

WINTERLAND DADDIES



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



Slade

"Slade, dear, stop pacing. You're making my heart race. You don't want my death on your hands, do you, you old worrywart?"

I stopped and rolled my eyes at the frail old woman rocking back and forth in her chair covered in a pale pink afghan that matched her pink fluffy house slippers.

"You're ten times the worrywart I am, Nan. You just can't pace, 'cause the doctor said you need to rest and stay off your feet."

"Pshaw," she scoffed, stopping the chair in its tracks and leaning forward to give me the look. "You stop your fretting right now, Slade David, before I give you something to fret about."

It was a threat she used at least three times a day. "I'm not a scrawny twelve-year-old boy anymore, Nan. It's been a long time since you gave me something to fret about," I reminded her. The truth was I loved this old woman more than life, and her look still had its intended effect, even after all these years. But I was thirty-two now, and I couldn't let on to that fact.

"Hmph." Nan crossed her wrinkled arms over her chest and pouted. "She'll call this time, Slade. It's been five years. Whatever happened that made her run is in the past. Merry loves me. She'll come, because I asked her to."

It was easy for Nan to say. She didn't know why Merry had left. I did. It was my biggest regret. If Merry didn't come, and Nan was disappointed, that would be a close second.

"I hope you're right," I muttered, unable to look at her and see the hope in her eyes. I did want her to be right, for my own sake, as well as hers. I wanted us to have a chance to right the mistakes we had made back then.

"Of course, I'm right. I'm always right. Now get out of my face, and start making the preparations! It's time for my soaps, and you are seriously killing my vibe."

Shaking my head, I chuckled and strode towards the dining room. I knew better than to keep arguing, especially when her soaps were on. Nan might not be able to take me out to the woodshed any longer, but she still had the power to make me feel two inches tall.

She was a force to be reckoned with, and she had saved us all. Christmas at Second Chance Ranch was a long-standing tradition that every single person she had ever taken in still looked forward to each year. Every person, that is, except Merry. This year, Nan had put her foot down. Merry came to Christmas, or Christmas was cancelled.

Grimacing, I glanced at my phone. It was still silent. I glared at the pile of invitations still waiting to be addressed. Forty-one to go. Nan had helped forty-five teenagers in her lifetime. One had since passed on, one was Merry, and Blake and I still lived here, running the ranch, now that Nan no longer could. Everyone else looked forward to these invitations and most came every year, often bringing their families to meet the woman who taught the unlovable how to love and be loved in return.

I couldn't let them all down. There was a very good chance

this would be Nan's last Christmas. Eyeing the piece of paper with Merry's phone number and address on it, I shook my head. Nan would have told me to have faith, but I was a man of action. Let her throw away the invite, I decided. She was coming for Christmas, if I had to drive to Arizona and bring her back, myself.

Christmas at Second Chance Ranch was happening. Reaching into Nan's box of stationery, I pulled out a pink envelope, opened her address book, and began writing out the rest of the invitations, one by one.

I was ten deep when the back kitchen door creaked open, and Blake entered, stomping snow off his boots, before making his way through the kitchen and over to me. I turned and met his gaze. "Why did you come through the back door?"

"Are you kidding me? It's two in the afternoon. I know better than to risk coming between Nan and her soaps!"

I nodded and returned to my work without further comment.

He stood silently and watched, waiting, I knew, for the same news we all were. Finally, he asked, "Did you hear from Merry?"

"Nope."

He nodded, continuing to watch in silence as I stuffed an invitation into the envelope I had just finished filling out and licked it closed, adding it to my pile and grabbing a new one.

"What's this, then? Nan tell you to have some faith?"

"Something like that," I muttered as he pulled out the chair across from me and grabbed an envelope from the pile. I handed him a pen.

"You think she'll come?" he asked anxiously. He had just as much reason to hope as I did, and just as much regret to swallow if she didn't.

"Hell, no. I don't even think she will open the envelope. She's stubborn as all hell; you know that."

"Then why are we doing this? Nan said no Christmas without Merry, and she's even more stubborn than Merry is."

"I can be pretty stubborn, myself. If she doesn't call by Friday, I'll drive to Arizona and drag her ass back here."

Blake raised his eyebrows but said nothing else. He didn't need to. We were as close as brothers, and I knew what he was thinking—that she might take it better coming from him. He was probably right, but I didn't care.

I had been her Daddy, and I was going to get back my little girl. I never should have let her leave. This time, I wouldn't.



BLAKE

I forced myself to push back the jealousy that came so naturally at the thought of Slade being the one to go get her. The truth was that it didn't matter how we got her here. It only mattered that she came.

It was time to right the wrongs of the past. Merry deserved to feel welcome at the only place she had ever truly called home, Nan deserved a Christmas that was everything she ever wanted, and Slade and I deserved a second chance. Or, at least, we wanted one. Whether or not we deserved one, I wasn't as certain.

"Fence is fixed, Nan." I took off my boots at the door, as was the rule, and padded over to where she stood at the stove, stirring a pot of soup large enough to feed an army. She stopped when I got close and turned to me, pulling herself onto her tiptoes to kiss me on the cheek.

"Thank you, Blake. You're such a good boy."

Masking my pleasure at the term of endearment, I nodded quickly and tried to distract her by stealing a taste of soup. Twenty-six-years-old and six feet tall and Nan still kissed my cheek and told me I was a good boy, just like she had been doing for the last twelve years. She smacked my hand away as I reached for the spoon. "Blake, can you get Merry down here to help me with the salad and set the table? I called for her, but she

didn't answer. Probably studying with her headphones on or some such thing."

"Sure thing, Nan." I was quick to answer, turning on my heel and heading towards the stairs, where all the bedrooms were. Truth be told, I could have just as easily set the table and thrown together a salad, but Nan was very strict that chores were divided equally and everyone did their fair share. Even at twenty-six and grown, as a paid employee at the ranch, I knew better than to go against Nan's wishes. Besides, it would give me an opportunity to steal a kiss.

Merry and I had been seeing each other for several months, and our relationship was a unique one. It mostly took place outside of the house, so Nan wouldn't find out about it. We were both of age, but there were a good seven years between us, and while Nan loved us both, it didn't mean she would want us dating.

If you were brought to Second Chance Ranch and placed in Nan's care, the other teens there were your siblings, whether they had been there at the same time as you or ten years prior. That was just how it was.

I didn't dare cross Nan on most things, but Merry had stolen my heart and made me lose my mind. I pounded up the stairs and had my hand on her doorknob as I knocked, ready to enter as soon as she gave permission, another rule of Nan's, of course.

My knuckles hit the thin wood three times in succession. "Rap, rap, rap."

"Owwwww!" I heard her cry out in response. My eyebrows creased with worry at the odd response, and I pushed the door open, knowing it wouldn't be locked. Another rule.

I'll never forget the way my heart lurched at the sight that greeted me —of Merry, naked from the waist down, turned over Slade's knee, her bottom already a hearty shade of pink under his ministrations.

They both looked up at me in shock. Merry scrambled off his lap and rushed toward me, shaking her head furiously at me with pleading eyes. I knew what she wanted. She wanted me to keep our secret. It would have been a smart move, for all of us. After all, I had walked in on them engaged in a spanking, not intercourse. God knows the temptation to turn

Merry over your knee and whoop her sass right out of her at times was a strong one; after all, that's how we had ended up together.

I wasn't feeling very smart at the moment. I was feeling angry. To see my sub and my best friend in such an intimate situation without my knowledge infuriated me.

With Merry off his lap, Slade stood, looking annoyed at the interruption, and began to walk toward me, with a confident older brother smile. I wanted to punch him.

Instead, things escalated into a yelling match. So many things were said in such a short amount of time, and each one was a punch in the gut that I hadn't been expecting.

The only thing I remembered clearly was walking out the door and telling her she had to choose, and Slade saying the same thing. Choose. Between best friends. Brothers. Her Daddy and her Dom.

I ran out the front door, got in my truck, and tore off to town. I heard Slade did the same. I don't know for sure. When we woke up the next morning, barely speaking to each other, she was already gone.

If we managed to get her here, it would be the first time we had seen her in five years. Hell, it was the first time we had been able to track down so much as an address. It was normal that we would both want to be the one to see her first and begin to right past wrongs. We were only human. But there was no room for jealousy in our solution. If she came back, things would be different, this time. Slade and I had learned to share.



MERRY

The thin black chicken scratch handwriting didn't match the thick mottled pink stationary, but I knew one thing for certain. I recognized both and would, until my dying day. The pink stationery was Nan's trademark, but the handwriting belonged to Slade. My

breath hitched in my throat, as memories, long since repressed, pushed their way to the forefront of my brain and threatened to make an appearance.

I had left Second Chance Ranch, five years ago, and hadn't looked back. Not because I didn't want to, but because it hurt too much. Nan had called in the beginning, until I changed my number to an unlisted one. My heart had broken every single time I had to ignore her calls, but I was too ashamed.

And now, she had my address. That was new. I wondered how she had pulled that off. Actually, I only wondered why it had taken this long. Everyone loved Nan, and she had connections out the wazoo.

I flipped the envelope over and ran my finger along the seal crease. There was no return address, but I didn't need one. Nan, Slade, and Blake were the only people in my life who had ever called me Merry. They had coined it during my first Christmas at the ranch. My first real Christmas, ever.

I hated Christmas before the ranch, and I hated it after. It was December first, and true to form, this one was shaping up to suck, just like the others before it.

My most current boyfriend had dumped me last week. Of course, that was after he stole the envelope containing my rent payment and had an affair with my boss. I had no job, no boyfriend, and soon, no apartment. Merry freaking Christmas to me.

Life after the ranch had been a rollercoaster of suckiness, followed by weeks of false hope and then major level suckiness when that hope came crashing into reality, which, somehow, it always did.

I secretly considered the fact that I couldn't seem to get a grip on life was due to the universe dealing penance for my mega fuckage of the only thing in my life that had ever gone semi-right.

Sighing, I chucked the envelope into the garbage without opening it. I knew what it contained. More false hope—probably in the form of an invitation to Christmas. I could never go back there,

and I didn't have time to entertain frivolous fantasies at the moment.

Reality was calling—the reality of a thousand pounds of dog shit in an elderly neighbor's back yard. I had put up an ad hiring myself out for odd jobs in an attempt to make back some of the missing rent money, and that was the response I got. The universe hated me.

Pushing all thoughts of Nan, the ranch, and Christmas parties out of my mind, I threw off the clothes I had worn to the office to pick up my last check and pulled on my rattiest T-shirt and jeans, shoved a pair of heavy duty plastic gloves and several garbage bags in my pockets, and headed out the door. Adulthood sucked, but a hundred bucks was a hundred bucks. Maybe I could even afford to spring for Taco Bell when I was done.



I CLUTCHED the remnants of an eighty-nine cent bean burrito in my hand, as I jumped off the borrowed bike and limped towards the house. To top off the loveliness that was my day, my car hadn't started on the way home from Mr. Henderson's house, and I had to borrow his grandson's old banana seat Huffy that was, at best, left-over from the late 80s. At least, he had cleaned the cobwebs off of it for me.

Even though it was several miles from home, I had stubbornly ridden over to Taco Bell to fill my stomach full of cheap and filling food that didn't taste like it was made from glue and rubber bands. The only consolation for my shit-tastic day.

I hid the bike in the overgrown hedges near the front porch so it wouldn't get stolen, because that would be just my luck, and groaned with every step as I made my way up the stairs to the large front porch.

I heard the boards creak under my weight like they always did, but I hadn't stepped up yet. A large manly figure stood, hovering in

the shadows. I gaped for a minute, confused. When he began to walk toward me, I screamed and threw my purse in his direction.

"Here! Take it all! Take everything! Just please leave me alone! I won't even call the cops!" And there went the hundred dollars I had just earned picking up dog shit.

The man, who I could now see was very tall and wearing blue jeans, stepped over my purse and continued his path toward me.

I froze for a full two seconds, then let out an ear curdling shriek and ran towards the bike, thinking that if I could just get to it, I could move faster than he could and maybe get away with my life.

My whole body was shaking, and I was muttering under my breath as I tossed one leg over the bike and began to pedal before I was even all the way on.

Of course, he cut me off at the path, stopping my escape with one long arm grasping the handlebars.

"Merry, stop."

I stopped. Nobody called me Merry, and I would recognize that voice anywhere. It haunted my dreams. I wasn't sure that I wouldn't have preferred a rapist or axe murderer.

Slade. Slade David Cross.

He fumbled in his pocket, while I watched, and withdrew his phone. He pushed a button, and suddenly, the darkness surrounding us was aglow, and I could see his face.

"What do you want, Slade?" My voice sounded hard and angry, even to me, but it matched how my heart felt at the sight of him.

"Don't you mean Daddy?" His tone was also slightly hard, with a hint of sarcasm that set my blood to boiling.

"Fuck off. And go back to wherever the fuck you came from on whatever piece of shit horse you rode in on."

"That's not language becoming of a lady, little one."

The term of endearment threatened to crumble my angry façade, just as he knew it would. Slade didn't play fair.

"And for the record, I came from Nan's, and my F250 is at the top of the driveway near the road, and I'm not leaving here without

you." His eyes glinted with determination at the last bit, just before he softened to apologize. "Sorry if I scared you."

"Whatever. Guess you're stuck here in Page then, because I'm not going anywhere with you, Slade." Now that I knew that I wasn't going to get killed in my sleep or raped in the sanctity of my own bedroom during the night, I threw down the bike and turned to stomp up the steps, gathering my purse as I walked.

I could hear his boots crunch through the gravel as he followed me. I didn't care. He could sleep in his truck, or even out here on the porch, for all the shits I gave.

He caught up with me at the door, as I dug for my keys and tried to unlock the bolt with shaking hands. Was it the cold or nerves? Probably both.

He caught the door as I pulled it open, but I knew he wouldn't follow me in without invitation. For all his bad qualities, Slade was a southern gentleman.

"Please go," I whimpered, resting my forehead against the spine of the door, refusing to look him in the eyes. "Please don't do this."

"I just want to talk."

"That's what phones are for, Slade, and letters, and, hell, even the internet. You didn't have to drive all the way here, loiter on my doorstep, and scare me half to death."

"I wrote. I'm guessing you threw it out without opening it."

"So what if I did?" I turned toward him and looked past him, without meeting his gaze. "Second Chance Ranch is part of my past. A small part. The part I left behind. I don't need to go back for some fake family Christmas for misfits."

He shook his head, knowing as I did, that every word was a lie. I'd have given anything for one more Christmas at the ranch. They were the only real Christmases I had ever had in my life.

Our eyes locked, and I could feel his reading me, just like he had always been able to do. I could feel that shit in my soul.

"You are full of it, short stuff," he blustered, glaring darkly. Slade didn't abide lies.

"It doesn't matter," I responded sullenly. "I'm not going back, ever. It won't change anything."

"What if you're wrong?" It was a challenge, and I could feel myself getting pulled into a battle of wills that could easily go on all night. We were equally stubborn, I knew.

I needed to shut the door in his face. It was the only way to end it, even if it was a temporary solution.

I stepped inside and gripped the handle, staring at him to memorize his face. Just one last time.

Finally, I began to slowly push the door shut, waiting for him to grab it once more. He didn't. He didn't need to. The words he spoke next stopped me in my tracks.

"Nan's sick, Merry. And whatever you think of the ranch, or me, or the past, or, hell, even Christmas, you are an old woman's dying wish. And so help me, God, I will do everything in my power to make that wish come true. So go ahead. Close the door; get some sleep. Open the letter. Do some thinking. Whatever you have to do. Just know, I will be back, tomorrow, and this conversation is not over."

I did shut the door then, so he wouldn't see me cry. Loud noisy wails, as I collapsed against the shut door and sank down against it.

The final straw in a horrible day. Unable to move, I buried my face in my hands and sobbed. Over my boyfriend, my job, my car, piles of dog shit, and thinking I was going to get murdered, and then for Slade. And Nan. And the ranch.

I sobbed until my hands were drenched, along with my jeans, where I had wiped my hands, again and again.

And, finally, I stood, shuffled over to the garbage can, and removed the pink mottled envelope I had tossed there, hours ago. I drew a deep breath as I opened it, but nothing in there could be as scary or as painful as seeing Slade in the flesh had been.

My eyes scanned the letter quickly, finding it to be exactly what I had expected. Nan's yearly invite to Christmas, with a note from

Slade thrown in at the bottom—a plea, a promise, and a phone number.

Sighing, I peeked out the window. He was still there, sitting on the porch steps, staring at his hands.

He had won this round. I opened the door and peeked my head out.

"If you still want to talk, I'm ready to listen."