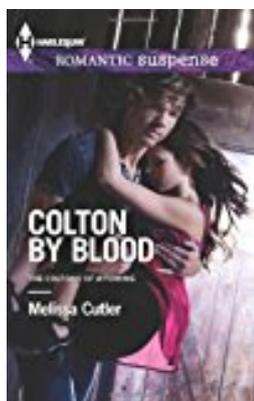


[PDF] Colton By Blood (Harlequin Romantic Suspense)

Melissa Cutler - pdf download free book



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Description:

About the Author Melissa Cutler knows she has the best job in the world, dividing her time between her dual passions for writing sexy contemporary romances and edge-of-your-seat romantic suspense. She was struck at an early age by an unrelenting travel bug and is probably planning her next vacation as you read this. When she's not globetrotting, she's enjoying Southern California's flip-flop wearing weather and wrangling two rambunctious kids.

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You can't make peace with a ghost. Kate McCord knew this as fact.

It was one of those secrets of life that no one would tell you and you had to uncover for yourself, like discovering Santa Claus wasn't real. It stuck in Kate's craw, all the truths that nobody saw fit to share. She'd found out the hard way, and not until it was too late, that bankruptcy would not solve your problems, not all men cared if a woman orgasmed and croissants—the real kind, not the ones sold in supermarkets—were nearly a third butter.

And the memories of the people you loved and lost? Well, all they did was haunt.

It was dark in the servant stairwell. A sprawling, fluid darkness that seeped into cracks and corners, and right into Kate's skin. A dessert tray, heavy and ungainly, was balanced on her right hand. Her left hand pressed to the wall, holding her steady as she stood rooted on a stair somewhere between the first and second floors, at least ten steps in either direction to the nearest door. Too great a distance for a woman who was afraid of the dark.

She had no idea how long she'd been waiting for the power to be restored, but it had to have been well over five minutes, perhaps ten if the rising heat and stuffiness were any indication. The watch she wore had a light, but activating it would require her to set the tray down. Not only was the tray too large to balance on a step, but she also wasn't sure she could convince her body to move.

Her pulse pounded all the way to the tips of her fingers and toes. Any second now, Horace or Jared or one of the other ranch hands would get the generator fired up and she'd be safe.

Any second now.

Every so often, distant voices cut through the unbearable silence that had replaced the hum of the air-conditioning system. Footsteps clomped away, fading off. Nobody ventured onto the stairs. All that mattered to the waitstaff was restoring the Colton family to the level of comfort to which they were accustomed. Locating a stranded cook's assistant probably didn't cross anyone's mind.

It would've crossed Faye's mind. She had been Kate's closest friend at Dead River Ranch. In all of Wyoming, really. But Faye was gone, and now the kind old woman was yet another person Kate loved who'd died before their time, only to haunt the shadows of her mind. Another ethereal face in the darkness.

She shivered.

The note she'd hastily stuffed in her pocket crackled. On the tray, the glass dish of bread pudding quivered.

Steady, Kate. It's only a power outage.

Maybe if she kept her focus on the pudding, she would survive this ordeal with her sanity intact. She'd spent hours on that dessert, baking the challah loaves, preparing the custard and whiskey sauce. It was a sumptuous creation topped by a pillow of fresh whipped cream. Mr. Colton's favorite sweet, if his frequent requests were any indication.

A boom of great force sounded from nearby. A door slamming or something hitting a wall. A tree falling, perhaps. Fierce windstorms were most likely to blame for the power outage. They'd plagued

western Wyoming for more than a week, beating on the ranch house and surrounding wilderness, unrelenting. Sinister.

Another hard truth Kate had discovered for herself was that Mother Nature was the greatest devil of all, an unremorseful murderer. Every time the weather turned nasty, the faces of William and baby Olive—and now Faye—hovered in her mind.

She'd felt so safe at Dead River Ranch, where busy servants and the lazy, entitled family left the lights burning all day and night. The kitchen was her cocoon. A warm, bright, safe place to call home. Until last month.

Poor Faye.

Murdered by the devil's lackey, a hired gun who'd been caught and locked away, though the mastermind behind the murder was still at large. The writer of the note in Kate's pocket. Someone who, she dreaded, remained on the ranch. Maybe someone she spoke to every day or whom she'd helped prepare meals for. Without money or anywhere else to go, her only two choices were to carry on with her job, hoping that law enforcement levied justice onto the devil behind Faye's death before more harm was done, or take matters into her own hands and do what she could to help the investigation.

The note was a testament to her efforts, not that anything had come of the stolen evidence. She'd nearly been caught red-handed tonight in the pantry by Fiona and she could well imagine the repercussions of being caught with evidence she had no business possessing.

On one of the two floors above her, the stairwell door opened with a bang that made Kate gasp. The tray tilted perilously. She felt the shift of weight as the dish of pudding slid, the teacup, too.

Her gasp turned into a cry of panic as she bent her knees and crooked her elbows, willing the tray to level. No, no, no. Not the pudding.

But her correction was too severe, as she overcompensated for her first error. The tray lightened as the entirety of the contents crashed to the stairs in an explosion of shattering glass and clanging silver.

She squeezed her eyes closed and hugged the tray flat against her chest.

Agnes was going to be furious. Delivering dessert to Mr. Colton's sickbed was supposed to be the final task of her sixteen-hour workday. Fiona had asked the favor of her on the sly since they hadn't secured Agnes's permission. Kate wouldn't put it past the bitter-tempered head chef to demand Kate's dismissal, as she'd threatened to do almost daily since Kate took the assistant-cook job four years earlier.

The flicker of a moving flashlight accompanied hushed footsteps on the stairs above. Someone was moving through the dark in her direction. Wordlessly.

A savior or the devil?

Surrounded as she was by broken glass, she wouldn't have been able to move even if she could've convinced her feet to unstick from the ground. Even if she were able to decide if she should climb toward the person whose footsteps were getting louder and closer, or if she should run away.

"Hello?" she whispered.

No answer.

She shuffled her feet backward, unintentionally kicking glass shards with her heels. With a tinkling sound, they tumbled down a step.

Light, either from a candle or flashlight, came into view on the stairs above her. Another door opened, this time from the ground floor, and with the new arrival, more glowing light. The descending footsteps grew louder, the wobbling light brighter.

Kate held her breath, too terrified to move. Damn the darkness, and damn her crippling fear.

With a crack of surging electricity, the lights came on. Kate's relief was tempered by the sight on the landing above her of Mathilda holding a flashlight, her expression as severe as her black, high-collared dress. She held her lips in a pucker that drew attention to the numerous little wrinkles on her upper lip. "What on earth," she said with slow precision.

Strict but fair on the staff under her command, Mathilda had earned her position in the household through decades of devoted service. She ranked above every other member of the staff, yet the glass ceiling between her and the family was ever-present. Kate didn't envy her the loneliness of the position.

A rattle of dishes behind Kate preceded Agnes's grating voice. "Oh, Kate. What in the name of all things holy did you do, child?"

Kate bit her tongue against a retort. A child, she was not. A penniless widow, grieving mother and pastry chef, yes, but not a child. Not for a long time.

Twisting on the spot, she glanced at the dessert tray in Agnes's hands before fixing her gaze on the round woman's spiky, persimmon-red hair. "When the power went out, I slipped and the tray fell. There was nothing I could do."

A lie, but a necessary one. She had never dared confess her fear of the dark to anyone but dear, sweet Faye, and she certainly wasn't going to spill her soul for the Dragon Lady—the whispered nickname some of the staff used for Agnes. Kate didn't have much to call her own anymore, but she still had her pride.

Without a word, Kate knelt and loaded the wreckage onto her tray.

"Look what you've done," Agnes scolded. "What a disaster." With every word, Agnes's voice climbed in both decibel and register. "Careless, is what you are. And where is Fiona?"

Kate opened her mouth, but spotted the note near Mathilda's shoe. It must have fallen out of her pocket when the tray tipped. She reached for it but Mathilda was quicker.

Her heart dropped to her stomach at the sight of Mathilda unfolding the paper.

"Is this what I think it is?" Mathilda asked. Her eyes darted as she read. "How did you—?"

On pure instinct, Kate reached for the paper, but Mathilda lifted it out of arm's reach.

"She looks guilty. What is it?" Agnes asked.

Mathilda looked over Kate's head at Agnes. "It appears to be a copy of the kidnapping-for-hire note from when Mr. Garth's daughter was taken." Returning her focus to Kate, she added, "Where did you get this?"

There was no good answer that excused her misconduct, or at least Kate wasn't clever enough to come up with one on the spot.

The real answer was that she'd brought a tray of sticky buns to the Dead Police Department under the ruse that it was a thank-you from the Colton family. While the officers indulged, Kate rifled through the police file. Then while they washed the sticky syrup from their hands, she'd made a copy. She had no intention of revealing the truth, however. "I can't tell you that, but I swear I didn't mean any harm with it. I thought maybe I'd see something in the note to help the police. Faye was only trying to save a baby from a kidn..."

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