” His father’s voice held the tone Clayton recognized too well. Disguised disappointment. He sounded the same way when Clayton mentioned a boyfriend or his

mother mentioned the wedding of another friend's child. Family and tradition were ingrained in his father's DNA, something Clayton hadn't come close to giving him yet.

If he turned down this offer, his parents would lose another dream they had built around him.

"When do I need to let you know?"

"The board meets next week. We thought we'd make our announcement then."

His mother smiled at him. "You'll make the right decision," she said. "You always do."

"Follow me around for the next couple of days." His father stood and came around the desk. "It'll give you a better idea of what you're getting into."

He felt his whole world start to slide away from him, like he was thirteen again and they'd announced they were moving the family from Wyoming out to Los Angeles so they could expand the business. He was a man now. Perfectly able to decline this offer, to live his life the way he chose. But the future of the business his grandfather had built from the ground up and his father had taken to the top of the cowboy fashion world rested on his decision.

## **Chapter 11**

Clayton boarded the plane back to Wyoming more conflicted than he'd ever been. Garrett never left his mind, and despite the weight and guilt tied to his parents' proposal, his heart soared with the giddiness of new love. His whole outlook was fogged by the anticipation of getting back to Wyoming and the man he was falling head over heels for.

He settled into his seat and sent another text. "Dinner tonight?"

Garrett responded with an almost instant. "Love to."

Clayton's heart gave a little flip. The word "love" jumped off the screen of his phone and struck his chest like an entire quiver of Cupid's arrows. He had it bad. And it felt so good.

"Pick you up at 5:30. Missed you." He pressed send and turned the phone off before he put any more of his heart on the line.

The rest of the plane ride was pure hell. His mind wandered every which way it shouldn't. Garrett's last relationship had been long-distance. What if he wasn't willing to go through that kind of challenge again?

Clayton searched for the most logical solution, one that would allow him to take care of business and the man he'd fallen in love with.

He'd keep his house in Wyoming. Maybe he could even work from home enough that the strain on the relationship wouldn't tear them apart.

He'd have to quit the ranch, but that would just make things easier for them. No more hiding what they had, slipping around town and eating dinners in so no one would see them together.

The knot of tension between his shoulders loosened a little. He'd find a way to make it work. Garrett was worth it. They didn't play games with one another. He didn't worry about Garrett having a wandering eye or, worse, a roaming dick. Something big was building between them. The once in a lifetime kind of big. Tingly warmth spread through him. He had it bad all right. He wasn't falling in love with Garrett. He'd already taken the plunge and now floated deep in the abyss of mind-bending, body tingling bliss.

A smile spread across his face. He loved Garrett Carter. Loved him with everything he had. Loved him enough to take the next step, as big a step as Garrett wanted to take. Living together. Marriage. Family. It was all in the cards. And tonight he'd lay it on the table. Show his hand and see how much Garrett was willing to wager on what they had together.

As soon as the captain approved the use of cell phones, he dialed information and made reservations at the most romantic restaurant within an hour's drive of the ranch and requested a table outside overlooking the lake. The cold air wouldn't matter. He knew how to keep his man warm.

Before he made it out of the airport, he called the restaurant back and reserved a bottle of Garrett's favorite wine. He hung up with a smile. His hands shook. Nerves had him by the balls, but he had no doubt he was ready. He would never find another man like Garrett. He didn't want to waste another minute wondering if Garrett felt the same way. His heart swelled. He knew Garrett felt the same. He'd seen it in his eyes. Felt it in his touch. Heard it in the beat of his heart. They were made for one another.

Clayton eased back against the seat of the cab and let his mind drift as the driver navigated the winding country roads that led to his house. Tonight was the first night of the rest of his life. And nothing could ruin it.

## **Chapter 12**

Garrett shut down his computer and straightened the files on his desk. He glanced at the clock on the wall and surrendered himself to the anticipation that had him in its clutches since he'd received Clayton's text. The connection between them still had the intoxicating effect of new love. This was what he'd been waiting for. Clayton was the one. He had no doubt.

He'd always had a high-flung romantic notion that the right man would be the one who declared his love with some grand gesture or put more effort into romance than sex. He'd tried for years to find little ways to show his love for John and to lure John into the same habits. It hadn't worked and ultimately he'd given up on that relationship. Distance didn't help. Their jobs kept them apart more than either of them wanted. And now, with Clayton, every day felt like Valentine's Day.

The clap of boots in the hall set Garrett's chest on fire.

Clayton entered the room with a smile. "Hey, gorgeous."

Garrett met him with a kiss, lingering just long enough on his lips to let the heat of their touch curl in his belly.

Clayton smiled. "More later?"

"A lot more." Garrett guided him down the hall with a hand low on his back. Thoughts of later already swirled in his mind and Gavin's drive-through suggestion clung to the tip of his tongue. "Maybe we can have an appetizer in the truck."

Clayton brushed his hand over the front of Garrett's jeans. "I *am* starving."

The back door swung open. Gavin stepped in first, a suitcase in his hand and a devilish grin on his face.

“Surprise!” John said, moving from behind Gavin and throwing his arms around Garrett. “Oh, God, I’ve missed you, baby.”

Garrett stiffened, too stunned to push John away. “What are you doing here?” The familiar scent of John’s cologne hit him like a freight train. His heart had been working overtime to let go of this man, and Clayton had rooted out a strong spot for himself. But John’s ghost lingered. They’d been together too long to break cleanly.

John rubbed his hands up and down Garrett’s back. “Gavin said my notes had you ready to call in the FBI. They were supposed to be romantic.” He gave Garrett a quick kiss before stepping back. “I thought you’d love the whole secret admirer thing.” He held Garrett’s arm in a familiar grip. “The bedroom’s the only place I’ll ever have you figured out.”

Garrett’s stomach sank, but John didn’t notice. His laughter filled the hall, his personality always bigger than any room he was in.

“Rebecca’s making dinner for the four of us,” Gavin said. “So if you disappear, make sure you’re downstairs and ready to eat at six. Don’t keep my lady waiting.” He smiled at Clayton.

Garrett whipped around to see the cloud pass over Clayton’s eyes.

“Clayton, this is John,” Garrett said quickly.

John stuck his hand out and gave Clayton a warm smile. Garrett’s gut twisted. John had sent the notes. John had finally tried to give him what he needed. But it was too late.

“Clayton was just—”

“Leaving?” Clayton filled in for him.

Garrett swallowed hard. God, he hated scenes. He struggled for the words that would put everything right again, but before he found them, Clayton was gone and the door swung shut at his back.

## **Chapter 13**

Clayton held the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip. Ahead on the horizon, an ominous dark cloud approached in the darkening sky. The storm rumbled, but the drumming of his heart drowned out the sound.

Heat pricked his armpits and jealousy ripped through him like a tornado. He had overreacted. He needed to turn around and go take his man to dinner like he planned.

He pushed a hand through his hair and swore, then pulled off the road and waited for traffic to clear so he could turn around. He wasn't going to walk away and let some suit-wearing beefcake waltz right back in without a fight. He knew Garrett loved him. John's arrival had been a surprise. Hell, he might've reacted the same way if Devon had swooped in looking hot and smothering him with kisses.

No.

He wouldn't have.

He loved Garrett. Devon couldn't have taken his mind off his man for a minute. He pressed the accelerator to the floor and headed back for the ranch. He'd send John back to where he came from if he had to throw him over his shoulder and load him on the plane himself.

The flash of blue against the windshield and the wail of a siren jerked his eyes to the dashboard. Dammit. Eighty and climbing in a fifty-five zone.

He pulled to the shoulder and waited for the officer to approach. In the rearview, Clayton recognized the man's cocky swagger. Just what he fucking needed. Maybe if he just kept his mouth shut, Chet,

the local Barney Fife clone, would write him a quick ticket and let him go.

He rolled down the window and reached for his license and registration.

“You know how fast you were going?”

“Not until you lit me up.” He handed the cop his paperwork while his thigh bounced on the seat. Every second Garrett spent with John killed a little piece of him.

Chet checked his ID, and then glanced at the barcode on his back window. The Fantasy Ranch logo was small, but easily visible.

Three years ago, Chet had been determined to shut down the ranch, convinced it was a brothel for women. The debacle he’d made of his investigation had gotten him demoted and put a very sweet lady in an uncomfortable situation. Clayton remembered her easily. She’d been his guest, and Chet was her nephew. The man was as unscrupulous as they came to use her the way he did.

Chet eyed his driver’s license with contempt. “Ain’t you figured out yet who you work for?”

Clayton held his tongue.

“Or are you just like them?” Pudgy fingers secured his license to the top of a clipboard. “How much do you get paid to sleep with those women?”

“I don’t sleep with women.” Clayton gave him an exaggerated wink and waggled his brow. The pig wouldn’t ever get that lucky, but he’d probably crap his pants thinking about it. And at least it shut him up.

Visibly shaken, Chet started to scribble out the information on the speeding ticket form. He didn’t make eye contact when he ripped off Clayton’s copy and shoved it to him with his license.

Clayton threw the ticket on the seat and pulled back onto the road while the officer stalked back to his car.

He *had* figured out who he was working for. He worked for a man who wasn’t over his ex. At least not over him enough. He pulled into



the first driveway he came to and waited for the police cruiser to pass before he backed out and headed toward home.

He wasn't going to chase Garrett down. If Garrett loved him, he'd show up tonight with his tail between his legs and his horndog memories of John shoved somewhere deep in his back pocket.

If he didn't show up...

Clayton winced and a sharp pain speared his chest. If he didn't show up, it was better not to waste any more time falling for a man who wasn't emotionally available.

Lord knows he'd learned that lesson.

His cell phone rang just as he pulled into his garage. His mother. He let the call go to voicemail. He didn't need any subtle pressure to move to Los Angeles and step up to his position in the family company. She meant well, but right now rhinestone studded t-shirts and hand-tooled belts were the farthest things from his mind. He might have just lost the man he loved.

By midnight, Clayton had watched Devon fuck eight men. He still didn't miss Garrett any less. And he hadn't gotten desperate enough to call *his* ex.

He listened to his mother's voicemail message. She'd found an apartment for him to look at. So much for subtlety. Acceptance sank in. Whether he nursed a broken heart in Los Angeles or Wyoming, it would hurt the same.

## Chapter 14

“Why didn’t you tell me you were seeing Clayton?” Gavin propped his boots on the corner of the desk. “Hell, I’m not a mind reader.”

“I never even suspected John was behind the notes. Or that you were putting them on my desk.” Garrett pushed his hand through his hair. The morning sun burned his eyes. Bitter coffee clung to his tongue and sat like a rock in his stomach. “What was I thinking last night?” He could still see the hurt in Clayton’s eyes, and shame flooded him.

His reaction to John was more of a habit than an emotion. The spark wasn’t there anymore. Last night had proven that. Maybe it had never been there. If it had, it definitely didn’t to compare with what he’d had with Clayton.

“What are you going to do about it?”

Garrett scrubbed his face with his hands. “I think I blew it. Did you see how he looked at me?”

“Blew what?” Rebecca asked as she came into the room and settled into Gavin’s lap.

Gavin wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. “Garrett’s been seeing Clayton.”

“Is it serious?” she asked.

He nodded. Nausea and pain washed through him. He’d just thrown away the best thing that ever happened to him for a night with a man who’d never been enough.

“But John spent the night here last night.” Her dark brows rose and her mouth twisted into a frown. “Garrett, tell me you didn’t.”

“He didn’t.” John stood in the door, his hair still rumpled from sleeping in the guest room, his bare feet sticking out from the bottom of his pajamas. “Believe me. He definitely didn’t.”

“But you didn’t call Clayton last night either, did you?” Rebecca shook her head and stood up. “When will you men learn?”

Gavin followed her out of the room and John sat down on the corner of Garrett’s desk. “He must be something.”

“Yeah, but I’m a real shithead.”

John picked up Garrett’s mug and took a sip. He winced and set it back down. “I need something stronger than coffee this morning. I called and changed my flight. I’ll grab a shower and head to the airport.” At the door, he turned back. “You know where to find me if you ever change your mind.” Then, with a smile, he added, “I can’t believe the notes didn’t work.”

“I never wanted to play games,” Garrett said. He didn’t bother to try and explain what he wanted again. John couldn’t give it to him.

## Chapter 15

Garrett checked his phone for the umpteenth time. Still no response to the three voicemails he'd left Clayton. The theater board meeting ended later than expected, and the concession area of the old movie palace was filled with moviegoers. Gargoyles stared down from the domed ceiling, keeping a close eye on the commotion below. After years of tireless effort, every inch of the historic building had been restored to its original glory and the palace was experiencing a rebirth. Movies played throughout the day in the large auditorium and the smaller venues were used for dance and drama troupes.

Garrett checked his watch. The class Clayton taught should be rehearsing for their upcoming performance. He crossed the polished marble floor of the concession area and passed under a tapestry that hung below the arched entrance of a secondary hallway. He stopped outside the auditorium door and steadied himself before quietly slipping inside.

Onstage at the front of the small, dimly lit auditorium, Clayton interrupted a lackluster attempt at a Shakespearean soliloquy with the clap of his hands. His boots thudded softly across the stage and his jeans moved against his tight ass in a way that caused Garrett's breath to hitch.

He stopped in the exact spot they'd made love, but didn't even glance down at the forest floor.

"Monica, sweetheart, throw your heart into it," Clayton addressed the teenage girl on the balcony. "Romeo's got a script to follow, too. He can't wing any curve balls at you. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there. Give it everything you've got."

His drama student nodded and began again. This time she delivered a much more convincing rendition.

Clayton applauded loudly and the other kids joined him. Juliet beamed and Garrett realized he was beaming, too. The kids all looked the way Clayton's guests looked after a week at the ranch. He brought out the best in people. Made them feel good about themselves and proud of who they were. Garrett's heart contracted.

Clayton turned to walk offstage. He caught Garrett's eye and his steps faltered. "Take five," he said loudly.

The bustle of kids filled the theater as Clayton made his way up the aisle toward Garrett. Garrett's heart sped up and regret filled him. How had he ever hurt this genuine, incredible man?

"I'm sorry. Please tell me I can make it right again," Garrett said as soon as Clayton had come to a stop in front of him.

Clayton gave him a look that melted every bone in his body. "John left, so you came back to me?" He shook his head. "No, Garrett. I'm not anybody's second choice. Not even yours."

The words were like a punch in the gut. "It's not like that."

"From where I'm standing, it's exactly like that. I hope he finally makes you happy." He turned around quickly and clapped his hands again. "Let's take it from the top of scene two. Love is a tragedy people. Give the audience all the pain they're paying for."

His students laughed and took their places. Garrett waited, but Clayton never even glanced back to see if he was still there.

## Chapter 16

Two weeks passed. Clayton wouldn't take his calls. He had turned in his resignation to Gavin the morning after Garrett interrupted his rehearsal.

Garrett had even gone to his house a couple of times, hoping to catch him at home. If he'd been there the first time, he didn't answer the door.

The second time, Garrett hadn't even gotten out of his truck. The real estate sign in the front yard had knocked the wind out of him.

Clayton wasn't playing games. He'd made up his mind. And Garrett didn't stand a chance of changing it if he couldn't even see him.

Now at the front of the dark auditorium, the curtain rose for the audience's standing ovation and Clayton joined his cast onstage for their final bow. Garrett applauded loudly, but the thundering claps didn't compare to the pounding of his heart.

The beautiful, talented man smiling out at the crowd and beaming at his young protégés deserved the kind of love that never let him down. He deserved a Romeo.

As the patrons filed out of the auditorium, Garrett made his way against the foot traffic like a salmon fighting his way upstream.

By the time he made it to the front, Clayton and the cast had already gone backstage, but Garrett knew every hidden nook of this theater. It didn't take him long to find him. A young Juliet clung to his neck and wiped tears from her eyes.

"We're going to miss you," she said. "No one teaches us the way you do."

"I know Grier personally," Clayton assured her. "He's fabulous. You'll love him in a minute and forget all about me."

She laughed through her tears. "You're unforgettable." She gave him another quick squeeze and then walked away.

Garrett swallowed the lump in his throat and waited.

Clayton must have felt his presence because when he turned around, there wasn't any hint of surprise in his eyes.

"Why are you here?"

"Because Juliet's right." Garrett reached for his arm. "You're unforgettable."

Clayton pulled his arm from Garrett's grasp and sized him up, obviously not ready to let him off that easily.

"Let me try to make it up to you," Garrett said.

"Try?"

"Let me make it up to you. I need you. I didn't sleep with John. It's over. He finally understands that. You're the only man I want and I can't let you walk away."

Clayton's expression softened and Garrett's heart swelled with hope.

"What if you can't stop me?"

"I have to." Garrett stepped closer. "You're more than I ever thought I'd find. You're everything to me."

"I can't cook." A smile touched Clayton's lips, but his eyes grew serious. "And I mean it. I won't ever take second place."

"We'll eat out. And I swear you don't have to worry about John or anyone else." The door to the theater closed and the last of the voices faded down the corridor. Garrett nodded toward some of the trees and the grass carpet that had been moved off stage. "I want you. Right here. Right now. I have to know you're still mine."

Clayton shook his head and his lips curled into a smile so sexy it took Garrett's breath away. "I think the fairies in this garden have seen enough. Let's go home."

Garrett pulled him in for a kiss. Every brush of lips, every slide of tongue had him thanking his lucky stars he'd found his partner. Clayton cupped his ass and gave it a territorial squeeze.

"I'm sorry about John," Garrett said when they finally came up for air.

Clayton tightened his grip on his ass. "When I get done with you, you won't even remember his name."

"Who's name?"

"Now that's *my* man talking." Clayton stepped close enough that Garrett could feel his hard cock and the rise of his chest when he breathed. "Don't think you're off the hook, cowboy. I've got plenty of ways for you to make this up to me."

"I'm yours," Garrett said. "Here. L.A. Wherever you want me. Nothing matters to me more than you do. Gavin and I can find a way to make the ranch work without me on property if we need to. I'm yours. And I'll make it up to you every day for the rest of my life."



## **Epilogue**

Clayton had just placed the last egg roll on a serving dish they'd gotten as a wedding present and tossed the takeout containers in the trash when a reflection off Garrett's truck flashed in the bay window. The food would be a waste tonight. He'd never get Garrett to settle down enough to eat a bite.

He poured a glass of wine and set the bottle down as the door to the mudroom closed. The look in Garrett's eyes as he crossed the kitchen sparked a fever in his chest. The weeks Garrett couldn't join him in Los Angeles were hell on both of them.

"Somebody missed me," Clayton said.

Garrett set the wine he offered on the counter and took him in his arms. Their lips met with a passion four years hadn't dampened. Clayton leaned into the kiss, holding Garrett's tense neck in his hands, pressing his body close.

"I hate sleeping without you," Garrett said against his throat.

"I am a much better lover than your right hand." He felt Garrett smile and some of the tension leave his body.

"How'd the meeting go?"

"The board is in agreement, it's time to add to the team of designers. But space is limited, and moving the company to a larger building or housing the design department in a separate location is cost prohibitive."

"So is expansion on hold for now?"

Clayton smiled. "I offered up my office. With minor remodeling it'll easily accommodate the new design team, and my new home office will be much less expensive than any of the alternatives."

“So you’ll work out of our apartment in L.A.?”

Clayton shook his head slowly and reached around to caress Garrett’s ass. “I’ll work from here, and sleep with my husband at night.” He leaned in for another kiss. “Every night.”

Garrett backed him into the countertop.

The slab of granite at his back didn’t have anything on the rock-hard cock that pressed against his. “As much as I like being stuck between this rock and hard place, you need to see what I did this afternoon.”

Clayton led the way down the hall, but stopped at the open door of the guest room next to their master.

Outside, the snow had melted from everywhere but the mountain tops framed by the bedroom window. Inside, a new mahogany crib stood where the queen bed had been.

Garrett’s hand in Clayton’s trembled. “She’s not due for another two weeks. The painters don’t come until next week.” Tears shone in his eyes as he searched Clayton’s face. “We agreed not to put the crib up until we knew she was ours.”

A previous attempt to adopt had nearly killed them when the birth mother changed her mind at the eleventh hour, and they’d taken every precaution this time around not to set themselves up for that kind of fall.

Clayton didn’t wipe away the tear that rolled down his own cheek. “I got the call a couple of hours ago. She was born at 12:02 this morning. Her birth mother signed the paperwork this afternoon, and our little girl will be released from the hospital day after tomorrow. She’s healthy and beautiful. My mom and dad are there with her now, so she’s not alone.”

Garrett started down the hall. “Why are we here? We have to pack. We have to get to the air—”

Clayton caught his arm and pulled him close. “Our suitcase is packed. The first flight back to L.A. leaves in three and a half hours.” He kissed him softly. “We can’t get to her any faster than that.”

Garrett inhaled and the overload of emotions poured out of him in a staggered breath that gave a tremor to his words. “You’ve given me everything I ever wanted.” The love shining in his eyes melted Clayton to the core.

He trailed his knuckles along the line of Garrett’s jaw. “And I didn’t even have to learn to cook.”

**THE END**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Wendi Darlin loves to write stories about rural life that take her back to her roots. She rarely ventures far from the places she knows well, but when she does you can bet her heroes will still be wearing jeans and talking in a smooth drawl that will seep straight into your heart..



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