

RESISTING THE RANCHERS

BIG G RANCH - BOOK ONE



ISABELLA KOLE

SHERI LYNN



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Isabella Kole and Sheri Lynn
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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



CLARA MAE

Clara Mae Appleby looked at her brother and screamed, “No! Absolutely not!” Then she turned her back to him and stood with her arms folded across her chest in an arbitrary stance.

“You listen to me, young lady,” her older brother Conrad said. “You *will* marry Mr. Fielding, or you will be disinherited. Father left me in charge of the steel mill, the property, the money, and you. Your future—our future—depends on a match between the two companies. By merging Mr. Fielding’s mill with ours, there is no limit to the profits to be had. It makes perfect sense.”

“I don’t think Father would approve of you marrying me off to that old lecherous coot. He is disgusting. You are trying to ruin my life, and I won’t allow it.”

“You are not the boss. You may have been able to twist Father around your little finger, but you won’t do it to me. This is the best thing for all of us.”

“If you want to merge our mill with his, fine, just don’t use me to do it. I’m not a possession you can barter with. I am your sister.”

“You don’t get it, do you? Without you as part of the deal, Fielding won’t budge.”

“That’s not my problem.” With that, Clara Mae grabbed her cloak and reticule and ran out of the house. The nerve of him, threatening to disinherit her! Father would be rolling over in his grave if he knew. And Mother, poor dear Mother, she would be aghast.

The Appleby siblings had lost their mother five years ago, to a sudden illness that had taken her overnight. They hadn’t even had a chance to say their goodbyes. Their father had grieved for her, nearly letting his business fail in the process. When Conrad had come home from the university and taken over, he had been able to bring it back around, but it was true that a merger with the other steel mill in their Pennsylvania town would ensure their futures. However, that did not mean she would marry old Mr. Fielding, a widower with three children. The man had to be in his forties. Clara Mae was a mere eighteen now. She had been devastated when their father had passed away a few months ago. Many said the poor man had grieved himself to death. When the solicitor had explained that everything had been left in Conrad’s hands, the business, the family estate, all the money, it hadn’t bothered her. After all, a trust fund had been set aside for her that Conrad was to oversee, and she trusted her only sibling. But then, he had presented her with this preposterous idea, telling her he would disinherit her if she didn’t comply. Why, surely, Father hadn’t intended that when he’d left it all to his oldest child and only son.

She had no idea where she was going until she was standing in front of the tea room down the street from her home. She ducked inside and sat down, ordered a cup of tea and a sliver of cake and tried to sort things out.

“Hello, Clara Mae, how are you?” a female voice said.

She looked up and saw a friend from school, Mary Catherine Brown. "Mary Catherine, join me, won't you?"

Mary Catherine's family had fallen on hard times after her father had been killed in an accident a few years ago.

"Thank you. I've been shopping and could use some refreshment." The girl sat and put her packages on the floor next to her.

"I can see you've done some shopping. Any special reason?" Clara Mae asked as she told the server to bring another cup of tea and slice of cake for her friend.

"Well, you know Mama has had a rough time of it since Papa passed. I've been working to help her, and now she is getting remarried to a very nice man, who will help raise my younger brother and sister, along with his two children. He lost his wife recently. I am of age and don't wish to be a burden to them, so I've found a way to make a new life for myself. I was doing some shopping before my long trip to Oklahoma next month."

"You are visiting someone out there? Family?" Clara Mae asked, confused.

"Oh no, I'm moving there."

Clara Mae looked at her in surprise. "M-moving? But why? What are you going to do? Who will you stay with? And Oklahoma, of all places?"

Mary Catherine laughed. "Well, you see, I ran across an ad for a mail order bride a few months ago. I answered the ad and began writing to a very nice man named Charles Barrett. He runs a ranch with his father, and he is looking to marry. Seems the women aren't as plentiful as the men out that way, so a lot of them try to bring women out from the east, like me."

"And you are traveling out west to marry a man you have never met? Isn't that frightening?" Clara Mae asked, thinking of her own situation.

"It would be if we hadn't been writing back and forth and exchanging photographs. He is a very nice man. My soon-to-be

stepfather even has a detective friend who checked him out, and he comes from a good, hard-working and well-respected family.”

“So you are traveling by train?”

“Yes, Charles sent the money for my ticket, and he will meet me at the station when I arrive. My mother is happy for me. She will have a good life now, with her new husband. He is a kind and generous man.”

“I see. I’m pleased your mother won’t have it so hard now. And if you’re happy with your decision, I’m glad for you as well. And where exactly did you find this ad?”

“At the postal office, on the board where all the announcements are. I’m sure there are more. This seems to be a new thing, men from the west bringing women from the east to marry.”

“I see,” Clara Mae said thoughtfully, an idea already spinning around in her head.

Mary Catherine laughed. “Surely, you aren’t interested in such a match? Why, you could have your pick of men right here in town.”

After the server brought Mary Catherine’s refreshments, Clara Mae told her about what her brother was trying to do to her.

“Oh, my friend, I am so sorry. I can’t imagine your dear parents would have been all right with this arrangement. Whatever will you do?”

“I have no idea. I ran out of the house in a fury and ended up here, so I decided to come in and try to sort it all out.”

“I hate for you to settle for an older man like Mr. Fielding, with a ready-made family, even if he might give you a good life. I’m sure you would want for nothing.”

“Oh, I’m sure of that too, but I just can’t go through with it. And if my brother is serious about disinheriting me, I must find a position and a new home, I suppose. I guess I could become a governess.”

“I have an idea. Why don’t you and I walk to the postal office when we leave here? We can take a look on that board and see if

there are any more young ranchers who might be looking for a bride.”

“Oh, Mary Catherine, wouldn’t that be just like the situation I find myself in now?”

“Not exactly, no. You can search for a young man, like my Charles. You would write to him and learn to know him before you agree to go out there. You can always say no. You will have a choice, which is something your brother isn’t giving you.”

“But what will I do in the meantime?”

“Well, I suppose you could always throw caution to the wind and accompany me on the train. You can settle out there and meet someone when you arrive. Let me send a wire to my Charles to ask if he knows of anyone.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve never done anything so impetuous.”

“Let me talk with Charles and get back to you. In the meantime, why don’t you pack some things and stay with me? Mama won’t mind, and you can stay in my room with me.”

“Well, what if Charles doesn’t know anyone?”

“I doubt that is the case, but go home, secretly start packing a bag, and I’ll let you know as soon as I receive a wire back from Charles.”

“You have certainly given me something to think about. If Conrad meant what he said, I will need to do something, so maybe a new adventure will be fun.”

The girls finished their tea and went their separate ways, with Mary Catherine promising to be in touch.

When she arrived home, Conrad was nowhere to be found, which was just as well. Clara Mae wasn’t really up to arguing with him again. She went to her room and started looking through her wardrobe, choosing what she would pack if she took her friend up on her offer. She grabbed her travel bag from under her bed and started throwing a few things in, then she hurriedly shoved it back into its hiding place when she heard Conrad calling to her from downstairs.

She smoothed her dress and went to the landing outside her bedroom door. "What is it?" she asked.

"Come down for dinner."

With a sigh, she went downstairs to the dining room to join her brother. Thankfully, when she looked around, she saw no one else. She wouldn't have put it past Conrad to invite Mr. Fielding to dinner.

They sat down and one of the staff served the first course. After saying a brief prayer, Conrad reached for a bowl and said, "I'm sorry we argued earlier. I am only trying to make sure our futures are secure. With you married, I can look for a wife of my own and start a family. The business will prosper, and we'll all be happy. You'll see."

"No, I don't see that happening at all, Conrad. I will not be sold off to the highest bidder. When I marry, it will be to someone of my own choosing. Case closed."

They ate the rest of their meal in silence. After dinner, Clara Mae went to her room and stayed there the next day, complaining of a headache. One of the maids brought her meals to her.

A few weeks later, she was in her room again when one of the young maids, Louise, brought her a tray. "Miss Clara, are you sure you are all right?" she asked. "You have been in your room so much as of late. We are worried for you."

"I will be. I just need to rest," she assured the young girl.

"If you don't mind, may I tell you something the cook overheard? The staff feels you should know."

Clara Mae looked at her curiously and said, "Of course. What is the matter, Louise?"

The girl fidgeted until she finally said, "Mr. Conrad is going out of town for a few days. Cook overheard him telling Mr. Fielding that as soon as he gets back, the wedding will take place. We, the staff, felt you should know. W-we, um, we are w-willing to help you get away while he is gone if you have a p-place you can go. We will

keep your secret. We all k-know that y-your folks would hate what your brother is making you do.”

Clara Mae’s eyes grew wide as she took in what Louise was telling her. She looked at the girl and replied, “I-I just can’t believe he is going to force me like that. I have a friend I can go to. She has already offered. I’ve been secretly packing some of my things in case I needed to leave in a hurry, and it seems that will be the case. Please tell Cook and the others they have my heartfelt gratitude, and I will need someone to take me to my friend’s house when my brother is gone. What will you tell him when he returns to find me gone, though?”

“We will tell him you sneaked out in the middle of the night. We have already discussed the matter between us. We loved your parents dearly. They were always good to us, and we can’t bear to see this happen to you. Your brother is also good to us, but we cannot abide by what he is threatening to do to his own sister. If we must find new employment, we are prepared to do so.”

“I don’t know what to say, other than thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

“We will make a plan. You eat and rest for now. We all love you, Clara. We always have, just as we loved your mother and father.”

Louise left her to her meal. When she had gotten a few bites of soup down, she found she had no appetite after what she had learned, so she set her tray in the hallway and lay on the bed. The tears began to fall. She was really going to do it. She was going to leave behind the only home she had ever known and take a train to some godforsaken place out west. She was truly on her own now. Thankfully, she had been brought up well, she had the manners of a lady, some money to see her through for a while that her brother couldn’t touch, as he didn’t know about it, and she was educated. If she could find a position in Oklahoma, she should be fine. She had saved much of her generous allowance from her father and that should help her to get settled.

And she would have Mary Catherine and her Charles, so she wouldn't be completely alone.

She would finish packing her bags and wait for her brother to leave, then she would enlist the help of the staff to get her to Mary Catherine's house quietly. She just needed to get word to her friend to expect her, without Conrad knowing.

The next day, she had the opportunity to do that, when Conrad went to work. She sent the driver with a note to Mary Catherine.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I am afraid things have come to the point that I must flee soon. My brother will be going out of town on business and while he is away, I will be coming to you, prepared to board the train with you.

Clara Mae

SHE'D KEPT it simple and to the point. Later that afternoon, Louise came to her room to tell her there was a young lady downstairs to see her.

She stopped her packing and scooted her smaller bag back under the bed then smoothed her hair and dress. "Go on. I'll see to your things," Louise said as she tried to pick up the larger bag on the bed.

"Thank you," Clara Mae said. When she got downstairs, she saw Mary Catherine standing in the foyer.

"Well, hello. Come and sit. May I offer you some refreshment?"

"No, I can't stay. I received your note and I also heard from Charles, so I wanted to stop by while I was out."

"Let's go in here," Clara Mae said as she gestured to the sitting room.

"Is your brother at home?"

"No, he is at the mill. Come, tell me what your betrothed has said."

“Well, he says you are most welcome to come and stay with his family when you arrive, until you get settled. He assured me there are many young men in the area and mentioned two brothers, friends of his, who are both looking to take a wife. So, maybe one of them will be to your liking once we arrive.”

“All right. That’s very generous of his family to allow me to stay with them.”

“Now, tell me what has happened.”

She quickly told her what Louise, the young maid, had told her. Mary Catherine shook her head. “No wonder you are leaving. Shall I come to fetch you when you are ready?”

“The staff is putting together a plan for me, and they will bring me after Conrad is out of town, most likely at nighttime.”

“All right, I shall look for you soon. Mama has said she will be happy to help you as well. Now, I must go. My future stepfather’s driver is waiting for me. I will see you soon. Be very careful. Is there anything of yours I can take with me now?”

“Yes, let me get my smallest bag. I am still packing the bigger one.” She ran up the stairs and returned with the bag. Her friend took it and left.

When Mary Catherine had gone, Clara went back upstairs and told Louise of her plan. The girl helped her pack a few more things.

“I am happy for you, Miss Clara. I will talk to Cook and we will make the final arrangements to get you to your friend’s house.”

She hugged the girl. “I don’t know how I will ever repay you for your kindness.”

“Just be happy; that is all we want for you.”

A few days later, Conrad informed her that he would be out of town for several days on business. “When I return, we will talk again.”

Oh no, we won’t, she thought, but aloud she said, “My mind has not changed. Have a good trip.” She dismissed him by leaving the room.

When the staff assured her he was gone, she set about getting

the last of her things together. At dark, the driver was to take her to Mary Catherine's mother's home. She sent a note to her friend, telling her she would be there after supper, and spent the rest of the day talking with the staff, saying her goodbyes, and reassuring herself that she was making the right decision, the only decision.

When she had finished her meal, having only taken a few bites as she was nervous, the driver took her bags to the carriage for her and waited while she hugged the rest of the staff and thanked them again.

Sam, the driver, took her to Mary Catherine's, carried her bags to the door for her, and hugged her one last time.

"Be safe, and be happy, Miss Clara. We will miss you."

"Thank you, Sam," she said with tears in her eyes.

The door opened and Mary Catherine stood there, ready to welcome her. "Let's get these things inside and get you settled," she said. To Sam, she added, "Thank you so much for bringing her."

"My pleasure, Miss Mary. You take care of our girl, and both of you stay safe." He tipped his hat and left.