

I CAN'T BE YOUR DADDY

STAGECOACH DADDIES BOOK ONE



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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



“*I* heard it from Laura Miller,” Derry Dearmont told Rose. “She heard it from someone else. But you could taste it for yourself, Laura told me. Those bread and butter pickles were definitely Bertha Harrison’s—not Louise Tate’s.”

“And Louise got the blue ribbon at the county fair, too. What a horrible person,” decided their friend Annie.

“I think she’s the one that...” Rose’s voice trailed off as she watched Derry’s eyes go wide and heard Annie’s sharply indrawn breath. She began to turn, but Derry stopped her.

“Don’t look over your shoulder,” Derry warned. “He’ll see you.”

“Who will see me?”

“*He* will. Oh, my.”

“Oh, for the love of daisies, Derry. Who is *he*?”

“I don’t know,” Derry said, her voice hushed. “But... Lordy, Lordy.”

Annie answered, just as Rose was about to lose her patience and turn around despite Derry’s warning. “It’s Travis Stern.”

“It is?” both Rose and Derry whispered at once.

Annie nodded. “Yes. When I was staying at my cousin Eulalie’s house in Sacramento, California, for that summer a few years back,

Eulalie and her family were neighbors of Dr. Stern and his wife Livy.”

“Doctor?” Rose and Derry chorused again. This time, Rose gave Derry a dirty look, but Derry was eyeing this Dr. Stern behind her and didn’t notice Rose’s irritation.

“He’s a dentist. Had a big practice in Sacramento,” Annie informed them. “Then there was some sort of trouble between him and his wife and he got divorced.”

“Divorced? Gracious!” Derry whispered. “There must be something wrong with him. Maybe he’s a womanizer or beats his wife or something like that.”

Rose was dying to turn around, but she held back. What did a divorced man look like? Was he a derelict or a sad sack? Or maybe he was slick and obnoxious. “Is that true, Annie?”

“Maybe. I don’t really know. There were rumors, but my folks wouldn’t let me in on them. They would get all quiet when I came into rooms. I know they were talking about him. Eulalie and I tried to get the news, but it was all hush-hush. Last I heard, he’d moved away from Sacramento and bought himself a ranch near Reno.”

“A man of mystery and intrigue, eh?” Rose said, her curiosity piqued. “I’ll bet I can find out.”

Annie grabbed Rose’s elbow just as she was about to turn around. “Don’t! He might be dangerous. And besides, the school board would have your head on a platter if you associated with a divorced man.”

“I won’t be *associating* with him. I’ll just say hello,” Rose whispered, feeling a twinge of caution.

“You won’t find out anything that way,” Derry pointed out.

“I have to start somewhere,” Rose told her. “Besides, if he flirts with me, we’ll know something.”

Derry nodded. “We’ll know he’s a scoundrel.”

“Exactly,” Rose agreed, turning before Annie could stop her again.

She ran her palm down the front of her gray and white striped

dress, deciding that it was unwrinkled and set her waist to best advantage, even if the colors were necessarily subdued due to her profession. Then she sauntered casually over to the mercantile counter, pretending to look at things along the way. Picking up and putting down thimbles, fabric remnants, and a book of recipes as she traveled the twenty paces toward the counter. As she meandered along, she surreptitiously looked at Dr. Stern. He wasn't dressed as she expected. Instead of a proper suit of clothes, he wore a blue shirt, blue jeans and chaps. He also sported a dark gray cowboy hat, but she could see his walnut brown hair peeking out from beneath it. He was tall, broad shouldered, and his muscular behind and legs were framed in his chaps, as though he rode horseback a lot. Hardly something a dentist would do. Rose began to think maybe Annie had mistaken a cowboy or rancher for the Stern fellow.

She made it to the counter and waited for Mr. Jones, the proprietor, to finish his sentence as he spoke to the cowboy. "That be all, Mr. Stern?"

Both men paused in their conversation and turned to look at her, so she smiled. She took a good look at Stern's face. He was breathtaking. He even had a classic cleft in his chin, though his face was roughened by a day's growth of whiskers. It was no wonder Derry was beside herself when she'd first seen him. "Hello," she told the tall, good-looking man. Quickly, she plucked a candy stick from a jar nearby and waved it in front of Mr. Jones.

"Just one?" Jones asked. "What about Derry and Annie?"

"Just the one, if you please," Rose said, glancing at Stern out of the corner of her eyes. He was watching her, silent as a cat about to pounce upon a mouse. She had a fleeting desire to be pounced upon, but pushed it aside. Reaching into her reticule, she withdrew a penny, deciding in a split second to try to get Stern to react to her and see what he'd do. So she dropped the coin and then made a little *oh* sound as it clattered on the floor.

Stern did as a gentleman should and held up a hand to stop her

from bending to pick it up, which was a good thing since her corset was particularly tight that morning. “No, ma’am. I’ve got it,” he said. His voice was mellifluous, so deep and husky. It made her warm inside. She wondered what he sounded like when he was whispering in a girl’s ear, kissing her earlobes, running his lips down her throat. Heavens to Betsy! She was clearly reading too many romance novels.

They touched fingers for less than a second as he handed her the penny, yet Rose felt fireplace sparks in her gloved fingertips, right up to her elbows. This man was dangerous, all right—dangerously attractive!

What would it feel like to have his firm lips pressed upon hers? She’d never been kissed, but fiddle dee-dee would that be an initiation into sweet romance! He’d be strong and commanding, soon stealing kiss after kiss.

The entire scenario made her hot as though she had a fever. She wondered if she was blushing.

Coming back to reality, a friendly smile seemed in order. “Thank you.”

There were burning questions to be asked, and it was up to her to ferret out the answers. Why was he just “mister” Stern, and not “doctor” Stern? Had he lost his will to practice? Was it a simple mistake by Mr. Jones? What had made him leave Sacramento, California, a prosperous big city, in favor of a little town like Stagecoach, Nevada? What was wrong with him to cause a divorce? Was his heart broken? Was he holding a torch for his former wife, hoping she’d come back to him? He looked perfectly normal to Rose. In fact, he barely glanced at her as he handed her penny back. Hardly a flirtatious womanizer. If any flirting was going to go on, it would have to originate with her.

“I’m Rose Pascal,” she said to him, smiling again, and offering her hand. What if she simply grabbed him by the big paw and pulled him into her, demanding his attention? The thought was

swoon-worthy, but she dragged herself back to a much more mundane reality.

He turned a bit, nodding and tipping his Stetson, ignoring her hand. "Ma'am," he said succinctly. "Travis Stern."

"I haven't seen you around here before, Mr. Stern," she said, a little frustrated that he wasn't striking up a conversation with her. Was there dust on her face? Maybe her hair was untidy and sticking out at sixes and sevens. She might not be the prettiest woman in town, but men didn't usually ignore her either. "Do you live in Stagecoach?"

"Northeast of here," he said, turning back to Mr. Jones. "That's it, Jones. What do I owe you?"

Mr. Jones gave him a figure, and Travis counted out the money. "I'll pull my wagon out back and Finch will help me load the goods." He had to turn toward Rose to leave, so he tipped his hat again and said one word, "Ma'am."

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Stern," she said. "I hope to see you again." But the last was spoken to the back of his head as he left. Even the back of his head was delicious, so she watched him walk away for a moment.

Thinking, she put the candy back in the jar and plucked her penny off the counter, putting it in her reticule. "I've changed my mind, Mr. Jones. No candy for me today."

The mercantile man gave her a gruff snort and went back to work.

Annie and Derry were waiting for her as she left the counter. "Well?" Derry asked.

"What did you learn?" Annie added.

Rose, still considering her brief conversation with Travis, shook her head slowly. "Not much. He's Travis Stern, though Mr. Jones called him "mister" Stern. He's a tall drink of water, that's for sure. I can't say I've ever seen a handsomer man... nor one as tight-lipped. He told me nothing but that he lived northeast of here. I tried to pry more out of him, but I couldn't interrogate him like a criminal.

Let's all try to remember he's just a man, not a Greek god brought to life." The other women ignored that sage advice, giving her looks of disappointment and not a little frustration. What exactly was she supposed to have done? Steal his gun and demand answers?

"Well, I guess we'll have to get information some other way," Derry said.

"Maybe my folks will give me something to go on now that I'm older," mused Annie.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Rose said, trying to keep the exasperation out of her voice but failing.

Annie shrugged. "Didn't think of it."

"Here, I practically threw myself at the man, while all the while you could have just asked your mother!"

"Sorry. I'll see what I can find out."

Rose drew herself up as tall as her five-foot, one-inch frame would allow and patted the coiled light brown braid at the back of her gray poke and taffeta bonnet. "You do that. I have to get back to the schoolhouse. There are papers to correct before tomorrow."

"Bye, Rose," Derry said.

Annie gave a little wave and an apologetic smile. "I'll see you at the book club tonight."

Rose nodded at her friends and left the mercantile. As she made her way through town, her mind was whirling with questions about the good-looking, terse, Travis Stern. Where had he been hiding all this time, and why did he suddenly show up in town today? He had a juicy story to tell, she was sure of it. She was going to find out just what it was, even if she had to throw herself at him! Where did *that* come from? Gracious sakes, the man was a force to be reckoned with.



SHE REMAINED curious about Travis Stern, even through the book club lecture in the church's big Sunday school room. Derry noticed

her uncharacteristic silence. "Cat got your tongue? You're so quiet tonight."

Rose felt her face grow warm. Derry's curiosity about Dr. Stern had waned, but Rose was caught woolgathering about the tall man with a cleft in his chin. She squirmed in the hard-backed chair. "It's nothing." The lie of the day. He definitely was *something*, and while she couldn't have him, she could daydream about him, his golden-brown eyes, his stubbly face and the cleft in his chin that seemed to be calling for attention.

She found herself licking her lips and mentally shook herself, returning to the moment and Derry.

"I'm guessing it's *someone*." Derry was smiling, brown eyes twinkling, even as she turned to the required page in their book.

Rose didn't respond. She knew she wasn't being her usual self; all of her friends were chatting around her like brightly plumed tropical birds, but she remained introspective.

"Did Annie come up with anything?" Derry persisted.

"No, I don't think so," Rose said, admitting that Derry was heading in the right direction. "I probably would have heard."

Rose prided herself on knowing what was going on in her little town. Her network of curious young ladies and gossipy mothers was vast. But, somehow, she'd missed Stern's arrival in town. Or maybe he so rarely came to town they could have been ships passing in the night—both nearby, but not coming into contact. Maybe he was a recluse, living like a hermit except when he had to get supplies. She might never know if she didn't get more from Annie. Hopefully, Annie's parents would be more forthcoming.

Rose didn't know exactly what she'd do with the knowledge she might glean. In her position, there wasn't much she *could* do. Getting too involved would risk her job, and she needed her job or she'd have to go back home. There were the children to consider as well. They depended upon her. There was no other teacher in Stagecoach. And she loved teaching, reaching young minds and instilling in them the love of learning.

Maybe she would get a bequest from a rich uncle and never have to think about going back to her mother's house. But, even if such an unlikely event occurred, her stepfather, Fred, would undoubtedly find a way to cheat her out of the inheritance and leave her penniless as an orphan on a stoop. The whole daydream was more a nightmare.

Derry cleared her throat and Rose was drawn back to their conversation.

"You really are contemplative."

"Sorry. It's just a mystery to be solved."

Derry stabbed her with a stare, then shrugged and went back to her lecture notes. "Don't forget the board."

True, the school board was watching her like a hawk, it being only her second year as the town teacher. "I won't," she said a bit peevishly, though she knew Derry meant well by her warning. She'd been warned not to approach Travis Stern, and yet she'd gone and done it. What a kettle of stew that was turning into—at least in her head. Nothing much was coming of it in the real world.

Which brought her thoughts back to the man. What was he doing now? Was he tucked under the counterpane with some harlot on Kennick Street? Or maybe he was cozy in a big chair, his head buried in a book. Perhaps he was an early riser and was now in bed asleep. What did he wear to bed?

Heavens to Betsy!



THE NEXT MORNING found a spring chill in the fresh air, but the children were playing, unconcerned, in the hard-packed schoolyard before class. Rose was just about to ring the bell and call them into the schoolroom, when she heard a buckboard clattering down the dirt road toward her. As it neared, she made out the form of Travis Stern and a little boy near him on the wagon's seat. The sight both

delighted her and made her nerves flare. Why was he here? And who was the little boy? Was Travis Stern a father?

The wagon rolled up and Stern dismounted gracefully. The boy scrambled down as well, following behind Travis as they approached.

Rose hoped her hair was tidy and wished she'd put a ribbon in it that morning. But at least her serge jacket and skirt were relatively new and would make her look like a proper schoolteacher. Greeting them with a smile, she said nothing as Travis tipped his hat.

"Ma'am."

"Good morning, Mr. Stern. What brings you to the schoolhouse this fine morning, and who is this handsome young man?" She grinned at the brown-haired boy, estimating his age at about seven. He was shod, unlike many of the children in this town, and wore clean navy short pants with worn but tidy suspenders, and a light blue chambray shirt. The resemblance between Travis and the young boy was obvious at close inspection. They were father and son, if Rose didn't miss her guess. This was an interesting development—Annie hadn't mentioned that Dr. Stern had any children.

"Mrs. Pascal," Travis began, "This is my son, Scotty. Say hello to Mrs. Pascal, Scotty."

The boy moved behind his father's leg and stared at Rose warily. He said nothing.

"Scotty," Travis prodded, giving the boy a slight nudge with his knee.

Scotty closed his eyes, his jaw tightening. "Good morning, ma'am," he said softly, hesitantly.

Travis ruffled Scotty's hair affectionately, then turned his gaze back to Rose. "Scotty needs to go to school. He's nearly six and it's time for him to be educated with other youngsters."

"Six! Why I thought he was seven at least." She addressed her next comment to Scotty, trying to keep him in the conversation,

make him more comfortable. "You're such a big boy, Scotty," she said. "Practically grown up."

The boy was staring at her again, his lips tightly closed. His wariness worried her. It would be hard to teach him if he rejected her as an authority figure.

"He takes after me," his father said. "I was tall at his age."

"And you grew to be a particularly tall man," Rose said, her eyes taking him in while she had the chance as he was talking to her. She wondered what his wife was like, then remembered he was divorced. What was Scotty doing with his father rather than his mother? It was quite unusual for a child to be separated from his mother, especially such a young child. There was a story there, but what? Hopefully, Annie was gathering information, because there were certain things it was inappropriate to ask Travis directly.

Rose squatted down toward Scotty, hoping that putting him at eye level would loosen him up. "Do you want to grow up to be a big man like your papa?"

Scotty closed his eyes—eyes so like his father's—again and nodded.

It was an odd mannerism, shutting his eyes with every response. Was there something wrong with the lad?

"Of course, you do," Rose said, her voice cheerful, though she was concerned. If the boy suffered from some sort of illness, an incapacity perhaps, she needed to know. He looked robust physically, but you couldn't tell everything by outward appearances.

She stood fully again, addressing Travis. "Scotty is a bit shy," she pointed out.

"Yes'm," Travis said. "He warms up after a while."

"Does he play with other children? Does he have brothers and sisters?"

"Scotty is an only child," Travis said, giving her a direct stare. Those golden eyes were unnerving. Rose took it to mean that further queries along that line were discouraged. A thousand assumptions popped into her mind, chief of which was that the

marriage had been a short one. She couldn't imagine a man like Travis not siring a brood. Actually, she shouldn't be imagining siring at all. Her imagination was running away from reality again.

She'd try another tack to determine Scotty's mental competence. "Does he know his letters?"

Travis seemed to like that topic somewhat better, pride in his voice when he answered. "Yes. And he can read and do some figures."

So, it was not a lack of wits that made him so closed. That was good. She squatted down toward Scotty again. "Do you like to read, Scotty?"

He didn't close his eyes this time but gave her a quick nod.

"Do you have a favorite book?"

The boy shrugged.

Rose offered her hand, intending to lead him away from his father and toward the schoolhouse. Scotty did not take her hand, instead, he pulled closer to his father and hugged his leg. It was highly unusual for a boy the age of six to be so clingy. She rose.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Stern," she began, "but your son is unusually reticent. Is there something I should know?"

Stern ruffled the boy's hair again and patted him. "It's all right to go with Mrs. Pascal, Scotty. She's a nice lady."

"It's *Miss* Pascal, Mr. Stern. I should have mentioned that earlier when I introduced myself at the mercantile."

He didn't react to her but continued to coax his son. "You'll have fun at school," he told the boy. "There are lots of books. And look at how much fun the others are having. Don't you want to play?"

Rose watched Scotty's face. The boy's eyes closed and he shuddered a bit. "I want to go home."

Travis got down at Scotty's level, much as Rose had done. "No, Scotty. You have to go to school. We all have to go to school when we're youngsters. I explained that to you."

"Do I really have to? Can't I stay home with Mr. Finch and you?"

You taught me to read. Mr. Finch is teaching me one-quarters and one-halves. Can't you get more books or something?"

Clearly, Scotty could make conversation when he wished. Rose watched the interaction between the two, trying to determine if there was something amiss in their relationship—something that made Scotty particularly shy. She saw nothing untoward in the way Travis behaved with his son. He seemed loving and patient. It could all be a ruse, but her intuition told her it was genuine. She'd seen a number of unique things with the children over the last two years because every family was different with different dynamics. Very few were like her family, so she had to rely on her training as an educator to understand what was going on with her pupils.

Travis was giving Scotty a firm look. "No, Scotty, I can't. I have to run the ranch, and Mr. Finch is not a schoolteacher. You need to go with Miss Pascal."

Scotty looked up at Rose then back at his father. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You mind your manners and she'll treat you fair."

Rose offered her hand to the boy again. "We'll have fun together," she told him.

"Go ahead, son," Travis told him, standing once again.

Scotty raised his hand, though he clearly didn't want to. Rose took it and felt him flinch, but he moved a step out from behind his father when she gave his little hand a squeeze. She addressed her comment to Travis. "I'll take good care of him."

His gaze locked with hers for a long moment, as though he was evaluating her for the first time. Finally, he nodded. "Yes'm, I think you will."

She smiled and he turned his lips up slightly, the closest thing to a smile she'd seen on his face thus far. Her thoughts swelled like bubbles as she thought about that smile and how much she'd like to see it again. How much she'd like to be the cause of it. What would it take? A cherry pie? A kiss? The idea made her giddy, and then her imagination bubbles burst as reality swept in. Travis had cleared his throat.

Realizing she'd been standing there like a ninny, she squeezed Scotty's hand again. "Come now, young man. We have books to read!"

Scotty closed his eyes again briefly but opened them and followed Rose as she led him down the path toward the schoolhouse.

"Bye, son," Travis called. "I'll be back for you in a few hours."

Scotty looked over his shoulder at his father, and Rose saw the boy near tears.

"Be a big boy," she told him firmly but kindly. "Make your papa proud."

The little man squared his shoulders at that and marched along without looking back again.

Rose didn't know how long Travis stood there watching them proceed toward the one-room schoolhouse together. But she didn't hear a creak of the buckboard until she stopped to ring the morning bell. She glanced back as the children gathered at the door to the school, entering in twos or threes, and saw the worn buckboard moving away down the road slowly, as though Travis was reluctant to leave.

Scotty saw where she was looking and choked back a sob. Rose squeezed his hand again and then hunkered down to his level. "Take a deep breath. Think about how proud your daddy will be when he hears a good report after your first day at school. I can tell him how grown up and brave you were. Wouldn't that make him happy?"

Scotty closed his eyes and a tear escaped, but he nodded.

"I'm glad we agree," she told him. "Now get ready to meet some new playmates."

Silently, he accompanied Rose into the schoolroom, dropping her hand as soon as they crossed the threshold. She had the distinct impression that his problem was with her rather than the act of going to school or meeting new children.

They were greeted with a cacophony of youngsters' voices. A

few of the older boys who were in their teens were guffawing in a corner as they told adolescent jokes to each other. Rose only hoped they were innocent enough for younger ears to overhear but doubted it. The eldest two, the Dickersons, ages fourteen and sixteen, gave Rose some trouble. At twenty-one, she wasn't much older than they were and they didn't much like having to yield to her authority over them while they were in the classroom. They disrespected her and made crude comments behind her back. Like many teenage boys, they alternated between acting like they wanted to curry her favor and wanting to prove how sophisticated, tough, and worldly they were by being crude. Fortunately, their father was a small farmer who needed their help and would likely take them out of school when spring came along. Russell Dickerson was old enough that he would likely not return after summer. Spring was only a few weeks away. She would handle them until then. She just had to be firm and unyielding in the face of their misbehaviors. So far, a no-nonsense attitude kept them in line—and the threat of going to their father if they didn't behave better.

The other children were less worrisome, though a few of the forty-two youngsters came from unhappy homes and their behavior showed it. Hopefully, Scotty wasn't one of those sad cases.

Scotty's eyes were big as he faced the room full of raucous children. He looked like he couldn't decide where to focus his attention first. The youngest children, who were mostly his age, were gathered together in the dress-up corner, trying on donated hats. All except for one six-year-old, who was sitting at a desk, head buried firmly in a book. Elmo Sturgis was a bookworm of the first order. Rose knew if she did her job well, she'd help him become a fine scholar one day. Perhaps he'd grow up to be an engineer or a doctor—or a dentist like Travis Stern. What had Travis been like as a youngster? Was he a bookworm too, or more interested in taking things apart to see how they were built? They said that's where the best scientists came from: men who wanted to understand how the world worked and who were willing to take chances to find out.

Her focus turned to Scotty once again and she led him along toward where Elmo sat. The redheaded, freckle-faced boy looked up from his reading as he sensed her approach.

“Good morning, Elmo. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Good morning, Miss Pascal.”

She pressed Scotty forward a bit. “This is Scotty. He’s brand new here. I was hoping you could help him find books in our library. I know you’re good at that. Scotty likes to read.” She turned toward the young man standing next to her. “Don’t you, Scotty?”

He nodded, eyes fixed on Elmo.

“Sure, Miss Pascal,” Elmo replied. “This here book is about choo-choo trains. Maybe Scotty would like to read it with me?”

“That sounds like a fine idea,” she said. “Would you like to sit at the desk next to Elmo and read along with him? He’s a very good reader.”

Scotty hesitated. Elmo didn’t miss it.

“We can turn the pages together,” he told the new boy. “We don’t have to read fast.”

“I can read fast,” Scotty said, but it didn’t sound defensive. “My daddy taught me. Did you learn here at school?”

Rose was encouraged. A conversation had begun.

Elmo gave Scotty an answer that would likely cement a friendship. “My daddy taught me too, but Miss Pascal teaches me new words and some stuff about how to spell. I read a lot of books.”

Scotty took a few steps toward Elmo’s desk. “Can I sit here?”

The two-person desk was ample enough for both of the six-year-olds to sit side-by-side. As Scotty slid in next to Elmo, Rose smiled and hoped there was a bond there that would see the boys forward. More than one lifelong friendship started just like this.