
ROMANCING THE RANCHERS

Big G Ranch - Book Two

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

Emma

The Big G Ranch looked wonderful. Emma hadn't known what condition she might find it in. Then again, it had been almost two years since she had received any correspondence from Ruth, the only female friend she'd made while living there, besides Beatrice Garrison. And that letter informed her of Beatrice's unexpected passing. Not that she ever once entertained the idea that the Garrison boys, Clayton and Everett, would let the place fall to ruin. But they were both mama's boys and Emma understood their devastating loss.

She hated never having replied to Ruth until a week ago, advising her she would be returning and would need a room at the hotel. Time didn't permit for her to wait on a response, if one even came. The Big G had been her home once. But she realized she would never be welcome on the ranch again.

Everett's wife, Laura, continued to shoot hostile glares at her and Andrew, her four-year-old son. Not that she could

blame her. Emma loathed herself for not providing the poor little woman with an explanation and easing her worries, but she must speak with Everett first. Imagining the terrible stories most likely imparted about her, Emma feared initiating any conversation. She honestly didn't desire causing anyone any turmoil or pain.

Deciding the atmosphere in the house was increasingly unbearable, Emma took Andrew outside to run around. The opportunities for him to do so until then were rare. Since his birth, she had to split her time between caring for him and her aunt. After he started walking and needed time outdoors, Aunt Mabel's condition had worsened. The guilt of denying him the fundamentals every young boy deserved plagued her. Thus, her return to Oklahoma became necessary after Aunt Mabel's passing. Andrew would grow up away from judgmental eyes, and he would have the love of both of his parents. How could anyone not love him?

Watching Andrew run around the field and spin and fall, had her laughing. The sun warmed her face and hands. It felt marvelous. She couldn't hear the sounds of the city—no continuous horses' hooves and people chattering as they walked by the house. She heard nothing, except Andrew.

After a good hour or so, a wagon appeared off in the distance, coming toward the house. Staying in the field with Andrew, she wished for it to be a neighbor or someone she wouldn't have any need to engage with. She needed to speak with Everett. Everett first.

Walking farther out into the grass and away from the house, she averted her eyes from the oncoming arrival. Even if the person or persons managed to not view her and Andrew, the hired coach that brought her there had stopped out front and alerted everyone of a visitor.

A shiver originated in her lower back and traveled up to

her scalp at hearing Clayton's voice. It had become deeper and more confident but unmistakable. "Laura, are you inside? Is everything all right?" he called.

She heard a female respond, either Laura or perhaps Clayton's wife. Either way, she had no intention of verifying it. She should leave. She could leave word for Everett, let him know he could find her at the hotel, and she must speak with him. Could she trust Laura or Clayton to deliver the message? She doubted it. Why would either of them?

Laura, Everett's poor little wife, whose face exhibited a wild range of emotion from sheer terror to extreme rage, or Clayton, the boy she'd left on the cusp of becoming a young man whom she'd promised she would return and never did—she couldn't expect them to aid her in any fashion. For all they thought, she had returned with Everett's son.

She wished things were different. She wished almost five years ago, she had possessed the maturity to behave appropriately and respectfully. She could only blame herself. Aunt Mabel tried to convince her and guide her to confront her mistakes and admit them. She did neither. Two things Emma would never apologize for were being with Aunt Mabel during her final, ailing years, and the birth of Andrew. Never.

"Emma?" inquired Clayton, coming up behind her.

She turned her head and met his gentle, brown eyes. "Yes, it is me." His eyes were wide, revealing his suspicion and unease. "I know... it has been a long time. You have grown up into a fine—"

"It has been a long time. So long, without receiving a single word from you. I wonder why you thought... why you would believe it a good idea to come here?" he interrupted. His face turned hard and his eyes darkened.

Lowering her eyes, she focused on the ground and rolled her upper lip between her teeth. The impulse to grab her son,

run to the hired coach, leave and never look back overwhelmed her. But she couldn't. She wouldn't. "I didn't expect anyone to welcome me."

"We don't," he barked.

Andrew's laughter disrupted the intensely uncomfortable moment. Clayton's attention went to the playing boy—briefly.

"Laura said you had a young boy with you. You married while back in Boston? So why are you here, Emma?" he prodded.

Clearing her throat, Emma stammered, "As I mentioned to Laura, I n-need to speak with Everett. I am not here to make trouble for any of you. That is the last thing I want to do." She wanted to explain it to him. She couldn't, without speaking to Everett first. She owed Everett a great deal of explanations.

"Your very presence here does exactly that. You left here promising to return. You professed your love to my brother and how you would be his wife. And you never contacted him," he yelled. "You broke his heart. For a long while, Mother and I worried he would never be the same. He became angry and isolated himself in the cabin he started building for you. It didn't even have a roof, and no one could get him to stay in the main house. Even when it rained, or the ground froze. And then when Ma passed."

"I was so sorry to learn of it. But by then, it had been almost three years since I left. And it seemed insensitive of me to send my respects." She'd honestly prayed, once she learned of Beatrice's death, that Everett had moved on and found love.

Pounding the toe of his boot in the dirt, Clayton huffed, "If you are determined to stay until you see him, I will ride and send him home. You and your son stay away from the house. I promise you if you upset either Clara Mae or Laura, you will regret it."

She bit her lower lip and nodded. “Thank you, Clayton,”

Watching Clayton march to the barn and then galloping off for Everett had her crying. She’d promised herself she wouldn’t cry. Such a stupid promise. How could she not? The ire she’d received from Clayton would pale in comparison to Everett’s. Not to forget she had her half-brother, Tobias, to face too.

“Mom, chase me,” Andrew pleaded.

Wiping the tears from under her eyes, she forced a smile and bent her knees, stalking toward her son. He giggled and ran. *You are doing this for him. He deserves to have a father.*

After playing and laughing until her sides hurt and her breathing came fast, the recognizable sound of a horse charging across the fields reached her. Her pulse quickened. Taking Andrew’s hand, she pulled him close. No, she didn’t have any intention of using her child as a shield, but she hoped his presence could lessen the hostile interaction she predicted.

She thought she had difficulty breathing before she glimpsed him. The years had been good to Everett. Very good. His broad shoulders and muscular arms flexed as he jerked on the reins, stopping the horse directly in front of her. He glared at her, but his handsomeness overruled his evident harshness.

“I am told you won’t leave without talking to me. Get to talking,” he roared.

Andrew tugged her skirt, hiding his face in it. “First, I owe you an apology. I cannot convey my deepest regrets for my dishonorable behavior and lack of—”

Everett blustered, “I’ve heard enough. Now that you have alleviated your conscience, you and your son can hop back in

the coach and head back to wherever you came from or wherever you are going.”

“When I first returned to Boston, I planned to return as soon as Aunt Mabel improved or...” she paused. He hated her. His eyes were dark with his disdain. “She recently passed. No one, not even her doctor, expected her to be with us as long as she was. And I will not regret being with her these years when she needed me.”

She couldn’t believe his eyes could get darker and colder. They did. He narrowed them and enunciated his words. “And you somehow believe I want or need to hear this. A simple letter would have sufficed. I never got a single one. Nothing. No indication about her health. No news about your plans.”

Shifting her focus from his malicious stare, she continued, “Not long after I arrived in Boston, I discovered I was with child.”

A nasty laugh burst from him. She shivered but kept her eyes averted.

“Again, Emma. How does this affect me? Didn’t take you long to find a lover,” he remarked.

Do what you came for. Open your mouth and say it. “I have been with one man... here at the ranch. He needs to know he has a son and Andrew needs to meet his father.”

“Unless you have an unreliable memory, he isn’t mine. You and I were virtuous and were waiting until we married,” he seethed.

Andrew yanked on her skirt and whined. “He is a child, Everett. I understand your anger. I couldn’t bring myself to tell you in a letter. I deserve your wrath. But Andrew doesn’t. I was weak. I won’t label it a mistake because I have Andrew, but it should not have happened.”

Flinging himself off the horse, he stomped in every direction, each time turning back toward her before distancing

himself. When he slapped the horse on its rump, it trotted to the barn. “You are telling me you were unfaithful. You pledged yourself to me and gave yourself to another. And someone here. Someone I trust and have provided a home to. A friend,” he hissed.

Her eyes filled with tears and her jaw twitched. “I am so ashamed. I don’t expect your forgiveness. I don’t expect—”

Rushing her, Everett gripped her arm and yanked her along as he hiked her to the coach. Snatching the door open, he shoved her inside. Andrew stood outside wailing. “Don’t you ever set foot on my ranch again. Are you staying with Ruth?”

Sobbing, she reached for Andrew, but Everett wouldn’t move and allow her to grab him. “Give me my son! Let me have him!” she screamed.

She watched Everett’s temper physically ebb before her eyes. His eyes lightened. His face softened. His shoulders slumped. Circling to Andrew, he gently lifted the boy and placed him in the coach. “Who is it I need to send after you? And to Ruth’s?” he questioned.

Hugging Andrew to her chest, she sniffled. “Claude. I will be at Ruth’s.”

He shut the door and went inside the house. She prayed he sent Clayton to fetch Claude and didn’t do it himself. Perhaps his wife would insist upon it. Either way, she’d succeeded in exposing her sordid secret. She inhaled as much air into her lungs as she could and slowly released it. For over four years, she’d yearned and dreaded this day.

Now she could put it behind her and move forward, in whatever form that entailed. She and Claude never spent any time together except at meals. They didn’t know much about one another. They weren’t in love. It happened one night when he found her crying about her aunt and leaving the

ranch. He sat with her and listened. They held hands. She laid her head on his shoulder. A sympathetic, soothing kiss led to more. More than either of them anticipated. Both felt instant remorse over their betrayal to Everett and vowed to never speak of it.

A knock came on the coach and the driver appeared in the window. "Are you ready to depart, ma'am?" he inquired.

"Yes." She twisted her head, taking her face out of his view. The tears she cried weren't only ones derived from anguish any longer. They consisted of relief and hope. "Back to town and I won't need you the remainder of the day."

Situating herself and Andrew on the bench and not in the floor, she cuddled him to her, and he quickly fell asleep. Her heart felt lighter. A shame it came at the cost of hurting Everett and of providing Claude with some shocking news. Thoughts of how Claude would react and how he would proceed consumed her for the entire ride. The driver dropped her at the train station. Ruth lived a short walk away, but once the driver began offloading her bags, she realized she couldn't carry them all. Luckily, he offered to assist for a small fee.

Going down the main thoroughfare and entering through the hotel's main room, she worried over encountering any past acquaintances. She did not. Going straight down the main floor hallway, she knocked on her friend's door and received a warm welcome. Ruth gave her the greeting she needed.

"I can't believe you are here. Truly here. Two days ago, I picked up my letter, and I warned myself not to get my hopes up." Ruth's face beamed with jubilation. She hugged Emma repeatedly, before she embraced her, and didn't let go. "I have missed you more than you can imagine. We have so much to catch up on."

"Mother, I am hungry," Andrew whispered, drawing both women's attention to him.

Surprise registered first in Ruth. "You have a son. And

such a handsome little man.” She gestured him, both of them, in and started setting out bread and ham. Obviously, they were her dinner portions. “No need for you to be hungry. We will get you fed right away. And don’t look at me like that, Emma. I will run to the kitchen and bring more ham and bread.”

The next hour involved much conversation between Ruth and Andrew and him eating much more than one would think a four-year-old could. Emma forgot how much she enjoyed Ruth and how much she appreciated her. A little younger than Claude, somewhere in her forties, Ruth never married. She devoted her life to her independence. Working as a laundress for the town’s only hotel garnered her stable wages and provided her room and board. Housed on the main floor of the establishment, she had a gathering room with a separate bedroom containing a tub and sink.

“Why don’t we put your perfect Andrew to bed and share a whiskey or two?” Ruth suggested.

“If it’s not a bother. I hope you secured a room for us. But I am not ready to retire yet. I am in dire need of being with a friend,” admitted Emma. She wondered why Claude had yet to make an appearance. After deliberating on it some, she realized he’d suffered a terrible day too. What if Everett confronted him? Could he be wounded? Physically. Even if not, she doubted if he would hurry to face the culprit. And how does one commence contact with a child they hadn’t known existed?

She heard Ruth teasing and coaxing Andrew into bed, but she, herself, never assisted. Until Ruth placed a drink in her hand, she removed herself from it all.

“Drink it. Then talk to me. You obviously have much to tell. And from what I’m gathering, you had a difficult day,” empathized Ruth.

Raising the cup to her lips and allowing the warm, potent

liquid into her mouth and down her throat, she sighed. “The most difficult day ever. And now it’s behind me. I never have to cry or lose sleep over it again.”

Ruth downed her drink too. “If I would’ve known you had a child. If I would have known anything... we haven’t corresponded. Everett and Clayton are both married. Happily.”

Thrusting her hand out with her empty glass, indicating she needed a refill, Emma confessed, “He isn’t Everett’s. He is Claude’s son. And before you begin condemning me, please know I have conquered that task for the last four and half years.”

Ruth hopped out of her chair and refilled both cups with ample whiskey. “Safe to say your arrival has provided the area with more than its fair share of scandal. Oh dear.”

Draining her glass again, the burn charring down her throat into her stomach and outward, she agreed. “Yep. Been a pretty damn awful day. And I am uncertain and discouraged about Claude’s learning of it and his reaction. He’s almost old enough to be my father. Nothing makes sense. And I can’t distinguish right from wrong, acceptable from unacceptable, and let us not forget obligation and choice.”

Ruth’s face pinched and one eye squinted. Emma giggled at the two of them. What a vision. Two women drinking whiskey and discussing her indiscretions. Ruth cocked her head and declared, “Now, Emma Mooney, I know the whiskey has relaxed you, but I know damn well you don’t find anything about this humorous. You aren’t insinuating you expected Claude to make an appearance tonight? You can’t be. If he hasn’t received a beating, one he dodged until now, I consider him a lucky man. Either he can’t physically come or simply having his demons exposed without warning has rendered him incapable.”

Rolling her shoulders and shaking her head, Emma sighed. “You are right. I wonder if he will. At some point.”

Going for the bottle of whiskey and again refilling their glasses, Ruth stated, “You know he will. Claude is a good man. You never would have given yourself to him if not.”

A hard beating on the door alarmed both women and had them fumbling around. A bout of hysterics broke out. Both sat on the floor and laughed. Ruth managed to form words first. “Why were we rushing around and what were we doing? We behaved like outlaws or something. Do I need to open the window so we can flee?”

The pounding on the door came again, reminding them why they had reacted initially. Emma whispered, “Do you think they know we’re in here?”

“Emma. I know you’re in there. Open the door now. If you don’t, it will be you paying for the repairs, not I,” Tobias threatened.

Emma giggled. “It’s Tobias. You remember my half-brother. He’s always hated me. I bet he danced a li’l jig today, hearing how I have once again disgraced our family. As if he ever gave a damn. The very second he obtained a way to get out of Boston, he did, and since he abandoned it, he lives forever detached from it.”

After a few failed attempts, Emma stood and opened the door. “I’ll say it first. Not so nice to see you.” She squeezed her eyes, hoping to see one of him and not two.

Tobias pushed inside the room, taking her with him, and closed the door. “You’re drunk. And you have a child with you.”

“He’s resting soundly. See for yourself.” She flung her arm in the direction of the bedroom.

Ruth added, “Nice to see you again, Tobias. You are looking very well.”

Either the whiskey teased her, or her debilitated eyesight did. Did Tobias wink at Ruth?

“All right, you two. No more whiskey. I’ll get you both

some water and we will sit and attempt to have a conversation.” Tobias helped her to her seat and removed the bottle from their reach. He went about pouring water into two glasses and delivering them. “The two of you together again. Such great memories.”