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# DADDY DOM CHRISTMAS

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CONSTANCE MASTERS   JENNIE MAY   JESSICA LYNNE  
KITTY GRAHAM   MELINDA BARRON  
SHELLY DOUGLAS



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Constance Masters, Jennie May, Jessica Lynne  
Kitty Graham, Melinda Barron, Shelly Douglas

Daddy Dom Christmas

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Daddy Dearest  
CONSTANCE MASTERS

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## Chapter 1

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**E**than smoothed the edge of the patchwork quilt and fluffed the pillows one more time before placing the new doll he'd purchased in prime position on the rocking chair. He looked around the room and felt satisfied. Well, as satisfied as he could be for a twenty-nine-year-old cowboy who had just inherited a child; not just any child but a girl child. What the hell did he know about raising a little girl? That would have to go, too: the language. What the heck did he know about raising a little girl?

In such a short time, life as it had always been ceased to exist. The day the letter arrived from his old friend, his world has stopped.

*If you're reading this, Ethan, I've probably already passed.*

He felt a jolt of sadness, but as he read on, the sadness turned to shock, although that didn't begin to cover his rolling feelings as he read the letter.

*I have a problem to face and if there was another choice, there is no way*

*that I would impose. Trouble is, there is no other way. There are so many children that go astray just because they have been left to a life without guidance too soon. I have no family. We haven't seen one another for a long while, in fact, you may not even remember me. Your father and I were in Vietnam together and I considered him to be one of my closest friends. Without a doubt, he had the best outlook on life and more importantly, core family values. I know how you would have been raised and you are the closest link I have to your dad. So, I am asking you for a favor that I would have asked of your father if he were still alive. My most precious possession is my little girl, Claire. She can be a little wild but she has a good heart and the things she needs the most are love, a home and a bit of a push in the right direction. I'm sure a life on your ranch, away from the city will give her the stability and security she needs. Please will you take care of my little girl?*

*I have drawn up papers and had them forwarded to the lawyer in town. The bottom line is, Claire's inheritance will be available to her on her twenty-first birthday. Until then, if you agree to this, I hope you will be able to manage her allowance for her and see that she gets what she needs and I'm not only talking about things. I am leaving her in your care.*

The rest had been a blur. With his new charge arriving within days, Ethan had been in a whirlwind of preparation. The thought of raising a child without a mama, a child that didn't even know him, scared him half to death but he would never turn his back on a friend that needed him, so he signed the papers and set himself to making a home for his new daughter.

He assumed she had her own personal things like clothes but he did his best to decorate her room with little girl things that would make her feel warm and cozy. His housekeeper Mary had been a big help (when she wasn't adding to the huge amount of baked cookies and other sweet treats that she was certain Claire would need to taste and smell as soon as she came to the door in order to feel welcome). Ethan had one more big surprise, a giant teddy bear he'd bought to take with him to the airport. He was



lucky that the lawyer on the other end had agreed to one of his personal staff to travel with the child from California to Missoula Airport. He really couldn't leave the ranch to travel all the way to California. As it was it would be a four-hour turnaround to collect Claire from there.

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Claire gave one of the suitcases she was packing a kick. What had her father been thinking? She wasn't a child that needed someone to look after her. As if losing her only parent hadn't been enough. It was too much, it was all too much. Why hadn't he at least told her what he had planned? She could have defended herself, explained why things didn't have to be this way. Did it really matter that she couldn't get into a decent college? She would be perfectly fine in this house by herself if she had the funds to feed herself at least but no, it was out of her hands. Claire flopped onto her bed and wept; for her dad, for this home that she would have to leave and for the life that would never be the same again. It didn't occur to her that her poor attendance at school and a terrible permanent record left her father with not a lot of choice.

The lawyer instructed to read the will had been very clear; if she was to inherit her father's estate, she was to live with her newly appointed guardian, Ethan West, until her twenty-first birthday—on his *ranch*—in the middle of nowhere, Montana. She turned over in her bed and opened her eyes wide.

“That's it!” All she had to do was stop Ethan from signing the papers. If she gave him a hard enough time, he would be glad to

send her packing. It wasn't like she couldn't compensate Ethan for the trouble once she had her inheritance. Besides, she didn't have a choice.

It was really important that she make a lasting first-time impression. Claire tapped her laptop. Something special and very revealing, her red latex dress. She'd bought it as part of a devil costume for a party. Without the horns and tail, it was just a dress. Of course, it was Montana, so it would be freezing. A floor-length coat that covered everything would work until the very minute she was ready to reveal her special surprise. She would have to take it in her carry-on luggage and change at the airport in one of the bathrooms. Next, she would run up as many charges as she could at the airport on her credit card. It would be fun to watch the look on this daddy dearest's face when he got the statement. The rest of her planning would have to be on the fly once she got settled. If he made a rule, she would break it. She would do the opposite of anything and everything he told her to do until he was so worn out he could take no more. He would send her packing and go back to whatever it was cowboys did on a ranch.

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Claire went through her closet one more time to make sure she had everything she needed. Everything was all packed. She had no intention of staying there forever so didn't need everything in the closet. The dress was in, along with her makeup and as a last-minute touch, false eyelashes. The coat was just not fitting. She was already irritated when the doorbell sounded. "Oh, for fuck sake. Who could that be now?" The coat was

dumped. “Who is it?” Her voice was loud enough to carry from the stairs.

“It’s Melanie, from Levi Crane’s office.”

Levi Crane, her father’s lawyer was there? Well, not him but one of his assistants, that was as good as him being there himself, almost, wasn’t it? Could it be that this was some kind of prank her dad had played? Maybe Melanie was here to tell her it had all been a joke and she didn’t have to go anywhere. She swung the door open. “Hey.” Melanie was nice; she had always been nice to her when she’d visited the office with her father growing up.

“Hi, Claire. I guess you’re probably wondering what I’m doing here.”

“You’re here to tell me this has all been a joke?” Claire held her breath, hoping with all her might that Melanie would laugh, smile, look anything but the way she was looking right now, nervous. It was like she was here to deliver bad news.

“That’s not why I’m here.”

And there it was, just when things couldn’t get any worse. “What now?”

“Ethan has asked me to travel with you to Montana.”

“You’re not serious?” Claire was dumbfounded. “This is ridiculous! I’ve traveled overseas on my own; I’ve been staying on my own here for three days. Look at me! I didn’t starve! I didn’t set the house on fire or turn to prostitution, did I?”

“You really are shooting the messenger, Claire. I’m just doing my job.”

“It’s just not fair!” She folded her arms and stalked away even though her ranting continued in full force. “I’m not a child and I refuse to be treated like one. High and mighty Mr. Ethan has bitten off more than he can chew if he thinks he’s going to control me.”

“I have no control over any of that, honey. I’m just going to travel with you and come home again. Will it be so bad to have a

traveling companion?” Melanie asked, trying to calm the situation down.

“I suppose not.”

“We can get to the airport early. You can do some shopping.”

Claire sighed. There was that. Shopping did fit into her plans. “Okay, but no judgement. I have a couple of surprises for my new daddy dearest and I don’t want you to interfere. Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Okay, then. Let’s get this show on the road.” Now that it was settled, Claire was glad Melanie would be along for the ride. She was confident on the outside but her insides were squirming. It would be nice to have someone familiar sitting beside her. For now though, there was a slight adjustment to her plan. She would have to wear her outfit now.

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“That can’t be comfortable, Claire.”

“You don’t have to look so horrified.” Claire smirked. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to offend you, so I’m choosing my words carefully. You know you can get an embolism on a plane from clothes that are too restrictive. That’s why they suggest strongly that people wear comfortable clothes.”

“You promised—no judging.”

Melanie held her hands up. “I’m not judging. I promise, just making an observation.”

Claire narrowed her eyes. “Like I said, I have my reasons.”

The traffic to the airport had been horrible and the dress dug uncomfortably into her thighs. There's no way Claire was going to admit that or the fact that she was nearly perishing from the heat in the long coat. It was a relief to actually get inside the airport doors. Her irritation soon returned when it became obvious that people found her outfit amusing.

"If one more person gawks at me, I'm going to punch them."

"Calm down, Claire," Melanie said, steering her away. "I said *I* wouldn't judge you, but I can't stop the rest of the world from having an opinion. It's all about the choices."

"People should just mind their own business."

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"Okay, bags checked." Melanie blew out a sigh of relief once they'd maneuvered their way through the long line and managed to avoid any altercations. "What do you want to do first?"

"Shopping," Claire said. "I would really like some space though. You don't have to come."

"I kind of do. As much as I like you and feel for you, I'm getting paid for this, so I have to take it seriously. I meant what I said though, I won't judge. You're obviously up to something but so long as it has nothing to do with actually breaking the law, I'll stay out of it. Besides, you're attracting attention in that get up, I'm worried someone might get hurt."

"I'll be fine!"

"It's not you that I'm worried about."

Claire tried to sound horrified at Melanie's sly dig but really, she was over the moon. People staring at her *was* irritating but at

least she was making an impression, which meant she would also make an impression on her new guardian. “Then let’s go shopping.” True to her word, Melanie didn’t interfere. Her eyes opened very wide at some of the purchases Claire made though.

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Once on the plane, the two settled into their recliners and Claire closed her eyes. There was something about the whirl of a plane engine that was soothing. Sleepless nights since all this began had jumbled her thoughts off and on. The big questions rattled around constantly in the back of her mind so when she did manage to drop off to sleep the questions became fragments of a disjointed dream. What kind of a man was Ethan? Why did he put his hand up for this and why did he agree to have her there in his house? Maybe she was supposed to be some kind of maid....

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*“Get my breakfast!”*

*A grumpy old man stood at the end of Claire’s bed. Rude much? “I can’t cook. I don’t want to cook. I just want to sleep. Leave me alone.”*

*“Leave you alone? I won’t leave you alone! You belong to me now. I’m your new daddy and you’ll do what I say. If you can’t cook, you better learn. Get down to the kitchen and, mind you, clean up your mess when you’re done.”*

*“I don’t clean either,” Claire said stupidly. The man flew at her and shouted right in her face.*

*“Don’t you understand? It doesn’t matter what you like to do! Now get moving, you lazy little ingrate, or you won’t like what happens next!”*

*“You don’t scare me, old man!”*

*“I will scare you! When I cut off the WIFI and throw away your phone!” He snatched up her cellphone...*

“No, no!” Claire screamed.

“Claire, Claire!”

Claire woke up with relief once she realized her phone was right in front of her on the tray. “I had a nightmare,” she said.

“What about?”

“There was this horrible old man and he was shouting at me. I think it was Ethan. He wanted me to be his maid and he took my phone!”

“I think it’s normal for you to imagine the worst Claire but I’m sure he’ll treat you really well.” Melanie took a chance and laid her hand over Claire’s. “I know you must be scared and I know none of this makes sense to you but your dad must have had a great reason for doing all this, he adored you.”

“I can’t imagine what that would be,” Claire said. “I mean I’d hate to think my very own father would sell me into slavery or something.”

Melanie giggled. “Now you’re just being dramatic.”

“That’s okay for you to say. When we get there, *you* get to turn around and come back. I’m the one who has to live there. I’ll be stuck in the middle of nowhere, with no friends and no family.”

“There’s always the internet.”

“Do they even have the internet all the way out there in the country?”

“Yes. Ethan does have email; that’s how we corresponded with him.”

Claire sighed with relief. “Well, that’s something.” She smiled. “You know what I could do with? A drink!”

“I’ll order you a coke.”

“I mean a real drink.”

“No way! Do you want to get me fired?”

The flight attendant smirked as she walked past and not for the first time. It made Claire’s blood boil. “Want to take a picture, honey?” she asked cattily.

“Tone it down,” Melanie said. “None of this is the flight attendant’s fault.”

“I’m sick of them staring.”

“Then, maybe you’re little attention-grabbing costume there could have done with a rethink.”

“I didn’t want to get *her* attention.”

“Honey, you have *everyone’s* attention.”

---

Claire scanned the crowd for someone who looked like they might be Ethan. There were so many people waiting, but those she could see were mostly families. “I don’t think he’s here. What happens if he doesn’t turn up? Do you think it’s too late for me to get a ticket to come back with you?” Claire loved the thought of getting back on a plane to go back home.

“He’ll be here Claire.”

“There are no older men here.”

“I think you’ve missed one man. There he is!”

“Who?”



“The handsome cowboy that has a giant teddy bear sitting on his foot and a sign that says ‘Claire White?’”

Claire followed Melanie’s gaze to the middle of the crowd. “Oh, wow!”

“Well, he’s not old, that’s for sure,” Melanie whispered.

“Nope, he’s not old.” In her wildest dreams, Claire didn’t imagine that Ethan would look like that. She had no idea what the giant teddy bear was about but he was very good looking. He was tall, with a black cowboy hat and just the right amount of stubble. His jeans and shirt clung to him in all the right places. He even wore actual cowboy boots. She stood stock-still unable to make her feet move, but soon found herself being spirited forward until there, directly in front of her, was the man himself. The sign definitely had her name on it. For the first time since she cooked up her plan, she felt silly being caught in the get-up she was wearing but it was too late now, she would have to play it out.

“Can I help you?” the cowboy asked.

Melanie put out a hand to introduce herself but Claire cut her off. “So, you’re Ethan West?” The man’s jaw dropped.

“Uh, yes, Ma’am. That would be me. And you are?”

It was Melanie that managed to get a word in this time. “Hi, I’m Melanie from Levi Crane’s. I think there may be some crossed wires here.”

Ethan tilted his head and glanced at her. It was obvious to Claire he wasn’t expecting her.

“I think so. I’m here to pick up a little girl, Claire?”

So he was expecting her but not expecting *her*. Oh, this was great. Claire wanted to jump up and down with glee at the advantage that had fallen in her lap. “Guess you made a teeny tiny mistake. I’m Claire, but as you can see, I’m *not* a little girl.” She had to give it to him; Ethan seemed to recover quite quickly if his arrogant smirk was anything to go by.

“If you say so.” He held out the teddy bear. “This is for you, princess. Welcome to Montana.”

What did he mean by that? It was obvious that she wasn’t a child! Maybe he was a dim country person who had to have things explained more clearly. “Thank you, but as you can see, I’m grown and long past playing with teddy bears.” Claire gave him her sweetest smile.

“Suit yourself, Claire.”

“I usually do.” She once again flashed him her toothy grin. This was as good a time as any for her to unveil her assets. It would show him that he wasn’t dealing with the minor he was obviously expecting. “My, it’s rather hot in here, don’t you think? I’ll have to take off this coat.” She flipped her long red hair over her shoulder and let the coat drop just enough to reveal her plunging neckline. Before it was off further, it was taken out of her hands and hoisted back on.

“I’m going to need you to leave that on,” Ethan said in a slightly strained tone. “It’s warm in here but it’s cold outside.”

She tried to wrestle the coat back off, but his hold was firm. “Let go! I want to take this off—”

His tone dropped and so did the smile. “I insist that you leave it on.”

Claire wanted to throw the coat off as soon as his grip loosened but realized the timing could be off.

Ethan turned his attention to Melanie and the smile was back. “I’m guessing you have a flight to catch?”

“I do. In fact, I should be heading to the check in counter.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No, honestly, I don’t have baggage or anything. I’ll be perfectly fine.”

“If you’re sure, we do still have a long drive back to the ranch.”

“Claire, do you mind waiting here while I have a word with Miss Melanie?”

“I do mind actually.” The two of them chatting about her behind her back wasn’t an ideal situation.

“I was being polite. It wasn’t really a question. Please just stand there for a few moments and behave yourself.”

“Fine.” Who did this man think he was?

---

“Thank you for bringing her here. I know December is a busy time of the year. I only asked for a companion because, well—”

“You thought we were sending a little girl on a plane on her own?”

“Frankly, yes. I’m so grateful that you came through, an eight-year old would have been safer traveling alone than this little brat dressed in that get-up.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t think she always dresses like that.”

“Thank goodness for small mercies. She looks like she’s come from the set of a hooker movie.”

Melanie smirked. “She’s a little lost and confused. I’m sure you must be too. I think you both have some adjustments to make.”

“You’re right about that. I may have to rethink what my role here is. I mean what her needs are and what I can do for her.”

“You’ll figure it out. She’s been very spoiled. Her father never denied a request from what I can gather.” She put a hand on his arm. “Just remember, she adored her father and in her mind, she’s lost everything she loved.”

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“All done talking about me?” Claire asked with an eye roll when Ethan came back. “I’m just about melting here.”

“Well, we’ll soon do something about that.” He plopped the teddy bear on top of the baggage cart and wheeled towards the door. “How do you feel about snow, princess?”

“I love to ski!”

“Okay then. I’ll keep that in mind.”