



BABY WITH MY

Dad's Best Friend

AN AGE GAP PREGNANCY ROMANCE

KHLOE ROSE

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ROMANCE


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CHAPTER 1

Colton

The sky was dark when I left my driver to go into the airport with a long sigh. I'd just been to Penelope's ballet recital and dealt with my ex-wife, Andrea, and I wasn't in the mood for a long flight to New York tonight.

Fucking work. I had the most successful architecture firm in the US, and even though I lived in LA, I often traveled to meet the elite clients in person. I felt it was best, and I wasn't a billionaire from a lack of work, though it got difficult balancing work with taking care of my eight-year-old daughter.

Thankfully, she'd be with her mom for the next four nights. I could focus on wooing this client and trying to enjoy my time in one of my favorite cities.

I went to check in my luggage and get through security with my briefcase, appreciating the airport in the late evening. It wasn't as crowded and made it easier to get to the gate, where I sat down to wait while reading through emails before I was in the air. I felt tired from a busy week and hoped to sleep during the flight, but that remained to be seen.

They started to board the plane. Being in first class, I was part of the smaller group that went on first. I settled in the plush leather seat and set my briefcase that contained my laptop and necessary paperwork on the floor before leaning back. I knew it would take a little while to get everyone on before we left, and the stress from the day washed over me.

I'd split up with Andrea when Penelope was just one, and she'd given me shit ever since then. Andrea went after me for money every year, and the only reason I didn't fight her for full custody was because she was a wonderful mom to our girl. Penelope was as happy as she could be splitting time between our homes, and I'd never impede that.

She was just a terrible wife that was only looking for an easy life, and I couldn't deal with it. I wasn't in love with her, to begin with.

I came back to reality and blinked as Penelope's pretty face flashed through my mind. That girl was my reason for living. I glanced around, seeing a head of thick honey blond hair beside me before taking in the woman's perfect profile.

She was gorgeous, with perfect cheekbones, and when she glanced over to find me staring at her, I felt surprised to see my best friend's daughter.

"Melanie?" I asked, forgetting all about being tired and stressed as her green eyes lit up.

"Colton. It feels like it's been forever!" She replied as she smiled, reminding me of how much she'd grown up. You'd think with Richard being my best friend, I'd see Melanie more, but all three of us worked a lot. She looked incredible, and I shocked myself with my physical reaction to Melanie. It was wrong on so many levels, but I couldn't help it.

"How are you?"

"I'm doing well. Just going on a work trip," I stammered, feeling the words stumble from my body.

Jesus. Did I need to get laid that badly? It had been a while since my last casual relationship, but I didn't think I was that hard up to be foaming at the mouth over Melanie Cross.

"New York as well? Me, too. I'm meeting with a new client to design her apartment all week." I remembered Richard mentioning how well she was doing at the elite interior design company she worked for, serving clients all over the world. Melanie giggled, and I had a flash of her as a little girl as guilt washed through me.

“I am meeting with one to build a new apartment building. You’d think with technology, I wouldn’t have to fly as much as I do, but no such luck,” I joked as she set her purse beside her on the large seat.

“Oh, I don’t know. I enjoy meeting them in person to see what I’m designing. It’s good to meet the people, get to know them and all.” Melanie countered as I realized why she was good at her job. She’d always been an active girl, designing rooms since she was younger. She always kept Richard and his wife, Melissa, busy with new ideas for her bedroom. Luckily, he was a billionaire in the investment business and had no trouble keeping up.

I met Richard in college here in Southern California and we became fast friends. We didn’t have the same majors, but shared enough classes to bond and remain friends. I was there when he married Melissa during his junior year and when they had Melanie just a few years later. She was a bit earlier than they had planned, but he had money to invest in his business and turned it into something successful quickly.

She looked a lot like her mom. I noticed as I took her in while she got settled into the seat across the aisle from me, mesmerized by Melanie. Melissa had always been a beautiful woman, but Richard met her first and they fell in love within a few months.

“You like the late-night flights like me?” I asked, as she sighed.

“I don’t love them, but my best friend had her birthday dinner tonight. She’d kill me if I didn’t at least go to that, even though I missed the dancing afterward. Jamie loves birthdays to a fault.” Melanie offered me a small smile, and I realized that must be why she wore sleek black pants and a floral blouse that clung to her curves, offering a hint of generous cleavage. Her black heels had to lend a few inches to her height, and I remembered her already being taller than most women. “I promised her I’d help her decorate her new living room when I was back to make up for it.”

“They’re not my favorite, either. Penelope had a ballet recital.”

“Oh, my Gosh. How is she?” Melanie asked as a smile broke out over her face. “I haven’t seen her in forever.”

“Penelope is amazing. She’s eight now.” When the two were around each other when my daughter was younger, they got along well, but that had last been when Penelope was around the age of two.

Where the fuck did the time go? Had Melanie looked like this then and I was blind? More than likely, I was still feeling bitter over the split and in my phase of fucking Andrea out of my system. The age Melanie was then would have been inappropriate, but was it any better now to think this way?

Probably not. I was an asshole.

“Eight? That’s practically a teenager.” Melanie laughed, and I nodded, feeling the same way. “It’s so weird that I haven’t seen you in so long, but I went off to college in New York and started working right after that. Time flies, right?”

“Your dad said you’ve been busy, and I think he complained they don’t see you enough.” I teased her as she wrinkled her nose, looking silly and absolutely sexy.

“It’s a good thing they have Devin at home keeping them busy. With all his sports, they won’t have time to miss me.”

Devin was her twelve-year-old brother and well on his way to some form of a sports scholarship in his future. Currently, it was baseball, but that could change after the season. He was good at everything.

“He’s doing great. I haven’t been to any games or anything for a while, but that kid’s a natural athlete.” I agreed easily as she smiled. Why did this feel awkward to me? It shouldn’t be like that, but ideas were flowing through my head.

“He really is. I wish I didn’t work so much, but getting on with Lowe and Delly would be stupid to turn down at any point in my life. It keeps me running, but I love it.” Melanie’s eyes shimmered when she talked about work, and it made me smile.

“It’s good that you love what you do. That’s what everyone should do.” I reminded her as she nodded. “We should all be so lucky.”

“Good reminder. I need that every so often. Thanks.” She offered a beautiful smile, and I felt my body react as I stiffened. Nothing turned me on more than a woman that knew what she wanted and went for it. Melanie could live on the trust fund set up for her by her grandfather, but she went to college and worked hard.

Andrea just settled when she got me, thinking we’d be married forever, and she wouldn’t have to work. Well, she got her way only without me based on the amount I paid in spousal and child support.

I silently told my cock to chill out, and that this was wrong. I can’t be attracted to my best friend’s daughter.

I just can’t.

CHAPTER 2

Melanie

“Are you sure you can’t go tomorrow?” Jamie begged me as she walked me to my car in the parking lot. “You work so much.”

“I put the flight off as long as I can, Jamie. I’m meeting with my client tomorrow.” I laughed as I looked at my best friend, who was giving me the biggest pout. “I was here for the dinner, and it was a blast. Have fun dancing!” I pulled her into a hug and smiled. I worked too much, but life worked out so perfectly for me with my career.

“You’re boring,” Jamie grumbled as she pulled away with a smile on her pretty face. “Call me when you get back.”

“I will. Go have a drink or several for me.” I kissed her cheek and watched as she headed back to our group of friends before getting into my car. Sighing, I drove to my house to get my luggage for the flight and waited for the car that would take me to the airport.

I felt like I worked so much more than my friends here in LA, but that had a lot to do with traveling. Our clients were all over the world since my company was that well known, and it offered me a lot of opportunities to see so many places. I’d traveled before work, but this time, I was on my own and went everywhere I could in my downtime.

It made me feel independent, and while I’d always cherish the memories made with family and friends, I would keep making more with just myself.

I made it to the airport and checked my luggage in for the long flight, thankful there were no layovers. That was tough with a flight to the east coast, but I always tried for the quickest flights I could get even though I traveled in first class. It was a tax write-off, so why not make the best of it? I slept better that way, and after my long day, I could use a nap.

I boarded the plane and looked forward to kicking my heels off. I took longer at dinner than planned and didn't have time to change. When I reached my seat, I noted there were only two other people on board and focused on finding somewhere for my laptop bag. If I didn't sleep, I could always work.

It was quiet, and I took a deep breath as I settled the bag on the ground, preparing to take my heels off. I felt eyes on me and turned my head to the right, seeing a gorgeous man looking at me before surprise crossed his face. When he said my name, I realized this was my father's best friend for years.

Colton Briggs was hot. He'd always been handsome but older in my head. Now, he was still older, but I'd been dating men my age casually for a few years and none of them did it for me. I knew Colton, and he was secure with his career and successful at it. Like my dad, he built his company from the ground up and still worked a lot from what Dad told me.

That was what I wanted in a man, and I smiled. "Colton. It feels like it's been forever!" I responded as I took in his short dark hair and intense blue eyes that felt like they were burning a hole through me. He wore jeans, and a fitted t-shirt that showed off his muscular torso, and I allowed myself one sweep with my eyes.

Just one.

We made small talk as I did the math in my head. It had been a few years since I'd seen him, before I left for college. Sure, he was good looking then. I wasn't blind. I was also eighteen, had stars in my eyes, and excited that I would be moving to New York soon.

New York. He would be there, too. I wondered how long his trip was, stopping that thought process before I let myself

get carried away. I had a busy week with my client, Isabella. I knew I'd be in her brownstone for hours a day all week, plus the shopping. It would keep me busy and there's no way I could have dinner with him or anything. We'd catch up on this flight and not see each other for another several years.

Simple as that.

We talked, and he mentioned his daughter, Penelope. She was born a few years after my brother and adorable from what I remembered from when she was still a toddler. That was right about the time I was off to college, but I remembered he got a divorce from Penelope's mom and glanced at his left hand.

No ring.

The flight attendant walked by to ask if she could get us anything and I requested a glass of white wine. He ordered a whiskey, and I wondered if we both needed to even out. I'd had wine with dinner, but just one glass then—another glass would make me tired for this flight. I could sleep as planned.

But I wanted to spend the entire flight memorizing everything about this gorgeous man beside me, and I glanced at him again. He didn't look over forty, but I could say the same about my dad. They both kept themselves in good shape to keep working as hard as they did, it seemed. Colton would be forty-five, just like Dad, and while that wasn't old, it was twenty years older than I was.

I didn't feel young as we kept chatting. Colton made me feel interesting and as though he wanted to know more about who I was now. I'd never felt like that with anyone I dated in the past while I'd craved it for years. The boys I met in high school were young and all about sex and I found that through my twenties as well, much to my disappointment.

I gave in a few times, but it wasn't as amazing as my friends made it out to be. Frankly, I thought it was overrated.

I finally kicked my heels off once we were in the sky for a while. Colton watched me with a smile on his face, and I

asked for another glass of wine. This was turning out to be one of the best flights I'd ever taken, and I suddenly felt awake.

His company was more successful than before, and Colton admitted that he still kept up with some old work habits. He had hired an assistant but still wanted to meet certain clients in person to know they were getting what they wanted. That had to be tough with a young daughter, but she spent every other week with her mom, and he just planned around that. He spent as much time with her as he could when he had her, admitting that he didn't feel like it was enough.

Strong business owner and father? That checked a couple of boxes, even if it was wrong. Colton sounded like he was doing the best he could with co-parenting, which I admired. It couldn't be easy. I never imagined having kids once I started school and interning shortly thereafter, being too busy to even think about it.

I certainly admired my parents for how they raised me and my brother, Devin. They did a fantastic job, and I hoped I'd give my kids that someday if I were to have any. Some of my friends were married with kids and seemed happy. I always felt like I was jumping on another flight.

"How long are you in New York for?" Colton asked me in his sexy, smooth voice as I fought the shiver that threatened to take over.

"For the week. I'll be shopping and measuring for the better part of that time." As I looked at him, I saw something cross his face.

"I am there all week as well. Could we have dinner one night if we're both free? It would be nice to break up working and enjoy the city a bit." He suggested as I nodded with a smile. "I don't normally know too many people when I travel apart from clients."

"I feel the same with my life being in LA. I think some new places have opened since I visited last. That will be so nice." I agreed, and we shared a long look that sent shocks through my body.

“I will look something up and make a reservation. Can I have your phone?” Colton asked as my father’s face flashed through my mind. I turned to get it from my purse and handed it to him, watching as he entered something. Handing it back, he smiled. “I have your number now. I will look into a reservation and call you.”

“I look forward to it.” I smiled and slipped my phone back into my purse, telling myself there was nothing wrong with having Colton’s number.

Nothing would happen. It’s just dinner.

CHAPTER 3

Colton

Normally, the flight felt like it took forever. This time, talking to Melanie made it feel too short since we never ran out of things to say. She caught me up on her life and impressed me with all the work she'd put in. I could see why Richard was so proud of her and felt guilty when I took her phone to text myself to have her number and guarantee she had mine.

We shared several long looks, and I wondered if she felt the same way I did. Was Melanie attracted to me like I was to her? Even if she was, could that even happen?

No. It couldn't. I'd known her since she was little and despite how grown up she was now, that didn't change anything. I didn't do anything more than casual with a woman, and a few nights in New York with Melanie wouldn't be enough for a woman like her. She deserved more, but that just wasn't possible.

We'd have dinner and catch up some more. Maybe talk about New York since we were familiar with the city and have a friend for a night. If I needed someone to warm my bed, I could find that at any bar at night. That was more my style since the divorce, after all.

As beautiful as she was, Melanie probably had a boyfriend. At least, someone she spent time with when she could. With her incredible curves and breathtaking smile, there was no way she was single. I hadn't heard anything about a boyfriend from

Richard, but we didn't talk about her that much. Now, I'd never want to talk about her, which wasn't good.

It wasn't like I was going to sleep with her. Given our past, there was no reason that should happen at all. Not to mention twenty years between us. I'd dipped into that pool a time or two with different women, but had no plans of staying there. How could I ever face her father again after anything physical with Melanie?

The plane landed while it was still dark in the city. I should feel exhausted, but I felt great as we hit the ground and didn't want this to be over. If we hadn't eaten, I could ask her to breakfast or out for coffee, but neither of us slept. We'd need rest before getting to work later today.

"Where are you staying?" I asked Melanie, as she got her stuff together.

"Hyatt Grand Central. I've always had a good experience there, and I got the suite this time. I do a lot of work at night," she replied, smiling ruefully at me as my eyes widened.

Of all the hotels in New York, she was staying at the same one I chose. It was also a favorite, and I had a suite, which meant we could be on the same floor. "We're in the same place. It's a great hotel and the suites make it feel a little less like you're living out of a suitcase."

Melanie looked surprised as she stared at me. "Yeah. Exactly. It's close to the client and places to eat." Her eyes brightened before she looked away, and they announced that we'd be heading into the airport shortly. "You're in a suite as well?"

"I always choose those. Tax write-off, and when I'm not home for a week, I want to be comfortable," I replied, watching her nod. "Want to share a cab?"

"Sure," she agreed as we stood to head into the airport to get our luggage. Her suitcase was new and sleek, and she reached for it and set the wheels on the ground of the near empty room. I took my black one from the belt and set it down as I looked at her.

“Anything else?” I asked and Melanie shook her head, her eyes locked on mine.

It wasn't until the cab that I caught her mango scent, and I took a slow breath. We weren't pressed together but still close as I stammered out what hotel we were staying at.

“It is a romantic getaway? Central Park is gorgeous this time of year,” the man told us as he glanced at us in the rearview mirror. “Great place for a carriage ride.”

“No, it's business for both of us. We're not together.” Melanie glanced at me with pink cheeks as she blinked, and I nodded.

“Just old friends,” I agreed quickly as the car took off, sending her against me with the force of it. She gasped, and I secured her with my hand, asking if Melanie was okay. Fucking cabbies in this city drove like they had a death wish.

“I'm good.” She jumped to the other side of the car, and I watched as the buildings rushed past me. The sun would come up in the next couple of hours, but it was still dark and quiet for New York City. The ride took ten minutes with the empty streets, and I got out, helping Melanie before we gathered our luggage.

She walked into the hotel first, offering me another glimpse of her incredible ass and legs in those heels. When she checked in, I looked her over as I felt like a dirty old man. A woman called me over to another spot and I checked in, getting my key card as Melanie got hers.

Sure enough, our rooms were on the same floor, and I paused at mine as I looked at her. “I'll call you soon, Melanie.”

“That sounds great. Try to get some rest before your meeting,” she told me with a smile as she looked at me.

“You, too.” She continued to her room as I thought about the shower I'd be taking before getting any sleep. I needed to find a woman here and just get this out of my system anywhere other than with Melanie Cross.

I met with my client six hours later with not nearly enough sleep after my session in the shower, where I jerked off with my best friend's daughter in mind. Although I accepted his offer of coffee, I still found myself distracted by thoughts of Melanie and struggled to pay attention.

What the fuck was going on with me? I was a professional, and this had never happened to a woman.

I focused, and we went over the design of his new building and I had to agree that it would stand out in this endless city. Once the design was finalized, he agreed to call in a contractor to get started, asking me if I wanted to grab some lunch with him. I still had a lot of work with the contractor and his team since I wanted everyone on the same page and agreed, finding myself at a diner down the street from the office.

"I hope you don't mind. I love the burgers here." Grant told me as we took a booth, and I glanced around.

"Not at all. I haven't eaten since the flight and a burger sounds great," I agreed, picking up the menu on the table.

"Red eye?" he asked, and I nodded, fighting a yawn.

"I had something for my daughter in California yesterday evening. It was the practical choice," I replied as he nodded, looking at me.

"Did something happen on the flight? You look happy." Grant noted as my eyes flashed to his.

"Happy?" I asked as I blinked. "I wouldn't go that far, but I ran into an old friend. It was unexpected. Speaking of which, we thought about having dinner one night this week. Can you recommend any places?"

"I can think of several. What are you looking for?" Grant asked as a server stopped by to take our drink orders. I asked for a soda, telling myself I'd work out at the hotel later. We then ordered cheeseburgers and fries and she left us alone again. "She was checking you out, Colton. Maybe you should ask her to dinner."

"I just want to focus on this dinner with...my old friend," I assured him, and he smiled at me. He went over some places

with me and by the time lunch ended and we agreed to meet in two days with the team, I knew where I'd be taking Melanie.

I glanced at the blond woman as I paid her and gave her a generous tip, but she couldn't hold a candle to Melanie. I was so fucked. I shook hands with Grant before catching a cab to the hotel to catch a nap. I'd get in a workout later and call Melanie to see when she'd be free for dinner.

Every night after dinner, I made a point of video chatting with Penelope. It was something I did when she was with her mom and made it work for them, doing it after dinner and before bedtime, and it made my entire day.

This evening, I loved it, but also looked forward to calling Melanie and setting a dinner date up. I felt like I was digging myself into a deeper hole with her, but I needed to see her again.

I needed to be close to her again.

CHAPTER 4

Melanie

I felt tired all of Monday, but Isabella kept me busy with her ideas about her living room. She was a quirky woman, but I enjoyed the fact I could have more fun that way and suit her boho style. Isabella was an artist and made significant money, and had a good style about her.

We laughed as I added my ideas to hers over tea, taking notes on colors and patterns. She was a fun client, and I expected my week here to be great, but kept thinking about Colton. I hadn't slept as much as planned and drank several cups of coffee besides the tea I sipped now.

Would he call me? I felt like a teenager wondering as I suggested a new color to Isabella. I needed a good idea so I could at least go shopping by Wednesday for this. I had people who set the rooms up for me if it wasn't local, but I did as much as I could for the clients. My company was large and seemed to have employees to help everywhere, but as the designer, I needed to make the big decisions.

"Do you have a boyfriend back home?" Isabella asked me as we took a lunch break. Her chef made salmon salads for us, and I appreciated it since I skipped breakfast. "You're such a pretty girl, Melanie."

"Thank you." With a smile, I replied. "I don't. I work and travel a lot, so it just hasn't happened to me yet." It wouldn't happen with Colton, either. We might have dinner at the most,

and that's if he even called me. I needed to stop this now. He probably wouldn't even call.

"I understand that. I've only been married once, and it's tough when you're always busy with a career. I think that's why I never had kids," Isabella told me as I looked at her. She was pretty, with a unique style and dark almond-shaped eyes and dark bob, and I'd guess she might be in her forties. This was a new apartment, and she was putting it together little by little. "I am just now settling into this place at forty-five after traveling a lot."

She was Colton's age, and I got along with her as well as I did with him. Was I an old soul like Mom always told me? I don't think she meant for me to date someone older, particularly their good friend.

"It's a gorgeous place," I noted as the chef brought in the salads and some more tea. "You made a brilliant choice."

"I did, didn't I?" She smiled as she looked around the spacious dining room. "Three bedrooms might be a lot for one person, but I make use of the space."

"That's all that matters. I have a three-bedroom house back home," I explained, as I stabbed some lettuce with my fork. "You need to have at least one guest room, right?"

"More importantly, a studio." She laughed, and I nodded, feeling the same way about my office.

I left late that afternoon with a good plan and told her I'd come by the following day to talk some more and see if she changed her mind at all. It happened a lot in this business, and I tried to avoid it at all costs. When I got back to the hotel, I called my boss to check in and changed into some sleep shorts and a tank top for the nap I desperately needed.

Oddly enough, my mom called once I woke up, and we chatted for a little while as I looked down at the city. At home, I had an ocean view, and this was like night and day for me. Once she talked about everything going on at home, I frowned.

“Colton was on my flight here. Isn’t that a coincidence?” I asked her, wondering what she’d think about it.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve seen him, hasn’t it?” Mom asked, laughing. “Me too. Everyone is so busy.”

“I know. His daughter is eight. I can’t believe it,” I replied.

“That’s about right. Born after Devin,” Mom agreed with a sigh. “You kids grow too fast.”

I heard another call come in as we chatted and didn’t look, fearing it was Colton and I’d leave Mom high and dry. I rushed through our call with the excuse I needed to go get some dinner and check to see that Colton called me and felt my heart jump in my chest.

“Oh, God,” I breathed, pacing the living room as I considered what to say to him. I stared at my phone and his name on the call log, finally calling back. “Hi, Colton. It’s Melanie.”

“I saw that on the phone, but hi. How was your day?” Colton asked as I looked in the mirror at my tangled hair.

“It was busy. My client kept me there most of the day, but she’s a lot of fun. I have a feeling I’ll work a lot more with her,” I replied, moving to sit down on the couch. “How was yours?”

“I think this will be a great project. He’s got good ideas for making this building stand out in a city of this size. I also got some recommendations for a place to have dinner,” Colton explained as my eyes widened.

We’re going!

“Like what?” I tried to sound casual as I leaned back on the couch.

“There’s a new place called Crown Shy that sounds kind of eclectic. I looked up the menu, and it’s great with a lot of choices. Would you like to go tomorrow night?” Colton asked, and I thought about my wardrobe.

“Is it something I’d dress up for?” I asked, and he chuckled.

“I’d never say no to a pretty woman wearing a dress. I am going to go with black slacks and a white button-up myself. Can you ever look too dressed up in a place like this?” Colton asked as I felt the squeal building up inside of me.

“New York? That would be a no,” I agreed calmly as I considered shopping for a dress the following day. He’d look so good dressed like that, and I needed to match him at least a little.

“What room are you in? I’ll drop by and get you at seven o’clock.” Colton offered, and I told him with a smile on my face. We chatted a little while before ending the call, and I jumped around my hotel room, wondering what I was getting myself into.

Tomorrow night didn’t provide dinner for now, so I ordered room service and took a long bath. I didn’t have a meeting with Isabella tomorrow, but I wanted to look up some supplies and get an idea of prices and availability. I’d be busy enough in the room.

I ordered a club sandwich and fries with some diet soda, pulling a robe over my pajamas. While I waited, I checked out the menu of Crown Shy, and it sounded incredible without being stuffy and incredibly overpriced. I could easily pick something there and be happy.

This felt like a date, even though I knew it wasn’t. Just dinner with an old friend that I hadn’t mentioned to Mom about. No big deal.

In the morning, I did some work on my laptop on the couch as I sipped coffee and ate breakfast from room service. Thankfully, almost everything was available in New York, and I’d only need to order it once she confirmed it tomorrow. These were the times I’d go around whatever city I was in and see the sights, but today I planned to see the inside of some stores.

I enjoyed shopping as much as any woman did, though I tried not to spend hours doing it. I just needed a dress for dinner and special occasions back home. That couldn't be that hard, but trying things on took longer than I expected.

I cursed the fact that Jamie wasn't here to help me as I turned to look at myself in a dark green dress that emphasized my body and offered a conservative amount of cleavage.

"That color looks great on you." I glanced up to see the woman that worked there smiling at me. "It brings out your eyes."

"You think so?" I asked, looking at them to see if I could tell. It was a simple enough dress with a skirt that flowed down to just above my knee, a fitted torso and small cap sleeves. I could wear it out with friends back home.

"Absolutely. It brings out your eyes and with the right makeup, they'll pop. It also shows off your gorgeous figure." She continued, walking over to me. "What's the occasion?"

"Just dinner tonight," I replied as my cheeks flushed pink.

"A date?" she pressed as I stared at her in the mirror, my face growing pinker.

I was getting myself into so much trouble.

CHAPTER 5

Colton

I looked in the mirror after I dressed, making sure everything looked tucked in. I had a pair of my best slacks on and a new crisp white shirt I grabbed today at the store, and I wondered if she'd like it. More than that, I wondered what Melanie planned to wear.

It was a little crisp outside, so I slipped into my jacket that went with the pants. I took one more look and ran my hands through my hair, which was growing out more than I liked. It was time to go get Melanie, and I slipped my phone and room key into my inside pocket, walking into the hall and turning right.

It felt like a long walk, and I took a deep breath, letting it out once I was in front of her door. Tapping on it, I waited to see her, and Melanie didn't disappoint when she opened it.

She wore a deep green dress that showed off her amazing breasts and waist before flowing to her knees, looking sexy without trying too hard. She wore a cardigan sweater over it in black, and her hair was straight and silky looking tonight as she took me in.

"You look good," Melanie offered as I looked into her eyes, seeing how green they were tonight with darker makeup than she usually wore and red lipstick to kill me completely.

"You look amazing, Melanie," I told her in a guttural voice, as I let my eyes wander again. I thought about what I'd

like to do instead of dinner, but it was so very wrong, and I got back on track. “Are you ready to go?”

“I am.” She held a little clutch in her hand and stepped into the hallway wearing incredible black heels and a smile on her face. They almost brought her to my height, and I offered her my arm, watching as she took it. She smelled like mango again and I breathed her in as we walked to the elevator.

We took a cab, and I helped her out at the restaurant, telling them my name at the podium. The room was small but offered several dimly lit tables with lights above them as well as candles, giving it a great feel. Once we were seated by the window, I asked for a bottle of wine, checking if Melanie liked white or red.

She chose white, and I asked for a bottle of their best wine before we looked over the menus. There was a little of everything and I decided on halibut while Melanie chose chicken, smiling at me as the server walked away.

I held up my glass of wine and smiled. “To coincidence.”

“To coincidence,” Melanie agreed, clinking her glass to mine as we both laughed. We talked about our jobs here, sharing stories about some of the more unusual clients until the entrees came. They looked fantastic and I let my eyes drift between the plates, thinking how good they both looked.

We shared and cut equal portions of both, taking bites across the table. There was a lot of laughter over the meal and talking about her family and my daughter. I told her about splitting up with Andrea but that she was a wonderful mother and we got along just fine. I resented her just after the separation, but it had been years now and everything had settled down.

I asked her if she was dating anyone, causing Melanie to blush.

“I’m not. I find myself devoted to my job more than anything,” Melanie replied as she dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. “I suspect you’re the same way.”

“I am bad about that when Penelope isn’t with me. When she’s at my house, I try to keep it to normal hours though I have Pamela, who handles a lot of things in the house for me. Nanny, chef, cleaner and I’m sure I’m forgetting something. She lives in a house on the property, and I take good care of her.” I smiled, thinking of the woman that’s been a part of our lives since I split from Andrea. “She is divorced and has grown children and it suits her.”

“That’s great to have help. Are you close to your family?” Melanie asked, and I wondered if she was trying to change the subject.

“I am, but my parents are older. We have dinner with them and visit, but she’s too active and upbeat for overnights and weekends there. I make sure she has a relationship with them,” I told her as she nodded.

“That’s good. As you know, I lost both sets of grandparents in the last five years. It was tough.” Melanie’s face fell for a moment as she blinked. “I feel bad that Devin lost out on so much time.”

“I know they loved him even with less time. They are taking good care of you two.” I smiled as our eyes locked and warmth rushed over my skin. “I am impressed with your work ethic, Melanie.”

“I have friends that just live on whatever family gave them and have a different life than I do. After seeing my dad work so hard, I think I appreciated it, and I am a lot like him. I had a dream, and I went for it.” She looked uncomfortable mentioning Richard, and I felt the elephant in the room for a moment. “I talked to Mom yesterday, but didn’t mention dinner. With you.”

“I can see that. No need to if it’s just dinner.” There was a long pause as our eyes locked again and I felt the rush. Jesus, the attraction to her was growing by the minute, and I knew I should walk away.

“You’re right. It’s just catching up,” she agreed in a shaky voice as she reached for her wine. “No harm.”

We finished the food, and I looked at the dessert menu. I didn't always order that after dinner, but the selections sounded interesting and when asked, Melanie agreed that the orange ice cream sounded delicious.

It was. We got two spoons and shared it, sipping the last of the wine as I felt it go right to my head. Being a single father meant I didn't drink a lot and wine had always gotten to me quickly. Melanie giggled as she set her spoon down and I saw the way her face looked in the candles as I reached for my wallet.

"You look beautiful in that light," I said as she stared at me with wide eyes.

"Thank you. It doesn't hurt you at all, either," she replied as she smiled. It hit me that there was a romantic vibe about this place. I looked around at the couples eating around us before I smiled.

Despite her protests, I took care of the bill. I looked to the left and right, knowing we should probably get some rest for work tomorrow. I also thought that we could walk back the few blocks to the hotel since Melanie seemed to have a good hold walking in heels.

She locked her eyes on me as I turned to look at her. "I thought we could walk to the hotel if your feet don't hurt," I suggested, as the sudden urge to kiss her hit me hard. I blinked, hoping it might go away, but it only increased.

"They're fine. I'd like that," Melanie told me and I reached out for her hand. She took mine, and the electricity zapped me as I gripped her hand. We walked along the sidewalk, taking it all in, as people rushed past us in the way that New Yorkers do. The lights were bright, and places stayed open later here. There was just a different feeling to this place than where we lived.

We didn't talk too much as we walked, but our hands remained locked together as the urge to taste her sweet mouth grew inside of me. I'd never felt it as much as I did right now, and I knew it would be a bad idea. Kissing Melanie would make me want more, and that couldn't happen here.

She was Richard's daughter.

The hotel was a couple of blocks ahead of us. I wasn't ready for this to be over, but I also knew going into a room with her was a terrible idea. I stopped walking as we reached a brick wall that separated two stores, and Melanie looked at me.

"Is everything okay?" she asked as I turned to face her. I cupped her face with my free hand as she gasped, leaning into me. Her skin was soft and warm, and I wet my lips with my tongue as she watched me. "Colton?"

"I can't stop myself," I murmured as I cupped her face with both hands and leaned in to kiss her. The heat hit me like a truck as she gripped my jacket, pulling me closer.

How was I supposed to pull away?

CHAPTER 6

Melanie

○ h. My. God.

Colton was kissing me.

I gripped his jacket and pulled him closer, slipping my tongue against his as our lips parted. He slid a hand into my hair and kissed me harder as we groaned together.

I was making out with a man on the New York streets and that man was my father's best friend.

I slipped my hands around his waist and tilted my head to deepen the kiss, needing all of Colton. I knew I couldn't have that, but I'd take what I could get right now. I wasn't sure if it was an older man or Colton, but this kiss was the best one I'd ever experienced.

Colton pulled away and gazed at me with hooded, heavy eyes as I sucked in my breath. "You feel so good, Melanie."

"So do you. Colton, I..." He silenced me with another kiss, and I moaned against his mouth. I didn't hear anyone reacting to us, but this was New York. I knew nobody would recognize us here and run to my dad about it. They didn't care and had their own lives to worry about.

"I could stand here all night and kiss you like this, but we need to get back to the hotel, Melanie. You work in the morning. I work in the morning." He kissed me again, and I felt him deepen it as we pressed closer together.

My body felt drawn to Colton. My nipples ached for him to touch and suck them, and my pussy ached as he kept kissing me the way he was.

I thought about going back to the hotel and going into one of our rooms and spending the night together. I thought about his mouth all over me as he made me come with his tongue and moved closer.

Fuck consequences.

Colton pulled away to look around before pushing me against the brick and claiming my mouth again. I laughed against him as I wrapped my arms around his neck and ran my fingers through his hair as he groaned against me.

“Melanie. We can’t do this.” Colton stepped away, and I fell against the building as he kept moving backwards.

“What?” I asked as I felt my lips tingling. “What do you mean?”

“I’d love nothing more than to take you to my room and finish this, but we can’t. You’re my best friend’s daughter, and I’ve known you since you were born,” he told me, running a hand through his hair. “I can’t treat you like some woman I met at a bar.”

“I’m not that little girl anymore! I’m older now and I can make decisions for myself,” I replied, as his eyes locked with mine. “We’re clearly attracted to each other, Colton.”

He looked around us, but fewer people were still walking by, and nobody seemed interested in our street argument.

“Let’s go.” He stared at me and then took my hand, leading me back to the hotel. His skin was hot, and he gripped me tightly as we walked, making me think he had changed his mind. Colton knew this was right, and we’d go back to the hotel and finish this. I’d deal with the consequences later should anyone find out, but we were in New York.

We walked through the lobby, and he pressed a button at the elevator, his gaze burning a hole into me. I caught my breath, playing back everything that happened at a rapid speed, hardly believing this.

However, he stopped in front of his room and let go of my hand. “I can’t do this, Melanie.”

“This is it? After that kiss? I’ve never felt like that with anyone before, Colton,” I told him, feeling my heart break.

“We can’t feel that way about each other. It’s wrong on so many levels, Melanie. We have to think about your family, everyone we know in between us, and I have a daughter I need to put first in my life.” His voice sounded resigned, and his shoulders slumped. “You need to go back to your room and forget this ever happened.”

“No,” I protested, standing in place. “They don’t need to know what happens here, Colton. We won’t tell anybody.” Even as I spoke, I knew this was more than just a night in bed with Colton. We enjoyed each other’s company, and he made me laugh. The kiss was intoxicating, but not all there was to this connection between us.

“Please go to your room so I can see you got there safely,” he told me as I watched him slide his hands into his pockets for his room key. “I don’t think we should see each other again.”

I opened my mouth to speak, then closed it. This couldn’t be happening, but the look in Colton’s eyes told me he had shut this down. I knew I could throw a tantrum and argue about this all night with him, but he made this decision.

“Thanks for dinner,” I murmured before walking to my room with my head held high. I unlocked it and walked inside, feeling all the emotions hit me at once.

I’ve dated men and even slept with them. I’ve laughed with some of them and enjoyed dinner. I’ve never done all of that with anyone before Colton, and he didn’t want me. At least he wouldn’t let himself have me.

I walked forward, stepping out of my shoes by the couch and taking several deep breaths. I wanted to finish that more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life. Dropping to the couch, I closed my eyes and let a few tears slide down my cheeks. Colton had a point, and if this became public to

anyone we knew, it would be disastrous. If we somehow made it past all of that and had a relationship that ended, there would be a lot of damage.

I just needed to let this go, and I grabbed water from the fridge and headed into the beautiful bathroom, running a hot bath in the jetted tub. The bathroom was as large as a small bedroom and offered a large bath, massive shower, large sink and counter space with everything you'd need to enjoy any of those.

I just ran a bath and stripped off my clothes before sliding into the hot water. I could still feel the desire coursing through my body, and it made me ache in between my legs as I played back the kisses in my mind. After securing my hair into a messy bun, I closed my eyes.

I still had a week left on this trip and Colton would be down the hall that entire time. We had to make this right before we went home, but I wanted him. I didn't want to not feel this way about him, and I groaned as I rested my hand on my stomach.

How could a man get me this worked up with a kiss? We didn't even take our clothes off or really touch. I slid my hand down my stomach and stroked my folds, letting out a gasp as my fingers brushed my swollen clit.

I'd touched myself before, but never because a man got me this hot and bothered. Even as I stroked my clit and moved with the actions, it would never match what Colton could do for me. I needed something right now, though. My free hand rose to my aching nipple, dragging the sensitive skin between my finger as I moaned. The combination of the two sent electricity through my body and I circled my clit harder and faster.

"Oh, God," I cried out as I felt the pressure building. I jerked against my hand and my body exploded as I closed my eyes. I slumped against the tub as I recovered, hoping that would be enough for me despite wanting so much more.

I enjoyed the hot water as long as it lasted, not wanting to return to the world as it was. I just needed to make it through

this week and throw myself into work as hard as I would with any client. That was my distraction, and I could make myself so tired I passed out every night until this stopped hurting me inside. When I went home, I could forget about Colton since he wasn't really a part of my life there.

With time, I could forget all about this night.

CHAPTER 7

Colton

I closed my door to the hotel room on Friday afternoon, ready to get the hell out of New York, and go home to my daughter. I met with Grant and the team and felt they all knew what they needed to do.

I didn't keep walking to Melanie's room like I longed to every time I entered this building. Walking away from her the other day had been hard for me, and I missed her every second of the day. I didn't just want to fuck Melanie in every way I could think of. If that were the case, this might be easier, and I could just replace her with a warm body like I'd been doing for years.

I enjoyed Melanie's company. She was fun to talk to, and we laughed so much together. Melanie was a mature woman despite being twenty years younger than I was. Her age wasn't a deterrent.

Why the fuck did she have to be Richard's daughter? What did I do wrong to deserve this?

I had a flight later, early tomorrow morning, and it couldn't come soon enough. I planned to have room service for dinner and make it an early night so I could go pick up Penelope when I arrived home. She was the light of my life and everything I needed to focus on.

My daughter was my life, and no woman would ever impede that.

I packed my things, leaving out something for the flight to wear tomorrow. I didn't think about the shower I took the night I walked away from Melanie and how I jerked myself off angrily for making that choice. Actually, I did that every day in the shower since that woman got me so worked up with her sweet mouth.

Working too much solved that during the day, but alone in my room at night, I just craved Melanie. Talking to my daughter took away the emptiness for those few minutes in the evening and I couldn't wait to see Penelope again.

I looked out of my window at the expansive city that I didn't see enough of during this trip. I put in long hours with the team, going over every detail of the apartment building until it was perfect. They were a good team, and I trusted they would handle the job well, but I could always come back if needed and was always available on the phone. Work served as my distraction, and I was a pro at that.

I could go out to grab a bite to eat and enjoy my last night here, maybe have a beer to celebrate the end of a long week. That's what I'd normally do, but I didn't feel it this time. I felt defeated and like I had walked away from an incredible opportunity. I didn't, though. The choice I made was the right one.

How could Melanie fit into my world and be accepted by everyone around me? I'd threaten her relationship with her family, not to mention the one I shared with them after these years. That had to come first, and I sighed as I closed my eyes. I never thought I'd be feeling this way about Melanie Cross.

In the end, I ordered room service and tried to watch a hockey game on TV. I enjoyed a few beers from the fridge, knowing I'd pay a lot for the convenience of not leaving my room. The sun went down outside, and I stood again, taking in the lights of the city and knowing I'd never look at them the same way again.

One night changed all of that.

I tossed and turned in bed that night, waking up at five to get to the airport for my flight. Thankfully, there wasn't a

beautiful blond next to me on this one and I used the time to sleep. I worked enough last week, more than enough, and deserved to rest and be ready for my energetic little girl.

I landed at three and went home to put my luggage away before going to pick up Penelope to take her out to dinner. She ran out of her mom's house and hugged me tight, telling me how much she missed me. Andrea waved from the door with a smile, and I felt grateful that all of that dust had settled.

"Want to get pizza for dinner?" I asked as she got into the back seat of my car.

"Yes, Daddy!! Can we go play games at Bruno's before we eat?" Penelope asked me with a huge smile on her face. That was her favorite pizzeria here that offered a few arcade games and her favorite claw machine and was always the place she ate. Luckily, the food was excellent, and I didn't mind going there at all.

"That sounds good. I have extra money for the claw machine tonight," I told her as her eyes widened. My girl seemed to change before my eyes as I watched her grow up. I missed her as a toddler and even three years ago. Now, she was growing into a young lady before my eyes, and I didn't know what to do about that. I'd accept any night at a claw machine to hold on to Penelope.

We ate a lot of pizza and played games for hours. I was surprised to look up and see Richard and Dana walking in with Devin and a large group of people. I let out a soft curse and wondered how to deal with this before remembering they knew nothing about me and Melanie.

"Colton!" Dana raised her hand and waved to me as Richard looked over at me. Guilt stabbed through me, and I told Penelope we needed to say hi to them for a moment. "It's so good to see you two. Maybe it is good that Devin's team decided on dinner here after the game." She hugged me and then kneeled to hug Penelope, telling her how much she'd grown since she saw her last.

"Colton. Good to see you." Richard shook my hand with a warm smile, and I grinned back. "Just you two?"

“Yep, per usual.” Who would be with us? Did he know something? “I just picked her up at Andrea’s and headed over here. I didn’t eat on the flight, so I was hungry, and this is heaven to a kid.”

“You came back today?” he asked, and I nodded. “Dana told me you bumped into Melanie on the plane there. She travels to New York a lot and we’re a little worried about losing her to that city.”

“Melanie would move there?” I asked in surprise, reminding myself to tone it down. It shouldn’t matter since I didn’t know her well.

“She hasn’t mentioned it, but the company sends her out there to their top clients a lot. Melanie is a favorite.” Richard watched as the group they walked in with gathered before the boys rushed the arcade. “Did you see her much?”

“No, just on the plane. We were both busy all week. When is she coming home?” I asked, pretending to just be friendly.

“I think Dana said she’s staying through Monday. Something about a holdup on fabric.” I didn’t like the idea of a woman as beautiful as Melanie there alone, but it wasn’t like I’d seen her since the night we had dinner. She went there alone all the time, from the sounds of it.

Fuck my feelings for her. They were going to be the death of me.

“So, team party or something?” I asked, nodding towards the boys as Devin led the way with a smile on his face.

“Just dinner after a game. These kids can go through several pizzas. It’s mind-blowing.” He chuckled, and I nodded in agreement. “We need to have you and Penelope over for dinner one weekend. Maybe when Melanie is back in town? We’ll set something up.” I didn’t realize how much Melanie smiled like her dad and that reminded me of our kiss, making me feel guilty all over again for how I had treated her mouth.

“We’d like that. Call me.” I faked enthusiasm, and we chatted longer before they settled in to eat. We’d finished our

pizza by then, so I escaped dinner with them and threw myself into my evening with Penelope.

Melanie was back on my mind now after talking about her, and I felt the ache inside. Would she be safe there in the city? Did she know what to do if something happened to her? I had to tell myself she was a big girl and had been traveling for work for some time now, from the sounds of it.

Melanie would be fine, and I wondered if she'd meet someone else there to finish what we started. She was a stunning woman and the idea of her kissing anyone like she had done with me made me feel something new inside.

Was I jealous?

CHAPTER 8

Melanie

I spent a few extra days in the city with Isabella to get everything at her apartment perfect. That was nothing new but being here without Colton hurt this time even though we didn't see each other after the night we had dinner.

He stayed away and didn't call me, and I honored that. I might have picked up my phone and considered calling him a few times, but that wasn't what he wanted. I didn't even know when he was coming home, but it was safe to assume it was well before my flight home.

Being home felt good. I always enjoyed sleeping in my bed and enjoying the view of the ocean from my deck, no matter how luxurious the hotels I stayed in were. Though I enjoyed several baths in the hotel at night when I was trying to wind down to go to sleep. I didn't have that at home and considered switching out my claw tooth for something with jets.

I agreed to meet Jamie for lunch the first weekend I was home since we needed to catch up. There was a cute bistro we both loved. Once we settled in with drinks and all afternoon to talk, Jamie asked me what was new.

I knew I couldn't tell her about Colton. She knew enough about my family to know him, and I wasn't sure what she'd do with the information. Jamie was my best friend, but she got too excited sometimes.

Instead, I told her about Isabella and how quirky she was. I showed her pics of what she was doing to her apartment and, as an artist, Jamie loved it. She was just a part-time artist and worked most of the time as a graphic designer here in LA. It was a much different job than mine. I showed her the pictures I took of New York, trying to make myself get into the vibe after things ended with Colton, but I never felt like it worked.

I looked up as we were eating to see Colton staring at me from the door, where he stood with a man I didn't recognize. I kept my face neutral and sipped my drink, glancing at Jamie to make sure she wasn't focused on me. A small greeting wouldn't be too much, and I offered a wave and a smile in his direction.

He scowled as they walked to a table, sitting down and ordering something from the pretty brunette server. I focused on my sandwich, and Jamie looked at Colton across the room. "Who is that and why did you wave at him?" she asked as I glanced at her.

"That's Dad's best friend, Colton," I explained, realizing she hadn't seen him before.

"Holy shit. He's gorgeous," Jamie told me as I giggled.

"Did you miss the part that he's my father's best friend and older than I am?" I asked as Jamie looked at me.

"So what? Dad doesn't need to know and you're twenty-five now. Things are different and he looks like he'd be a lot of fun for a night." Jamie lowered her voice, and I blushed as I forced a laugh.

"You need to get laid," I told her as she grinned.

"I did last night. When is the last time you did?" Jamie asked me and I realized it had been six months.

"That explains why you're talking crazy. It's been a while, Jamie. I won't lie, but I have not met anyone great." She looked at me. I'd never been like some of my friends—sleeping around just for a night. I took life too seriously for that.

“You work too hard to do anything else. I need to get you out to lunch more often, and then we need to find you a guy. It’s time to loosen up,” Jamie told me as I reached for my drink, resisting the urge to look at Colton again. Her brown eyes sparkled, and I laughed, shaking my head. “I mean, you travel, and you could have some hot nights in other places.”

That reminded me of the night with Colton and how good he felt. I glanced at him and saw him staring at me from across the restaurant with his mesmerizing blue eyes.

“With clients like Isabella, all I want to do is take a bath and pass out at night,” I assured her as she laughed.

I stayed at the bistro for two hours with Jamie, drinking and talking. Colton remained there throughout, and I had to force myself to keep up with the conversation as I avoided his eyes.

“We’re all grabbing drinks at Benny’s tonight. Join us?” Jamie asked as she hugged me on the sidewalk.

“I’ll try to be there!” I promised her as she stepped back and tilted her head at me. The wind blew my hair into my face, and I tucked it behind my ear as I laughed. “I promise.”

As she walked towards her car, I turned as my phone rang in my purse. I knew it was Colton and reached in to grab it, pulling up a message as I sucked in my breath.

Colton: We need to talk. I can't stop thinking about you.

Melanie: You said we can't see each other.

Colton: I am going to call you tonight after Penelope goes to bed.

Melanie: Okay.

I knew then that I wouldn't be going for drinks with anyone. I walked back to my house since it was just a few blocks away and squealed, wondering what he'd say to me. Suddenly, this evening felt like a lot more than just a few hours away, and I sighed.

I changed out of my skirt and blouse, slipping into leggings and a t-shirt to get some work done on a project. At least I could do that on my deck with the ocean as a view. I sipped a glass of wine as I worked, keeping the buzz from lunch going. I would need it to talk to Colton and get through whatever he had to say to me.

Would he want to see me again? I didn't see a reason we could be anything now, but I knew how hard the last several days had been for me. It appeared that he felt the same way, and I thought about taking the next step. I'd hate keeping a secret from my family if we saw each other, but he felt so damn good kissing me on that New York Street. It was like a moment in a movie to me, or something in a good romance novel.

Could I walk away from that again?

I was a few glasses of wine in when my phone rang later that night. I told Jamie that I got called in to help with something for work and couldn't make it and just kept drinking. Colton's name flashed on the screen, and I took a deep breath before answering.

"Hi," I said, returning to my balcony to finish my wine.

"It killed me seeing you today, Melanie. Hell, it killed me to walk away from you that night." He admitted as I closed my eyes. "Everything reminds me of you, and I haven't seen you in LA for years."

"What can we do that's different now?" I asked, wanting to face this. "What's changed?"

“I can’t stay away from you. Meet me for dinner Monday night after work. I won’t have Penelope and if anyone sees us, we can just say we bumped into each other. It won’t be like New York, at least not on the streets. I just have to taste you again.” I shivered at Colton’s words as my body perked up in all the right places.

“Where?” I asked, pulling my knees to my chest.

“Do you know the little diner on the corner just down from the bistro? Jane’s?” Colton asked. “It’s casual and near shops. It would make sense to bump into each other there and just have dinner.”

“I do. What time?” I asked, as Colton hissed on the other end of the line.

“Six o’clock. I can’t wait to see you again, Melanie.” We talked for longer about his work trip and then mine, finding out that neither of us enjoyed the week following our kiss. Colton told me he ran into my family upon returning home and about the guilt he felt, as he knew he still wanted me. Mom mentioned that to me, and my heart ached as she told me about it, not even realizing what she was doing to me.

I ended the call, knowing how long it would take to get to the point I was back with Colton.

On Monday, I dressed in my favorite fitted jeans with a tight t-shirt and heels, trying to look casual. This wasn’t a date, just dinner. I was just hanging out with a friend.

I could keep lying to myself about that.

CHAPTER 9

Colton

I could feel myself rushing through work on Monday and forced myself to slow down. My manager gave me an odd look during our meeting, and I needed to play this down.

It was just dinner after work with a friend. It made sense that I'd bump into Melanie, and we'd grab a burger and just catch up. I'd do that with any acquaintance, but Melanie wasn't any of that for me. I tried to forget her after New York and throw myself into family life and work. It felt like everything was against me when I ran into her family and then saw her at lunch when we hadn't seen each other for years.

At least, I wasn't aware if we had or not. I didn't recognize her on the plane until she looked at me, but I knew I'd take a longer look if she passed me on the street. I hid in my office for most of the afternoon, catching up on client emails and just slowing down away from everybody.

This would be good.

I verified the plans with Melanie through a text and felt relief when she promised me she'd be there. I purposely wore some new black slacks to work with a light blue button-down shirt, trying to look casual but good for her. I wondered what she might wear on this casual occasion as I watched the seconds drag by, considering going home to pass the time there.

Fuck. This was taking forever, but the diner was closer to work than it was to the house. I also knew the general area of

Melanie's house, and she could walk there if she chose to. When the clock finally hit the end of the evening for most of us, I let out a sigh and forced myself to keep working until I needed to leave for dinner.

"Working late, Colton?" Keith asked me as he paused in my doorway.

"I don't have Penelope this week, so I'm just going to finish up and run some errands. Great ideas at the meeting today. Thank you." I smiled at the manager, and he nodded.

"No problem. Don't stay too late," he told me, and I smiled and told him to have a great night. My empire was doing well, and I looked down the hallway as people walked out in groups. I tried to keep things fair here and not work people into the ground. I had enough money to last me a few lifetimes, but I saw that everyone else got paid what they deserved as well.

Life was good, and in a little while, I had a dinner date with a beautiful woman.

I left with enough time to drive and park at the diner, checking myself over as I stepped out of the car. I was a forty-five-year-old man, and I felt nervous about this as I looked around. Melanie approached with a shopping bag in her hand and smiled as our eyes locked.

"Colton. How are you? It's been a while." She greeted me as she paused on the sidewalk, looking sexy as sin in jeans that clung to her curves in a fitted green t-shirt. Jesus.

"Melanie. It has. What a surprise." I glanced at the diner and smiled. "I was just going to grab some dinner before running a few errands. Do you have time to join me?"

"That sounds perfect. I love the bacon cheeseburgers here." She waited for me, and we walked together to the front door as I took in her black heels.

"Do you own anything other than heels?" We sat down in a booth in the corner.

"I do. I just am so used to them." Melanie laughed as our eyes locked. You could cut the sexual tension in the room with

a knife, and I couldn't deny that any longer. "You don't like them?"

"Oh, I do." I looked around to see that we were on our own back here. "I just want you in nothing but the heels with your legs wrapped around my waist, if I'm being honest."

Melanie's eyes widened, and she reached for her water as the server set them down, draining half the glass as she kept staring at me. "You do?"

"It's been hard not being around you after that night in New York, Melanie. I almost called you so many times there and here, but I thought I was doing the right thing. There's so much at risk here, but I want you," I told her as she blinked, turning pink. "Let's look at the menus before the server gets back."

We both ordered bacon cheeseburgers and sodas, and Melanie leaned back in the seat across from me. I memorized her perfect face for a moment, remembering how green her eyes were the night I kissed her. She tucked a strand of her straight hair behind one ear and blushed with a smile.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" she asked as I smiled.

"You're beautiful." I watched as she smiled, her full lips a deep pink tonight as she licked her lips, making me want to jump across the table and claim that mouth. I don't know how we did it, but we made it through the meal and had a good conversation. It was always that way with Melanie. She admitted to buying a new photo frame from the store down the street to kill time and make this more legitimate and giggled, making my cock hard.

I lost count of how many times I'd jerked off in the last few weeks without seeking the company of another woman.

When we finished dinner and it seemed like we were staying too long, I offered her a ride home. Melanie accepted, and I guided her to my Lamborghini truck, opening the door for her. I wanted to kiss her, but I couldn't do that here.

Not yet.

I leaned in to breathe in the mango scent I'd grown so fond of. Melanie smiled as our eyes locked and I forced myself to the other side of the car.

When I pulled into her long driveway, I stopped the car and looked at her. The house was a pretty pale blue beach house, and I could see the water from here, but I didn't care about that. I leaned in to kiss her now that we were alone again, and she moaned as she moved closer to me. I doubted anyone would show up to her house past eight tonight and closed my eyes, giving into my need for Melanie.

Our tongues danced together, and I slipped a hand into her silky hair, gripping it as she whimpered against me. She felt so good, and I could taste the sweet soda on her lips as she moved closer, gripping my shirt. "I need you," I told her as Melanie pulled away, looking towards her house with heated eyes. "Is anyone coming over?"

"No. The gate is closed, and they'll need to call," she replied as I shoved my door open and stalked to her side of the car.

"You're not fucking home," I growled as I held her door open with my leg, kissing her again. "Do you have cameras?"

"Outside, but nobody sees them but me. I don't have people over a lot," Melanie told me as she wrapped her arms around my neck. We stumbled to the front door and made our way inside. She dropped her purse and bag to a table near the door and I pressed her into the wall after kicking the door closed.

We moaned as our kiss deepened and I ran my hands down her body. I wanted everything from this woman and moved one hand to cup her breast as I moved my mouth down her jaw. Her nipple pebbled against the material between us, and my mouth watered to take her into my mouth.

"Colton," she groaned as I lifted her and carried her to the living room, looking for any comfortable surface. There was a sectional and some large windows that probably had a magnificent view, but I dropped her on her back, crawling

over her before I kissed Melanie again. I slipped between her thighs, driving my aching cock between her legs as she cupped my ass.

I kissed down her neck as she whispered my name, arching into me with her hips. This was so much and not enough, and I slid a hand over her breast to the hem of her shirt, pulling away to look at Melanie. She nodded, and I slipped my hand underneath, finding a thin bra.

Melanie wriggled under me and slipped the shirt over her head quickly. I took her in, seeing hard, pink nipples that begged for attention. My hand slid over the front of the bra, opening the clasp and smoothing my thumb over her before kissing her again.

Melanie was stunning. I kissed her swollen mouth and moved down her jaw and neck. She let out a whimper and arched into me when I licked her right nipple, unbuttoning my shirt roughly. I sucked her between my lips, driving my cock against her harder as she clawed at my chest.

I sucked and licked her, keeping up my rhythm as I realized she might come from this. Hell, at this point, I might. She felt so good and looked amazing under me as I teased her nipples. When I bit down around her, Melanie arched her body and met my thrust, crying out my name.

“How are you so good at that?” she asked as she slumped down, catching her breath. “Don’t answer that.”

“It’s all you. You’re so sexy and I want to make you do that so many ways, Melanie,” I told her as she stared into my eyes. I was damn close to my release, and I sat up to give her some space.

This was messy and perfect. I wanted all our clothes off so I could feel her wrapped around me and I slipped my shirt off completely.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” Her voice broke into my haze, and I blinked at her. “That felt so good, Colton. I’ve never felt like that before with anybody. I just...there’s so much history with us and I’m scared.”

“You’re not the little girl I remember, Melanie. You’re a grown, sexy woman and while we can’t do any of this in the public eye, I want some time with you. I need time with you.” As she sighed, I begged her not to do this with my eyes.

“I don’t do this lightly with anybody, Colton. With you, that’s so much more complicated and I just want to take some time to think this through.” She took a few breaths, covering herself.

“You want space?” I asked as she nodded, looking broken.

I wasn’t a man to force a woman to do anything, and I sighed as I pushed myself away from her, holding my shirt in my hands. It killed me to do this again, and I slipped my clothes on and calmed my racing heart.

When I finished dressing, I collected my keys from the table by the door and told her to lock the door behind me. I had a date with a cold shower tonight.

CHAPTER 10

Melanie

It took me an hour to stand up and lock my door after Colton left. I took my heels and clothes into the bedroom and changed into a tank top and some pajama shorts, still feeling stunned by the choice I just made.

After dry humping for the first time in my life, I sent the man away. I sent him away for space after missing him more than I've ever missed anybody.

This was Colton, though. There was a lot at risk, and it hit me that this could be a lot more than sex for me. I'm not a casual sex kind of girl since I take everything seriously in my life. Getting too involved with my dad's best friend was a dangerous thought. What if we fell apart and had to see each other after that around the family?

Fuck. I can't believe I sent him away. A large part of me wanted to call Colton and beg him to come back over. I knew I could lose myself completely in a night with that man and maybe the rest of the nights of my life.

I poured some wine and stood out on the balcony, looking over the dark water as I sighed. I always thought that work was rewarding, and never worried that I didn't have somebody serious in my life. I never needed it.

Colton was different, but he was so forbidden to me. There was the fact that he was my father's best friend and a part of the family, he was older, and he had a responsibility I knew

nothing about. I didn't have kids and wouldn't know the first thing about that if we were to get that serious.

We couldn't.

I could have kids later myself if I met someone. Colton wouldn't want to start over with someone else and take anything away from Penelope. This was so messy, and I dropped into my chair and closed my eyes. How did it all happen so fast?

I knew that there was always my job, and I'd throw myself even more into it until this awful feeling went away.

Over the following week, I ended up working with a local photographer at a new hotel. I was barely there and had to force myself into the moment, but Jack was a nice guy. He wasn't Colton but still attractive with cropped dark blond hair and deep green eyes and completely available, according to my coworker, Lauren.

We worked together for a few days before he asked me out to dinner the coming weekend. Not having any reason to say no and desperately needing to move on, I accepted, even though my heart wasn't in it. Jack was a successful photographer and had so much to offer, even though my heart felt dead.

Jamie caught wind of the date and insisted on drinks Friday night to discuss it. She was all about planning outfits and I smiled as we walked into the little restaurant that also served as her favorite hang out in between our houses.

"Tell me about this guy! You haven't had a date in a while." Jamie sipped her drink and stared at me.

She was so wrong about that, but I couldn't tell her anything about Colton. I'd spent some of the best nights with him, even though we only went on two dates. What was I doing?

"His name is Jack, and he's a local freelance photographer that was shooting a hotel we designed for a magazine. Successful and good looking," I told her as she arched a perfect dark brow.

“I need a lot more than just good looking,” Jamie told me as I sipped my drink.

“He’s tall, like over six feet. I’d say he works out without being gross. Do you know what I mean?” I asked, as she nodded. “Cropped dark blond hair and these green eyes that remind me of moss.”

“Ooh la la!” she exclaimed as I nodded, feigning excitement. “Do you know where he’s taking you?”

“There’s a new seafood place he suggested for dinner and maybe a club after that to listen to some music? We’re going to play it by ear,” I replied, looking up as the server placed our appetizers on the table. “He’s twenty-six but much less of a frat guy type than anyone I’ve met before. At least, so far.”

“Nothing is worse than thinking you’re going out with one guy and being with a completely different one,” Jamie agreed as she reached for a chip to dip into the crab and artichoke deliciousness on the table. “You know you can text if you need an out, right?”

I’d forgotten about that backup plan we had. “I do. Aren’t you going out tomorrow?”

“I’ll be out with some people from a place I’m making a menu for, but I’ll keep my phone close by. It’s just like a mingle thing.” Jamie shrugged. “No biggie. What are you going to wear?”

“I’m told this isn’t a fancy restaurant, so I was going to go with my black dress you’ve seen and some heels. Do my makeup and hair and keep it simple but sexy,” I replied, forcing the enthusiasm as my stomach hurt at the thought of being with anyone but Colton. “That should be good for dinner and possibly a club.” I knew my green dress would work, but I never wanted to wear it again.

“I like that. It’s sexy without being too much for you. Jack will love it.” Jamie gushed as I smiled again. She dipped another chip, and I remembered we had food on the table. My appetite had been practically nonexistent this week, but I knew I had to eat something in front of her.

“I think so.” I dipped my chip and took a bite, moaning at how good it was. There were also lettuce wraps and the mushrooms that only Jamie enjoyed. “I don’t have the serious vibe from Jack, but that’s okay. It’s just to have some fun.”

“You take a lot of things in life seriously and I love that about you. It makes you kick ass at your job, but there’s always room for fun, Mel. You deserve to be treated great by a man just for the simple fact it’s a date.” She smiled at me as she reached for my hand.

It killed me not to tell her about Colton and how incredible he was. All Jamie could know was that he was gorgeous and Dad’s friend.

“I know. It’s time,” I agreed with false bravado as she raised her glass for a toast.

The following night, I stood in front of the mirror in the dress with my hair and makeup done. It looked fine, but I didn’t want Jack to be the one seeing it. My phone rang, and I glanced down to see that it was Mom calling. I had some time before he got here, so I answered.

“Hey, Mom. How are you?” I asked as I turned to look at my profile. This just didn’t feel right.

“Hello, sweetie. I just wanted to check in and see how your week was.” She always sounded so cheerful. “Also, can you come over for dinner tomorrow? It’s last minute, but I’m itching to see you again. I haven’t seen you since you left for New York.”

Ouch.

“I’m good. It was a busy week and I’m getting ready for a date right now.” I froze as I said the words, knowing they talked to Colton sometimes.

“A date? Who with?” Mom asked as I closed my eyes.

“Just a guy we worked with last week. I’m not engaged, Mom.” I assured her, knowing that’s where she was headed with this. “He’s a photographer here in the area.”

“It’s been a while for you, Melanie. That’s great,” Mom encouraged as I let out a slow sigh.

“It has. This should be fun, and I can make it for dinner tomorrow if you make my favorite pot roast,” I told her, already able to taste it.

“That’s on the menu with my chocolate cake, so be here.” She sang as I laughed. We chatted until it was almost time for Jack to come get me and I slipped on my heels and walked into my living room. I couldn’t even look at the couch after what happened there with Colton, and I slipped my gloss into a small purse.

Here goes nothing.

The date was nice. Not fantastic, but fine. Jack had a lot of stories to tell, and we had a friendly conversation, but there were no sparks between us. I wished there was because he asked enough questions about me to show interest. Jack would be a great guy to date, but I didn’t want Jack.

I wanted Colton.

We went to a jazz club, which surprised me. I sipped a drink, and we kept talking in the back of the room as he told me he photographed this place when they first opened.

“That’s how you know about it,” I replied, glancing at him. “Most people our age don’t go to clubs like this.”

“I like what I like. I don’t feel like I need to make anyone else happy apart from you.” He smiled as my heart dropped into my stomach that was full of a wonderful dinner. I placed my hand on it and took a deep breath.

I got through the kiss at my door, knowing that Jack deserved more than I offered. He was sweet, intelligent, and giving and everything a girl except me could want.

The icing on the cake was when I arrived at my parent’s house and found Colton’s car in the driveway.

Fuck me.

CHAPTER 11

Colton

I hung my head when Richard told me that Melanie had a date after inviting me to dinner on Saturday night. She was already fucking dating someone after kicking me out of her house?

Of course, I couldn't be a jerk and reject the invite to dinner. I hadn't spent a lot of time with them for a while.

I was in a slight mood all day Sunday thinking about Melanie with some other man and struggled to keep it cool when I picked up Penelope. Andrea had some plans, and I planned to take her over there tomorrow night after school, so it worked out well. My daughter came running out to hug me and I dropped to catch her, forcing a smile on my face.

"Hey, baby girl. Ready for dinner at Uncle Richard's house?" I asked her, as she wiggled in my arms.

"Yes. I want to play with Devin," she told me as she reached for her backpack to get into the car. Long ago, we agreed we should each have clothes and only send her back and forth with the basics. There were too many stories about parents using their kids against each other. I didn't want to be that man, and Penelope's happiness mattered the most.

We headed to their house on the coast, and I asked Penelope what she had done this weekend. Andrea always spent a lot of quality time with Penelope, and I enjoyed hearing about what they did together, which was a Santa Monica Pier trip this time. It hurt a little that I missed out on

these things, but I was making plenty of memories with my daughter.

I didn't respond to her at one point, and I saw Penelope lean forward in the back seat.

"Daddy, are you okay?" she asked as I blinked.

"I'm great, Pen. Just tired," I lied as I felt her eyes on me.

"What is Aunt Dana making for dinner?"

"I think pot roast...our favorite," I replied as she grinned. "Maybe she'll make that cake you like, too."

"Mmm. I love chocolate cake!" Penelope told me as I laughed for the first time in a week. I pulled into their driveway, and we hopped out of the car as she ran to ring the doorbell.

I caught glimpses of my daughter as a little girl and of a girl on the way to being a tween and I watched as Dana opened the door to hug her.

"Are you coming inside?" she called to me with a smile, and I headed up the stairs. I greeted them and Devin asked Penelope to play soccer in the backyard with him once we got that out of the way.

Dana handed me a beer, and I glanced at her. "Beer?"

"Just the one. It's water after that for you, Colton. You know those kids will play until it's dark outside," Dana reminded me as I nodded.

"So true." I opened it and took a small swallow, knowing I needed to savor it. "It smells good in here, Dana."

"She knows what everyone likes, and it's always the pot roast," Richard said as he walked into the room. He kissed her hair as she smiled. "Mine, too."

"Good, because you're stuck with it." Dana joked as the front door opened. "Here she is!"

"Mom? Dad?" Melanie called out as Dana told her to come into the kitchen. I gripped the beer before setting it

down, worried that I'd break it in my hand. My mood returned, and I told myself to stay calm.

I had my mouth all over her breasts last weekend. Fuck. Some other man might have already replaced me.

"Hey, Colton," she said after a moment when she saw me there. "I didn't know you'd be here."

"Penelope, too. She's outside with your brother." Dana hugged Melanie as our eyes locked for a second before I looked away. "Did you have fun last night? Will you go out with him again?"

Shit. I sipped my beer again, forgetting about enjoying it. I needed a bottle of whiskey right about now.

"It was fine. I'm not sure yet," she replied in a rushed tone. She'd better not talk too much about her date. I didn't want to know the details.

"That's all? Did you do anything after dinner?" Dana asked, unaware of how much she destroyed me inside with the question.

"Just dinner and a jazz club. It was different and nice. There's no mention of a second date yet, though." I stared into Melanie's face, seeing guilt there. She shot me a quick apologetic look, and I felt glad that her parents were both behind her.

"Would you like wine now or with dinner? I know you're driving tonight," Dana told her daughter, and I wondered if she just wanted the entire bottle like I did.

"With dinner. I'll just grab some water." Melanie looked pretty in some jeans and a floral peasant shirt with her hair in pigtails, and I watched as she reached into the fridge. Did she wear the green dress last night?

If I continued like this, I was going to make myself crazy before the end of the night thinking about what she did or didn't do last night.

We chatted about work and the kids until dinner was ready and I volunteered to call Penelope and Devin inside. I walked

out to the extensive deck and looked down at the kids on the grass by the pool as they played a game of soccer, one of Devin's favorites. I knew she'd probably want to play since Penelope looked up to Devin a little.

"Hey, kids. Dinnertime!" I called as they both looked at me.

"We can finish later!" Devin told her as he raced up the steps and into the house. "Is my sister here?"

Yes, she fucking was.

I followed Penelope inside and helped carry the food to the table with Richard. When there were a few people, they had dinner in the formal dining room and Melanie was setting drinks out. My beer and a glass of wine were beside each other, and I stared at her for a moment.

"Who are you?" Penelope asked Melanie as she looked at her. She wouldn't remember Melanie since it had been some time.

"Hey, Penelope. I'm Devin's sister. We met a few years ago, but you were pretty little." Melanie glanced at me. "My name is Melanie."

"I like your hair. You're pretty," Penelope told her and I knew she already liked Melanie. Why wouldn't she? That was one reason we weren't seeing each other, from what I remembered.

"Thanks," Melanie replied, glancing at me.

We sat down to eat, and I was next to Melanie while the kids sat beside each other. Richard and Dana took their seats at either end or we dug into the food. Normally, it would be amazing, but it tasted like cardboard tonight. Still, I forced it down as we chatted through dinner, too aware of the mango scent filling the room and the heat from Melanie's body. I felt so fucking drawn to her.

Luckily, the kids distracted us enough for me not to get too caught up with Melanie, though I noticed she seemed to pick at her food as well. Penelope asked Melanie a few questions as though she were interviewing her, making Dana chuckle as she

sipped her wine. It would have been sweet if it didn't twist the knife deeper in my back.

The kids went outside to play some more, and Melanie offered to help her mom with dishes while I chatted with Richard. They talked in the kitchen while I joined Richard out on the deck to watch the kids and catch up.

"Are you okay? You seem a little distracted tonight?" he told me as he sipped a beer that I longed to tear out of his hands and finish.

"Just a long week. I'm good." There was no way in hell I could confide to my best friend about anything that was bothering me. I moved the conversation to work talk because I could handle that a lot better.

We all had dessert, and I made an excuse to leave because of Penelope when we finished. She got her play time in with Devin and needed a shower before bed and I couldn't be around Melanie anymore. My daughter pouted, but I could see that she was tired when she yawned and thanked my friends for dinner.

I barely said anything to Melanie, hoping nobody noticed as I walked out of the door.

When we got home, I told her to take a shower and get ready for bed as I grabbed another beer. At least I didn't have to limit myself here, but I promised not to break into the whiskey in my cupboard. She got into bed after the shower and I spent a few minutes in there talking to her like we usually did, grateful for this extra time with Penelope.

After I went to my room for the night, I let my emotions overtake me all over again. Tonight was miserable. Melanie looked gorgeous, and I just wanted her back, but we couldn't talk at Richard's house. That was probably best given the circumstances, but it killed me inside and I relaxed against my pillows and closed my eyes.

I'd get through this.

No, I fucking wouldn't. I reached for my phone on the table beside me and started a text message to Melanie.

Colton: You went on a fucking date?

CHAPTER 12

Melanie

I hugged my mom one more time before trudging to my car, sitting inside as I took a deep breath.

Tonight was one of the hardest ones of my life seeing Colton like that. Mom didn't mention it to me, but I shouldn't have been surprised since they were friends. It's not like she knew anything about us more than the fact we bumped into each other on the flight.

It just caught me so off guard seeing him there, and took everything I had to act as normal as I could. I had no reason to treat Colton in any other way than being kind and I tried my best. They were inside the house as I glanced over and started the engine.

I heard my phone chime as I drove, ignoring it until I was in my house with a glass of wine. I'd already filled Jamie in on my date with Jack with false enthusiasm and she gave him a thumbs up. I didn't agree, but I couldn't tell her that.

"Fuck me," I murmured as I read the message from Colton. Of course, he'd ask about my date since Mom didn't know she shouldn't bring it up.

Melanie: I did. It was harder than you probably think for me, Colton.

Colton: Was it? You threw me out just a week ago. Did he have his mouth all over you like I did?

Melanie: Fuck you. It was nothing like that and you know I don't take that stuff lightly. I'm trying to move on from us, Colton. How comfortable were you tonight?

Colton: It was fucking miserable. At least I know my daughter likes you, so we have that going for us.

Penelope. She was a beautiful little girl and sweet as can be. I could see the admiration in her eyes as she complimented me, but she wouldn't want me as an intimate part of her dad's life.

Melanie: She's at that age. That's all. I hardly think she'd want to share you with me.

Colton: I saw for the first time tonight that she might be fine with it. I don't even have her full-time, Melanie. How would it be sharing me?

Melanie: Exactly my point. Your time together is precious.

Colton: Are you going on another date with him, Melanie? For the record, the idea makes me feel something I've never felt in my life.

I knew my feelings for Colton were just as strong as ever, but I shouldn't be surprised by that. Seeing him tonight in the role of a dad made me want him even more, even though I could see how agitated he was. He never let his daughter see it or take anything out on her. I could tell that my brother had a great time with Penelope, too. There was no way anything but sex could work out with me and Colton, and I just couldn't do that.

Melanie: I don't think I am. I still have some healing to do from all of this. I think we need to stay away from each other if we can. This isn't healthy.

Colton: Fine. Take care of yourself.

I cried after that. Fat tears rolled down my cheeks as I mourned the loss of whatever it was I had shared with Colton. It wasn't a long-term friendship since we didn't know each other for the last few years. There was a powerful attraction that could lead me to some of the best nights of my life. Our chemistry was obvious when we were together.

There just wasn't a future without a major upset in everybody's lives around us. My dad had known Colton for years, and the idea of him knowing about us made me feel sick. I knew we were both consenting adults and we could make decisions for ourselves, but some things were just wrong.

His daughter was precious, but I am not at a place in my life to be anything of substance to her. I had a career and a life to live and worked too hard for that. I was sure there was a woman out there that would fit into every part of Colton's life, but the idea of meeting her killed me a little more inside.

I went to work with my head held high, throwing myself into my latest local client. Isabella was ready to start her kitchen next month, and I planned to go back to New York, but not until I absolutely had to. I already needed to find a new hotel with no memories. Going back to the city where my life changed forever wasn't that easy to dismiss as the surrounding walls.

Jack wasn't working with me anymore, but he called a few times throughout the week. I blamed work for not having time to talk, not wanting to deal with him asking for another date. In his mind, ours was probably good for a first one. There was nothing wrong with him, and if I hadn't been with Colton in New York, I'd probably want to give this a try. He checked all the boxes in most girls' minds.

Friday, I finally answered a text from him after work. He asked me out for the following night, and I hesitated as I sat on my couch that reminded me so much of Colton that it hurt.

Melanie: I don't think this is going to happen for us, Jack. You're a good guy, but I'm just not in that place.

Jack: Did someone break your heart or something?

Melanie: In part, yes. I also travel a lot for work like you, and it's just tough to pin me down. I feel like I am all over the place most days.

Jack: That's too bad. I wish you well, Melanie.

I felt like shit as I read his last message a few times. He was such a good guy, and I felt stupid for not trying, but I didn't lie. My heart wasn't in it, and I knew that when I was ready, I'd probably never find someone like Jack again. I probably deserved that.

I disappointed Mom and Jamie when I told them there would be no second date. I couldn't tell them exactly why, so I blamed it on work and travel. Jamie told me it was a copout, and I could make time if I tried, and Mom sighed. I knew she wanted me to find someone to love me as much as she loved Dad and, of course, she wanted grandkids. Devin was off the hook from that for years. Lucky kid.

I spent the weekend in the house, just catching up on sleep and essentially wallowing in my misery. By Sunday, I needed to get out, and I dressed for a long walk on a local beach for a change of scenery. I could go down to the one by my house anytime I wanted, but it was more of a private one for the residents of the surrounding homes.

I needed something with people to liven me up, not more time to think about everything.

I parked in the lot and looked around at the cars. There would be plenty of people here, and I'd hear laughter and voices. It made me smile.

I headed down the sand to the water, fixing my hair into a ponytail as I walked. This was a perfect way to finish my depressing weekend, and I took a deep breath of the surrounding ocean air.

"Melanie! Melanie!" I jumped as I heard my name and looked around. A little girl was running towards me, and I realized it was Penelope as my heart sank. She wrapped her arms around my legs, and I looked down, wondering what to say.

"Hi, Penelope. You're here, too?" I asked as I glanced in the direction she came from, seeing her dad sitting by a sandcastle, staring at me with a scowl on his face.

“We went to lunch and we’re building a sandcastle. Want to help?” Penelope asked me as I smiled down at her warily. Of all the beaches in LA and today, I had to run into them.

“I’ll come say hi. Sure.” I couldn’t be rude to a kid, and she took my hand and led me back to Colton. Something about this felt natural, and I forced the idea out of my mind. Penelope would feel a lot differently about me if I was dating Colton. “Hey,” I said vaguely when we reached him, taking in the fitted t-shirt and muscular arms.

“She wants to help us, Daddy.” Penelope plopped into the sand and looked up at me expectantly.

When did this get so complicated?

I sat down closer to her than to Colton, thankful for my sunglasses that hid the pain in my eyes. We finished the large castle in record time, and I followed her plan as I tried to ignore her dad. My body had a tough time with that, and my nipples and core seemed to remember exactly what it felt like to be in his arms. I wore a workout set today that would hide that, and I silently congratulated myself on that as well.

It also didn’t leave a lot to the imagination, and I felt Colton’s eyes on me as I chatted with Penelope.

“Do you live by the ocean?” she asked me as I nodded with a smile.

“It’s a smaller one than this, but yes. I do,” I replied, as she grinned.

“Daddy’s house is on a beach. Mommy’s house is so close we can walk, but she takes me to the pier sometimes.” Penelope kept talking, sounding happy with her situation with divorced parents. That was a good thing, and I smiled at her as she reached for something in a cooler, handing me a juice box.

“I haven’t had one of these in years,” I told her as she stuck the straw into hers.

“They’re my favorite.” She beamed, and I giggled, looking up to see Colton staring at me.

When the afternoon ended without too much awkwardness, we all stood to leave. Penelope ran a few feet ahead of us to the car and Colton looked at me.

“This was nice, Melanie.”

“I agree. She’s a great kid,” I replied, watching as she climbed into his car.

“I need to see you again. I can’t do this.” I swallowed the lump in my throat and looked at him.

“Call me this week. We can have dinner over the weekend or when you have some time,” I told him as his face broke into a smile.

“I will. Drive safe,” Colton told me after I hugged Penelope goodbye. I nodded and walked to my car, feeling good about this.

Was I wrong?

CHAPTER 13

Colton

I knew I wouldn't let this go with Melanie. Seeing her with Penelope at the beach made my feelings that much stronger since I'd never let someone I was seeing around my daughter before. That was because it was casual and not worth the effort, but my daughter genuinely liked Melanie.

We could take it slow and decide how to handle that as time went on. I just felt good knowing that the two weren't strangers and this was impossible.

I had my daughter all week, so I focused on her when I wasn't working. I'd never let her become less important to me, and Melanie knew that. When she was asleep, I'd call Melanie sometimes, and we'd talk for a while. We just got to know each other better and went on a deeper level with our conversations.

We also laughed a lot. It was fucking refreshing since I rarely found that in a woman. We planned on dinner Sunday after I dropped Penelope off at Andrea's house, and by the end of the week, she asked me to come over. Melanie enjoyed cooking and wanted to prepare something to enjoy on the deck, and I accepted, promising to bring her favorite wine.

I dressed in some new jeans and a brown button-up shirt on Sunday before leaving with Penelope, and she gave me a curious look.

“Do you have a date, Daddy?”

“A date? No. I’m just meeting a friend for dinner and didn’t want to wear my shorts. What do you know about dating?” I pressed her as she got into the car.

“My friends are dating at school. Duh. Plus, Mommy went on a date,” Penelope replied as I arched a brow.

“Did she?” I asked slowly, wondering who the man was. I didn’t feel any sense of jealousy, but I’d always be protective of my daughter.

“Yes, but I haven’t seen him. They go out to dinner when I’m with you. I thought you might do that, too.” She sounded so matter of fact, making me wonder if I was overthinking this too much.

“Nope. Just a friend from work,” I assured her, not ready to go there yet. I needed to see how this went. I dropped her at the house with a big hug and a wave for Andrea, hoping she was happy.

After that, I got two bottles of wine and an enormous bouquet of tulips at the store and headed over to Melanie’s house. It was a beautiful day, and the breeze was perfect for an outdoor dinner. I hadn’t seen much of her house, so I looked forward to seeing that side of Melanie tonight.

She opened the door wearing a fitted t-shirt in pale green with a long loose black skirt. “Hi.” She smiled as she let me in and I leaned down to kiss her cheek, feeling the heat from her skin. “Two bottles and flowers? Thank you.”

“They don’t need to be opened tonight. I just know how you like your wine,” I teased her as I looked around the spacious living room. The couch made me hard as I remembered what I’d done to her there, but I focused on other things, like the large gas fireplace and wall of windows overlooking the ocean. The house was clean, with bright colors scattered throughout the room to add to the dark gray colors of the furniture.

Melanie walked barefoot to the kitchen to put the wine away, and I looked over to see an open chef’s kitchen done in light wood and white. “I made salmon, twice-baked potatoes

and veggies. I hope that sounds good.” She looked at me and I nodded.

“Perfect. You look beautiful,” I told her as she blushed and glanced at something on the counter.

“Thanks. You look incredible, too.” She blushed and pulled something out of the oven as I watched, enjoying being in her space. “Did you have a good week with Penelope?”

“It’s always good when I’m with her. She likes you a lot and talked about you a few times,” I replied as Melanie looked at me with a smile.

“It’s the age. I looked up to everyone older than me back then,” Melanie replied as she pulled some plates from the cupboards.

“Can I help?” I asked, as she smiled.

“Open a bottle of wine, maybe? I’ll get this plated.” We shared a long look, and I blinked before she guided me to where the tool was to get that done.

Once outside, I took in her view. It wasn’t that different from mine, but something about living this close to the ocean felt special to me. The water calmed me, and Melanie had the perfect table out here to eat at and chairs comfortable for relaxing in.

“Do you spend a lot of time out here?” I asked her, as she nodded with a smile.

“When I’m not mad busy with work, I do. It’s a nice place to decompress after a long day and for morning coffee if I get up in time.” Melanie looked at me as she forked a piece of fish. “You?”

“Absolutely. Do you have a balcony off the bedroom like I do?” I asked as her face flushed a deep pink.

“I do, but I use this more for everything. I haven’t set up a coffee maker in my room yet.” Melanie joked as I focused on my plate.

“This is great,” I told her once I’d tried a bite of everything. “You’re an excellent cook, like your mom.”

“She and Gram taught me a lot over the years,” Melanie replied as I thought back to Richard’s parents. They were always close until they passed away five years apart, while Dana’s parents lived out of state and visited once a year. “I don’t get to cook like this too often living alone.”

“I’ll always be your guinea pig,” I assured her as our eyes locked for a moment. “I enjoy being here.” Her eyes looked brighter than normal with the shirt and dark shadow on her eyes tonight, and her lips were sexy and glossed.

“I just...I wonder if it’s a good idea, Colton,” Melanie told me as I watched her face fall. “There’s still a lot at stake here.”

“Some things, yes,” I agreed, as she sighed. “Penelope asked if I had a date tonight. Apparently, her mom is seeing someone, and she’s totally fine with it.”

“What did you tell her?” Melanie asked as she stared at me in surprise.

“No, of course. That’s going to take time with anyone, but I want you. Penelope likes you and she’d survive us,” I told her as she stared at me again. “You’re a good person, Melanie.”

“I don’t know, Colton,” Melanie murmured, eating another bite.

“I am not suggesting that we say anything tomorrow, but in time. There’s a lot to dissect here, but I want you in my life.”

“What about my family?” she asked, and I thought about it for a moment.

“More difficult, but at the end of the day, we’re adults. You know how much I appreciate what they’ve done for me and Penelope, but they would also want to see me happy.” Melanie shot me a questioning look. “They’d want that for you as well.”

“You’re twenty years older than I am.” Melanie was going to fight me at every turn.

“Melanie, you have been an old soul since I met you all those years ago. Your mom says the same thing all the time. I

think you're more mature than some women I've been with that are closer to my age." She winced, and I thought about her date. "They meant nothing to me. Not like you do."

We finished dinner as she switched the subject to something lighter, and I went with it. We didn't need to jump right into the deep end tonight, but there was something I needed to ask.

I helped carry the dishes to the sink with her, waiting until she cleared the table before I wrapped my hands around her hips in the kitchen as she stood at the sink. "Those can wait," I told her as she stilled. "Did you go on another date with that man, Melanie?"

"No. I didn't feel anything when I was with him, and he was a good guy. I can't stop thinking about you, Colton." She turned in my arms to face me and we stared at each other. "I don't know what we're trying to accomplish here."

I couldn't wait any longer. I cupped her face with my hands, leaning in to claim her mouth in a hungry kiss. All the pieces of the puzzle fell into place as she moaned, reaching out to grip my shirt. Melanie wasn't hesitating as she deepened the kiss and our tongues moved together at a frenzied pace.

I could taste the wine on her lips as I kept kissing her, unable to pull away. One hand slipped down, stroking her soft neck as I tilted my face to taste more of her. I could smell the mango as I breathed through my nose and moaned as she sucked my tongue into her mouth.

I slipped my hands down her body, cupping Melanie's ass as she wrapped her arms around my neck. Fuck, she felt good as we pressed closer together. Melanie moaned again, and I pulled away, taking a few deep breaths. I stared into her face and heated eyes, lifting her to set her on the counter.

"What are you doing?" Melanie gasped as I slid her forward, placing my body between her legs.

"Do you feel what you do to me?" I growled as I thrust my hard cock against her. As I kissed her lips, I cupped her breast as she groaned against my lips. I squeezed, touching her nipple

through the thin bra as she whimpered and deepened the kiss. As the kiss heated, I pinched her nipple as she arched closer to me.

I hadn't forgotten how she came for me the last time I was here and planned to thoroughly enjoy her body tonight. I ran my hands down to the hem of her shirt, tugging gently before she raised her arms into the air.

That was all I needed to strip it from her body, unclasping the bra that held those perfect tits. I cupped them, kissing Melanie again before moving my mouth down her neck. She pulled me closer, whimpering my name as I reached my destination and drew her right nipple into my mouth.

At this level, I could also tease her pussy and continued to thrust against her as I feasted on her incredible nipples. Her legs were wide open, and she let out a sound every time our bodies met.

"When you come this time, I'm going to lick every drop from that pussy," I told her as she gasped. I cupped her ass and jerked her forward so she'd feel everything as I nipped at her.

"Colton," she moaned as she gripped my head, pulling me closer. "Harder. I need more."

"Legs around my waist," I told her, and she complied. "Where is your room?"

"End of the hall," she panted as I lifted her and went down the only hallway I could see.

CHAPTER 14

Melanie

Colton's mouth against mine felt perfect as I lost any doubts I had about us. I'd gotten myself off too many times thinking about the night we were here together. Tonight, I wasn't going to stop anything. I needed all of him.

He carried me down the hall to my room, bursting through the door before pressing me up against the wall. Colton kissed me again, demanding and hard, and I knew my life would never be the same. He nipped at my jaw and neck, returning to my nipple as I cried out his name.

I closed my eyes and memorized the feeling of his tongue against me and his teeth dragging across my sensitive skin. I whimpered as he bit down, still thrusting against me with his big, hard cock.

Colton growled as he turned and carried me across the room and placed me on my bed.

"Take this off," I told him, tugging at his shirt.

"I want you to do it," Colton challenged me as I stood, unbuttoning it to reveal a perfect chest as I threw it to the floor. I leaned in to kiss his neck, then shoulder as Colton hissed. He had to be the sexiest man alive, and I slid my hands around his back, tracing every muscle.

"I want you," I told him as he kissed my hair.

"I'm yours, Melanie. I have been since our first kiss." I met his gaze and unbuttoned his pants, watching his eyes

darken.

“Bed. Now,” he barked, and I dropped to the mattress and stared at him. “Scoot back to the pillows. You’ll need to be comfortable for this.”

I moved, and he slipped the jeans down, leaving briefs on that left little to the imagination. Colton moved down and gripped the hem of my skirt to give it a good tug, and I lifted my hips as he stripped me bare. When the clothes were somewhere in the room, he spread my thighs open and looked at me in the dimming evening light.

“Fucking perfection,” he murmured as he reached out a hand to stroke my slick thigh. I moaned, jerking against him as my desire flooded my pussy. When he stroked my folds, I cried out and felt how close I was to coming for him.

There was no turning back now, but I couldn’t do that if I tried.

Colton found my clit easily and circled it as he stared at me. The pressure built inside of me as I cried out, and I lost all my inhibitions. “I’m so close,” I moaned as he slipped a finger inside of me and continued to stroke me. I felt like I was going to come out of my skin and raised my hands to my breasts, playing with my nipples as he cursed.

I tugged at my nipples as he curled his fingers and hit something magical, making me come with a loud cry.

“Fucking hell, Melanie.” He removed his finger and dropped so his mouth covered my pussy. I felt his hot breath as I whimpered again, thinking this was too much too fast. Sex had never felt like this for me, and I dropped my head back as his tongue slid through my wet folds. “So sweet. I could eat you like this all day.” He licked me everywhere, cleaning my first release but bringing me close to another.

His hands gripped my thighs as he feasted on me, teasing my swollen clit with his tongue before sliding it inside of me. I rocked forward, needing more as he leaned in to suck my needy nub between his lips as I screamed.

This was too much and not enough. I felt another orgasm building as he sucked and gently bit me, sliding a finger inside of me as I groaned. I gripped the comforter and prepared myself for the explosion as I closed my eyes.

“Look at me. I want to see your face as you come on my tongue,” Colton told me as our gazes locked. He kept sucking, kept biting, and I sucked in a breath. His finger moved faster, curling and touching every part of me as I came, struggling to keep my eyes open. He locked his mouth to my pussy, drinking me in as I watched in awe.

“It’s never felt like this before,” I whispered as he kept sucking, staring at me.

“It was never us.” He kissed my thigh as he pulled away, his mouth glistening with my release. “Can I keep going? I want to be inside of that perfection, Melanie. I need to claim you as mine.”

“Like I could tell you no,” I told him in a hoarse voice, wondering if I could come again.

Colton pushed back, getting on the floor before he brought something to the bed. I saw a strip of packets and pressed my lips together, realizing what was going to happen. He lowered the briefs and tossed them aside, staring at me as he stroked his cock. “This first time might be fast for me. I haven’t done this since our kiss and you’re going to feel amazing. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“You made me come three times so far, and I’ve done nothing for you,” I argued as Colton smiled and ripped open a packet. He sheathed himself and looked me over.

“You deserved every single one and there’s plenty more where that came from.” He leaned over me, sucking a nipple into his mouth for a moment before moving up to kiss me. I tasted myself on him and felt him slide inside of me as our tongues moved together. Colton moved slowly, giving me time to adjust to his size as he stretched me with every inch.

I could totally come again.

When he buried himself all the way, I let out a moan. I felt full, complete. Colton moved back, and I rocked against him, gasping as he filled me again. I wrapped my legs around him and held his face in my hands, kissing him as we found a perfect rhythm. This felt so easy and so right as our damp skin pressed together, bodies moving as he moaned my name.

“Fuck,” Colton cursed as he jerked, then stilled. I watched his face contort and sensed the power of the release and wondered if that’s what I looked like. He looked amazing as he lowered his mouth to mine, just touching our lips together as he recovered.

This was the perfect date. The perfect night. I felt a shiver wash over my skin as I held him close and closed my eyes.

“Like I said, fast. Do you feel okay, Melanie?” Colton asked as he slowly withdrew from inside of me.

“I feel amazing,” I admitted as he smiled crookedly, showing off some dimples I had never noticed. This was a unique smile, and I wondered if I was seeing a different side of Colton tonight apart from being in my bed with him. He kissed me again and looked into my eyes. “You’re so beautiful, Colton. It’s like I’m seeing you in a different light.”

“I just made love to you for the first time and you’re mine. It is different now, and it feels like perfection.” Colton knelt on the bed, removing the condom and knotting it before he walked to my bathroom.

Made love? Was that making love? It sure felt different from any sex I had before, and I suddenly felt insecure. Colton returned to me, naked and confident, as he moved beside me on the bed and pulled me against him.

“I am sleeping in this bed tonight and we’ll set an alarm for the morning, so we have time to do this in the morning. I’m up for round two if you give me some recovery time.” Colton kissed my hair. “To be twenty-five again sounds so good.”

“You look better than any man my age I’ve ever seen,” I countered as he chuckled.

“Good to know. Want some water from the fridge? I want to lock the house up,” he told me as I looked at him. Everything in my head morphed together, and I blinked as I nodded. He rose and walked naked through my house, and I heard him locking doors before he walked back in with waters in hand.

Did I make a mistake?

Colton handed me one and joined me once again on the bed, slipping the covers over us this time. I’d never slept with a man in this bed all night before and I looked at him in the light that came from the full moon rising in the sky. I wasn’t sure what to do, but I settled into him and took in the heat from his skin.

Colton was everything a man should be, and I kissed his chest as I breathed in the scent of us that filled the room. There was a big part of this that was still wrong, and I wasn’t sure what to think about the future.

I thought about his daughter and my dad as I closed my eyes and felt his arms wrap around me. Guilt flooded me, but I kept my breathing steady as he stroked my skin.

We made love again before falling asleep after kissing languidly for several minutes. I straddled him after he put on another condom, taking him inside of me as I groaned. Colton held onto my hips as I rode him with my head tilted forward and his other hand traced over a nipple as he sucked in his breath.

We came together, and I cried out his name as he growled mine, slumping over him. I was in deep but too tired to think about it as he pulled me against him before I passed out.

CHAPTER 15

Colton

I heard my phone chiming and reached over to shut the alarm off, blinking in the bright room. The scent of sex and mango filled the air, and I smiled as I looked over to see Melanie sleeping peacefully beside me.

I thought about last night as I watched her sleep for a few minutes, realizing I was happy waking up with Melanie. I slipped an arm around her as she shifted, moving against me.

“Morning, beautiful,” I told her softly, sounding hoarse from sleep.

“Colton?” she asked in a sleepy whisper as she backed against me, stilling when she felt my cock pressing against her.

“It’s a morning thing...and a you thing.” I assured her, sliding a hand over her bare stomach. As I smiled, I felt her nipple against me as I cupped her breast. I wanted to know every inch of Melanie’s body and I leaned in to kiss her neck. “I enjoy being here.”

“It’s weird. Last night really happened,” she murmured as I chuckled. I squeezed, and she moaned as I wondered if she could take me one more time before we faced reality.

Reality. A place where I couldn’t scream to the world that I made love to a beautiful woman last night, or reveal her identity. This needed to be a secret for a while until we figured all of this out, and I suspected she’d want to wait as I pulled her to her back.

“What are you doing?” Melanie asked as she looked at me. I leaned down and sucked a nipple into my mouth before stroking my fingers against her pussy, already finding her wet. “Oh, God. That’s what you’re doing.”

“We have a little time this morning and I’d like to see you come again. I’d even be up for being inside of you again before we need to get up,” I told her as a pink flush washed over her skin. Melanie arched her hips against me as I found her clit and circled it as she let out a moan.

I could wake up every morning to this sight and I let a breath out, knowing we weren’t there. Yet, or maybe ever.

I made her come with my hand and then told her to get on her knees before I slipped inside of her. Melanie rocked against me as I thrust, feeling the way she wrapped around me before we came together.

While we rested, Melanie glanced at me a few times. “What’s on your mind?” I asked her, as she frowned.

“I just feel like I need to pinch myself. Is this real?” she asked as I leaned in to press a chaste kiss to her lips. I suspected Melanie was not a girl to make out first thing in the morning because she worried about her breath.

“It’s so real.”

We got up, and I dressed in my wrinkled clothes while she prepared for a shower. I kissed her when I walked to the door to leave and made sure she locked the door, smiling as I walked to the car.

After I showered at home, I headed into the office and greeted everyone as I passed desks and doors. People seemed surprised, and I wondered what kind of boss I was with the reaction, shaking my head as I sat down at my desk and warmed up my computer.

“Good morning, Colton. Do you still have that meeting with the new client today for lunch?” Keith asked, as he stopped at my door.

I checked my calendar, feeling a little distracted. “Looks like it. Noon at Merlot’s,” I replied, as he nodded.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m great. Why do you ask?” I looked at him as he grinned.

“You seem a little happy and distracted this morning. Good night?” Keith asked, as I wondered what to say. I couldn’t just offer a little information to him, so I needed to keep everything to myself.

I wasn’t a kiss-and-tell kind of man to begin with, so that worked for me.

“I didn’t have my daughter last night, so I got some sleep and worked out this morning. It felt great.” The workout wasn’t a lie, but I wouldn’t go into detail about it.

“That’s good,” Keith said, and I nodded as I stood.

“I’m going to make a quick coffee before I get started.” I left my office and walked to the break room, using one of the coffee makers to fix something strong. I certainly didn’t sleep as much as I would have at home, but the workout happened. I hoped Keith didn’t think anything about the coffee.

What the fuck was I worried about? Everyone drank coffee in the morning, and he didn’t know anything about me other than what I offered. I was a nice person to my staff, but I didn’t overshare.

He was gone when I got back to my office, and I settled in to answer some emails for the morning. I got lost in work and kept thinking about Melanie throughout the day, wondering when I could see her again. That was something that could only happen when I didn’t have Penelope, because I spent every second I could with my daughter.

I also didn’t think that Melanie wanted to sleep together every night. That was a big jump from last night, but fuck if I wouldn’t enjoy it. We both worked long hours during the week so there wouldn’t be a normal for us.

I headed out for lunch and met my client at the little bistro, seeing him waiting by the podium.

“Mr. Ryan. It’s good to see you.” I shook his hand, hearing my name called from a few feet away. I glanced at the door to see Richard and Dana walking in with smiles on their faces. “Hey, you two. Out to play while Devin is at school?” I asked.

“Exactly,” Dana replied, and I made the introductions between the client and my friends as I felt the knot in my stomach. Could they tell what I had done last night?

I slept with their daughter, and I felt guilty as everyone made small talk for a few minutes. We separated when our tables were ready, and I returned to my job as I followed a server to a table with Mr. Ryan.

We talked about the hotel he wanted to build in several cities, starting in LA. It would give the well-known ones a run for their money with the amenities and that wasn’t easy to do. Everyone would benefit from this, and I invited him back to the office to draw up a plan that we agreed on.

The entire time at lunch, I forced myself to focus on what was happening at the table. Seeing Richard and Dana threw me off, and I worried they might see right through me and know what I did last night. I just waved to them when I left, but I knew I’d see them at some point. Things could get complicated fast.

Once the meeting ended, I leaned back in my chair and took a deep breath. Nobody knew anything. Nothing about me suggested I slept with Melanie last night, and I was just thinking too much about this.

Richard knew I had casually slept with women sometimes since the divorce. He didn’t judge me for it even though he was happily married and encouraged me to find someone and be happy with them.

Would he feel that way if the person were his daughter?

I closed my eyes and sipped the water I got when the meeting started in my office. I still needed to reach out to some contractors and get some prices, but I felt stressed, and I had doubts about Melanie.

Doubts. She felt incredible last night, and I wanted to stay up all night with her. Melanie was a woman that could decide for herself, and I didn't force her into anything. We were both very much there together.

By the time I left the office for the day, I knew this shit would be complicated. I hadn't reached out to Melanie all day since I was working, but I sent her a message from my car.

Colton: Did you have a good day? Want to have dinner tonight?

Melanie: I am still at the office, so I will take a rain check.

This was why I hated texting. I felt like she could've said more to me and didn't want to analyze her message.

Colton: Be safe, Melanie.

I drove home and fixed myself a steak for dinner, feeling more alone than normal. Of course, I left work hoping to see Melanie, but I knew this wouldn't be a daily thing at all. I also didn't want it to just be sex, and I sat down on my deck to eat with a cold beer.

For the first time in a long time, I wanted something more. I thought about the day at the beach that was so unplanned but perfect and the time we spent together. I got along with Melanie well and we didn't feel like we were that different in age to me.

What was so wrong about us?

Every evening, I hoped to see Melanie, but the woman worked a lot. She seemed to always be designing something whether at the office or at home, and I went to bed disappointed. I knew that this was why I kept things casual

and wondered if I should just keep doing that. It would be so much easier, but I knew I was developing feelings for Melanie.

Once I slept with her, I knew she'd become an addiction and knew I needed a night before Penelope came back for the week. I wanted no one to get in the way of that. I wouldn't let Melanie do it, but I needed to see her before then.

It was Friday that I got the message from her, well into the night.

Melanie: I can't do this. It was a mistake, Colton.

What the fuck?

CHAPTER 16

Melanie

It was a long week. By Friday, I was completely frazzled. I never knew how much I worked until I had someone that wanted to spend time with me, and it was too difficult to juggle.

That and the many other reasons I shouldn't be involved with Colton Briggs.

I felt like every bit of the twenty-five-year old I was when I sent a message to Colton telling him I couldn't do this anymore. I hoped we could just disappear back out of each other's lives and move on.

With any luck, there wouldn't be any more surprises with him involving my parents, but I should expect that. I knew what I was getting into when this thing started between us. If we cut all ties now, there was a good chance nobody would ever find out about this.

I tossed and turned all night, thankful I didn't have any obligations this weekend. I hadn't heard from Colton and hoped he'd just let this go. He'd have Penelope back this week, and that always kept him busy. I'd never step in the way of their close relationship and wished I hadn't spent time with them at all.

Penelope seemed to like me a lot and that could be a dangerous thing for us.

My parents asked me to come over for dinner on Sunday, and I worried about Colton being there with Penelope. Sure,

we could explain that she knew me from dinner the previous night over there, but she seemed to really bond with me at the beach. Kids her age had a way of just talking about everything, and why would I spend time at the beach with them?

Still, I had to accept the invitation because it was my mom.

I ran errands throughout the week and hung out with Jamie for dinner on Saturday night, declining her invitation to drink. I knew she'd just keep trying to tell me to go on that second date with Jack I had no interest in. She lived her life for fun and considered dating a part of that. She hadn't been serious about someone in several months, but I wasn't like that.

Jack wanted more from me than I could give him, and I'd never lead him on for a night out. I might not be able to have Colton, but that didn't mean I should transfer all those fucked up feelings to someone else.

Now that we had slept together, the emotional mess was a bigger pile than before. I'd never feel that again with anyone else, and I didn't know what to think about that.

Sex with an older man really was hot and I couldn't even tell my best friend about it.

Sunday, I picked up my mom's favorite fruit cake on the way over since she was making one of my favorite dishes for dinner. Chicken and dumplings was so good when she made it and something I missed not living at home.

I parked in the driveway and let out a sigh of relief when I didn't see Colton's car. Maybe I could just relax with my parents tonight and not deal with him two days after breaking things off.

My brother attacked me when I walked into the house, and I gave him a hug. "Hey. Devin. How are you?"

"We won our game today." He grinned, and I ruffled his tousled hair. "When are you going to come to a game?"

I walked into the kitchen and sighed. "I know, Devin. I suck as a big sister, don't I?" I asked him as my mom frowned at me.

“Don’t say that! You work so much, Mel,” she argued as I smiled gratefully at her.

“I do, but I could still go to a game sometimes. He’s going to be off to college before I know it.” Mom pressed her hand to her heart as I laughed.

“Don’t say it. He’s the last one at home.”

I helped her make a big salad to go with dinner, catching up on life around the house. I always had the same news and the only thing that changed was how many hours I worked the previous week.

“Anything new with Jack?” Mom asked as she looked hopefully at me.

“That ship sailed away into the night, Mom. When do I have time to date anyone?” I asked as I grabbed some tongs to toss everything together. I heard my father’s voice and froze when I watched him lead Colton and Penelope into the living room.

Oh, no. Colton raised his eyes and met my gaze, a scowl crossing his face.

“Look who I ran into running errands,” Dad said as Mom looked over with a smile.

“Hello, you two. Perfect timing. Dinner will be ready soon.” She went to hug them both, jumping out of the way when Penelope saw me. The little girl ran over, squealing my name as she wrapped her arms around my legs.

“Hey, you,” I greeted her, looking down as she offered a wide smile. “How are you?”

“I thought you might be at the beach again. I told Daddy to call you, but he said he couldn’t,” Penelope told me as I nodded.

“I was busy today and couldn’t be there. That was just by accident, Penelope. We had fun, though,” I told her as I felt my parent’s eyes on me.

“Beach?” Mom asked, looking between me and Colton.

“I went for a walk on the beach and ran into them. That’s all. We built a sandcastle.” I offered quickly, feeling Colton looking at me. When I glanced at him, his eyes were cold, and I looked away.

I knew he would hold this against me and wondered if this was for better or worse.

I helped Mom take everything to the table, pouring wine for both of us, while Dad got beer from the fridge for him and Colton. Mom gave Penelope and Devin some juice, and we settled in to eat as Penelope insisted on sitting beside me.

I enjoyed listening to her stories, but felt Colton’s icy gaze on me throughout dinner. It wasn’t so much that my parents might guess something was wrong, but so obvious to me. He blamed it on work and Dad accepted that, but Mom shot him a few worried looks.

The kids played outside after dinner and I watched them, sipping the last of my wine. Dad and Colton were in the living room talking shop, and Mom joined me outside with a fresh glass of wine.

“I love how well they get along,” she said, observing the soccer game happening below us. “Penelope seems to really like you, Mel.”

“You know how it is at that age. Every girl that’s a little older than you is so cool when all I did is build a sandcastle with her.” I laughed and set my empty glass down.

“Want some more?” Mom asked, and I shook my head.

“I have to get home.”

“I know Penelope has a good relationship with her mother, but sometimes I think Colton should date again. He’s got so much to offer a woman.” I stared forward, forcing myself to remain calm.

If only she knew how much he offered me. That could never get out.

We enjoyed dessert later, and I made an excuse that I forgot to do a load of laundry tonight before work, stepping

out early. I hugged my parents and Penelope, nodding to Colton with a small smile on my face before escaping to my car.

I wanted to beat my head on the steering wheel, but I just drove home. Colton looked so good tonight, and I wanted to call him and take everything back. My body craved him, and I'd never felt this way before.

I got ready for the next morning, feeling frustration flood my veins.

I worked extra hard the following week, keeping myself busy both at home and at the office. That was always an excellent distraction, and it sounded like I'd be returning to New York soon to work with Isabella.

Maybe a week or two in New York would do me some good.

On Thursday, I had a lunch meeting with a local client at a local bistro. I brought along my tablet to take notes on and so I could show her some examples of what she might like, looking forward to getting some fresh air.

I didn't spend enough time outside with how much I worked right now and even the evenings on the balcony were becoming an occasional treat. I almost looked forward to lunch and dressed in a cream pencil skirt with a soft pink blouse and nude heels.

Once I saw the client and we got our table, we both ordered water and I asked her what she wanted for her new kitchen. Talking about design always got me in a better mood and I pulled out the tablet to get started with Clair.

At least until Colton walked in with a gorgeous blond woman and sat across the courtyard from us, helping her into her seat with a warm smile. I stared at them, feeling a jealousy that made my heart hurt as he ordered something from the server.

"Melanie? Are you okay?" Clair asked as I blinked and forced my attention back to her.

“I’m fine. How would you feel about a soft gray for the countertops?”

CHAPTER 17

Colton

I saw Melanie across the restaurant once I sat down with Mrs. Collier for lunch to discuss a new restaurant with her husband, Michael. Her eyes locked on us and, being the asshole I was, I played up the act of helping the woman in her chair and getting our drinks ordered.

Jenna Collier meant nothing to me and just came to lunch since she was close by.

Melanie looked soft and lovely in a pencil skirt and blouse, dressed to the nines for what I assumed was a client meeting. She had a tablet out and used it often during the conversation, though less once she saw me enter the courtyard.

Penelope had been talking about her almost all week, asking if we could have her over for dinner so Penelope could show her some toy or another.

I regretted the beach now.

I had trouble focusing on the meeting even when Michael appeared, blowing my cover when he kissed his wife hello before sitting down. The words that Melanie sent me played through my mind on repeat and while I hadn't reached out to her to contest them, I didn't like it at all.

Women threw themselves at me and rarely walked away, telling me they were finished with me. After the night Melanie and I shared, I couldn't imagine how she could do that at all. There was a connection, and the sex was fucking incredible.

Sleeping with her in my arms and waking up with her was even better. I hadn't felt that way before, even when I was still together with Andrea.

I sensed Michael picking up on my distraction and damn near breathed a sigh of relief when Melanie left with her client, barely meeting my eyes before she disappeared.

Her ass looked incredible in that pencil skirt, and it took everything I had to look away. I could only picture her bent over on my bed as I fucked her good and hard.

I left the lunch with a new client, and he came back to sign a contract with me so I could start the design.

I finished the week and took Penelope back to the pizza place for dinner to relax and have some fun. When she asked if we could invite Melanie, I nearly snapped at her, but none of this was my daughter's fault.

"She's away for work, Pen. Melanie can't make it." In my world, I could pretend Melanie was away, and eventually, Penelope would stop talking about her.

"Does she travel a lot like you do?" Penelope pouted as we walked into the restaurant.

"Often, yes," I replied, thinking this was the last place someone without a kid might be. It was loud and chaotic and not the place for an easy meal with friends. We found a table and ordered food before playing some games as I kept an eye on the table to see when dinner arrived.

We stayed late and Penelope collapsed into bed when we got home, too tired to keep her eyes open. Since it was Saturday, I kissed her good night and went into the living room for a beer.

I took it out to the deck and sipped it in the lounge, listening to the sound of the water crashing against the sand. At least Melanie hadn't been here to give me memories of her. I kept my house a private place, only inviting good friends since this was the house I shared part time with my daughter.

Sex happened at hotels or the woman's home, and I never brought it here, but it felt like Melanie was all too present. I

hadn't stopped thinking about her and wondered what she was doing as I sipped my beer.

I knew I shouldn't bring her around Penelope so my daughter could get over that little attachment she had with Melanie, but I just wanted one more night in her bed. I wanted to be inside of her again and work her out of my system, if that was even possible.

I made pancakes for breakfast in the morning, and we had a lazy day on the beach below my house. Penelope would return to her mom's house tomorrow evening and I wanted as much time as I could get with my daughter.

Next week would be lonely. I found the house to be too quiet without Penelope here, but now that I'd been with Melanie, there was another option.

No, there wasn't. She ended things, and we weren't even speaking. It was better this way.

I dropped Penelope off the following night and returned home, drinking three beers on the deck before I tried to go to sleep.

I spent long hours at the office as usual when Penelope was gone and Keith stopped in my office on Wednesday.

"Are you sleeping on that couch this week?" he asked me as I glanced up at him. "You looked happy last week, and now it seems like you're burying yourself again. Is everything good?"

"That's the life of a CEO when his daughter is with her mom," I told him, leaning back and stretching my neck.

"It's what you make it. You don't have to be here this much," Keith assured me as I shrugged, feeling lifeless for a moment.

"It sounds like I'm going back to New York soon. They want me to look over the progress, but I'll try to rest there, Dad." I teased him as Keith chuckled.

"You need to. Was it a good weekend at least?"

“It was busy, but we had a good time,” I replied as I reached for my coffee.

Keith left when a client called, and I let out a sigh of relief. I didn’t want to make a new friend here and needed to run the business. My managers were a big help, but I needed to not tell them anything going on in my life.

Friday morning, I stopped in for coffee at a small place I enjoyed, seeing Melanie in line in front of me. She wore a pale green shift dress and heels, and I took her in as she moved aside to wait for her drink.

I reached the register in a couple of minutes and glanced over to see Melanie’s surprised face. She offered me a small smile, and I nodded at her before ordering. I made my way over to the waiting group and stood beside her.

“Can we call a truce?” Melanie asked in a small voice as I looked at her.

“Truce?”

“We’re going to have to see each other sometimes because of our connection. I’d like to make that be a little easier than it was last time.” Melanie told me as someone called her name.

“Have dinner with me tonight,” I told her as she looked at me with wide eyes. She went to get her coffee and waited for me to get mine before we walked onto the busy sidewalk. “We can run into each other again. I’ve never missed a woman like I do with you, Melanie.”

“So, we should start things up again? Is that a good idea?” Melanie asked me as she searched my face. “This has gotten complicated, Colton.”

“I still feel you wrapped around me, Melanie. I still see your face in my mind when I jack off.” She could only hear me as a pink flush washed over her cheeks. “Tell me you don’t think about it.”

“Penelope,” she murmured as I stared into her eyes.

“I don’t want this to have anything to do with her. She’s going to throw us under the bus if that happens.” I looked

down at her body for a moment. “Meet me for a hamburger at six. Same place as before.”

“Colton,” she groaned, looking around with a frown. “I don’t know.”

“Please,” I told her, putting everything into that one word.

“I’ll see you there.” Melanie offered me a small smile and turned to walk away as I let out a breath.

One more time was all I needed with Melanie. After that, I could let her go.

I rushed through the day and left work on time for a change. Keith gave me a nod as we walked out together, and I smiled as I told him to have a good weekend.

I walked into the restaurant and glanced around, seeing Melanie in a booth towards the back. She looked at me with a sexy flush to her cheeks and I strode across the room towards her, my eyes locked on her face.

We ordered burgers, fries, and shakes, and she leaned against the seat across from me.

“What does this mean?” Melanie asked, as I looked down at the table. “You’ve barely made eye contact with me the last few times I saw you and I get it. I took the easy way out, Colton. I just don’t know if we should see each other again.”

I looked at her, considering my answer. Could I walk away after another night together?

CHAPTER 18

Melanie

What the hell was I doing here?

I swore I was done with Colton. I ended things poorly, but I meant what I said. We shouldn't be here together or anywhere else alone. He was too much of a temptation and I didn't trust myself around him.

I twisted my hair around my finger as I waited for the drinks, feeling my hands shake.

"You're probably right that this shouldn't happen again, Melanie. I just can't stop thinking about you and we see each other everywhere. I just need to get you out of my system," Colton told me as I arched a brow.

"This isn't accidental."

"I know that, but at least we're talking." He shot back, running a hand through his hair as the server brought the chocolate shakes. "Christ. I eat horribly with you."

"You wanted to come here." I could see his struggle and watched as he looked at me for a long moment. "That was after dinner at my parent's house and the bistro where you were both awful. Did you want me to think you were with the blond?"

"Probably." Colton admitted as I laughed, shaking my head.

"What are we doing?" I asked as I stared at him, taking in his perfect face. "Nothing makes this right, Colton."

“I know.” He pounded a fist on the table as I jumped, shrinking back. “I just want to spend tonight with you, Melanie. That’s where this needs to start.”

“When does it end?” I asked, as our eyes locked.

We ate dinner, sharing long looks across the table. I knew I wanted Colton again, even though I fought it with all my heart. If I kept this up, I’d end up broken, but I knew how weak I was around him.

We agreed to go to my house again, even though I didn’t need another memory of him in my bed. Did I need one of me in his bed where he lived with Penelope?

That seemed worse to me.

I walked in and he followed me after driving over in his own car. Setting my keys down on my counter, I walked to my fridge for the bottle of wine. I took out a beer and handed it to him before pouring the biggest glass of wine I could.

As I closed my eyes, I let the liquid go down my throat.

I opened them to see Colton set the unopened beer down before walking over to me. He took the glass from my hand, setting it down before claiming my mouth in a hungry kiss. I moaned as his tongue slid over mine, reaching out to grip his button-up shirt.

Sirens screamed in my brain, but I gripped his shirt tighter as our kiss deepened. He pressed me into the counter, his cock hard against me as he slid one hand into my hair and the other over my hip. The man could kiss, and he had me lost in it as our mouths crashed together again.

“I smell this damn mango everywhere I fucking go,” Colton growled before he kissed my neck. His hand gripped my hair as I closed my eyes, leaning over to give him more of my skin. He nipped at me as I gasped, wanting his mouth everywhere on me.

Why did this happen with Colton? This could fuck everything up, but his mouth was all I could think about right now.

He found my mouth again, and I slid my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. Colton slid his hands down to my ass, squeezing tightly as I cried out. He lifted me and I wrapped my legs around him as my dress lifted, baring my thighs.

Colton took me to my room, and I slid to the floor, jerking his shirt from his pants as he unbuttoned it. He slipped his pants off after that and pulled my zipper down, telling me to get the dress off.

I let it drop to the floor and kicked it off with my heels, throwing myself into him as I kissed him again. Colton caught me and pulled me close before sliding his hands under my lace underwear to grip my bare ass.

We dropped to the bed, and I scooted up to the pillows as he followed, kissing my tingling lips hard as his hands wandered over my body. I felt his touch everywhere and cried out as he jerked the bra open, sucking a nipple into his mouth as his hand slid over my slick folds. A finger entered me, and I jerked, offering him all of me as his finger fucked me hard and deep.

Teeth dragged across my nipple, and I knew he'd leave marks, but I didn't care. I moaned as pain and pleasure washed over me, needing this more than anything.

Consequences be damned.

I came on his hand as I cried out his name, and Colton removed his finger, dragging it over my lips as I sucked it into my mouth.

He spread my thighs open and dove in, sucking my clit into his mouth. I rocked against him, throwing my head back as his mouth consumed me. My previous release still throbbed as he nipped and sucked, sending me towards another one as I gripped his hair. One of his hands slid up my stomach to cup my breast, tugging on my nipple as I cried out his name.

When I came on his tongue, Colton cleaned me up as I slumped against the mattress.

“What is this?” I asked as he lifted his face to look at me.

“This is lust. Need. Want. Call it whatever you want.” Colton told me in a resigned tone as he rested his head on my abdomen, breathing deeply. “I don’t know how to fucking live without it.”

After we rested in silence for a few minutes, Colton went to his wallet and pulled out a strip of condoms. He sheathed one over his cock and got back on the bed with me, looking over my body as I shivered.

He positioned himself before me, lifting one leg over his shoulder as he entered me. I groaned, feeling the way he stretched me open and filled me so completely.

It was too much. It wasn’t enough.

As he pulled my other leg up and pressed my foot against his chest, the angle changed, and I swore he went deeper. I whimpered as he kept moving, feeling my whole body come to life.

Before he came, Colton told me to get to my knees, and I rolled over clumsily. I moved up and grabbed a pillow to hold on to as he moved, slapping my ass with one hand.

“Fuck!” I cried out as arousal washed through me. He chuckled and did it again before grabbing my hips and slamming into me.

We came together, crying out as he jerked a few more times before collapsing beside me. I stretched out, needing it before I slumped to the mattress.

Was that angry sex? If so, I liked it. Nothing had ever felt that way before, and I closed my eyes as I took a deep breath.

Colton stood and went to the bathroom before leaving my bedroom. I wondered if he was leaving, but he came back, and I opened my eyes to see the drinks from earlier in his hands.

I turned and rested against my pillows, taking a few sips of the wine. Colton popped the beer open and drank half of it in one gulp before sitting down beside me.

“Are you okay?” he asked as I looked at him. “I feel like I ripped you open.”

“It felt like that, but I’m fine. I’ve never had sex like that.” He was resting against my pile of pillows. “I still feel it everywhere.”

“You should. I lost control of myself.” Colton admitted as I smiled at him.

“I’m not a glass doll, Colton. That felt amazing, and I enjoyed it.” I assured him as he looked at me. “You probably ruined sex for any other men for me.”

“I don’t even want to think about that,” he growled as he closed his eyes. He took another drink of beer and sighed. “I needed that, Melanie. I need it again tonight if you can handle it.”

“I’m pretty sure I can,” I chuckled, loving the idea. It made me wonder if he planned to spend the night and what that could mean. We still had a lot to think about. We couldn’t be together in the traditional way, and how long would that even last? Colton would find someone that was available that way and choose her because of what she might offer him.

Could my heart handle that? I was getting in deeper by being here with Colton and while it might be easy for him to walk away, I couldn’t say the same about myself right now.

CHAPTER 19

Colton

The second time I made love to Melanie, it was gentle. I lost myself in the feeling of her wrapped around me and her soft moans as she rocked with me.

Without her here in my arms, there was a void in my life that scared me. I hadn't felt that way about a woman in a long time and didn't understand why it happened with Melanie. She was so wrong for me, and we couldn't ever be anything past this bedroom. Penelope would never know her for who she really is.

I needed to think about my daughter in this, but there were other women I slept with she never knew about. A man has needs that don't involve the other aspects of his life and maybe that's all Melanie was to me.

Something told me it wasn't that simple, but once we came together, I held her in my arms again. Melanie fell asleep, and I watched her even breathing and peaceful expression for a while as I played back the night through my head.

I got another beer from the fridge, feeling keyed up from the sex. I made sure I locked everything before stepping out on her deck in my pants, taking in the view in the moonlight. It was like what I had from my house, and I appreciated the sound of the waves and wind as I took a long drink from my beer.

Melanie had a good life here, and I didn't know what part I played in it. We hadn't talked a lot about it since we both knew

there was no future. Her father would never accept this, and it would break a friendship I'd had for years. I didn't want Penelope to meet another woman and like her, only to lose her like she did her mother. My daughter already liked Melanie, and rightfully so. She was an incredible woman, but off limits to me.

Off limits to me in many ways.

I sighed and headed in to return to bed, pulling Melanie close to me. I'd figure this out later, but for now, I just wanted to hold this beautiful woman in my arms.

I woke up to the sun shining through the windows and an empty bed, looking around the spacious master bedroom. It was beautiful with soft green walls and cream bedding and decor around the room to bring both out.

It was also empty, and I looked at the open door. Did she leave me alone in her house?

After a minute, I smelled coffee and grinned. Melanie walked into the bedroom dressed in a robe with two cups in her hands and a smile on her face.

"I thought you might want some. We slept in until nine!" Melanie greeted me, handing me a cup. "Just sugar?"

"You pay attention," I told her, taking a sip as she moved to open the sliding glass door.

"I have a table out here if you'd like to sit outside with me."

I took another sip and rose, pulling on my pants and joining her at a bistro table. The balcony itself was in the shade but offered the same great view and I took it all in. "This looks like my beach. Do you ever go down?"

"Sometimes for a walk. Not often enough though with as much as I work. It's part of the reason I bought this place and I never use it. That's sad." Melanie shook her head and sipped her coffee.

"Why did you go to the beach that Sunday?" I asked her as she glanced at me.

“I wanted to walk and think but be around people. Does that make sense?” she asked, and I nodded. “You were there with Penelope, so I assume you guys like that, too.”

“That was more of us going out to lunch and being nearby, but yes. She enjoys watching people. I always keep beach stuff in the car,” I admitted as she smiled. “It’s a great way to spend the day, and that one was a genuine surprise for me.”

“She’s a great girl, and I don’t want to get in the way of your relationship,” Melanie said as she focused on the view again.

“I won’t let anyone in that way with my daughter, Melanie.” My tone grew cool, and she frowned. “Yes, she likes you, but Penelope will never know you as more. I won’t let anyone hurt her.”

“I’d never want to do that,” she assured me in a soft voice, hunching over. “I just like being around her when it happens. What happened to you?”

I blinked and realized I just sounded like a real asshole. My thoughts were catching up to me, and the confusion of what this was set in right along with them.

“Jesus. I’m protective of her and the way she connected with you worried me. Since we’re doing this, I don’t want her to get attached and I’m going to work hard to keep the two separate.” I waved a hand between us in the air. “I know there will be times where we’re in the same place, but it will never be as a couple.”

“Point taken.” Melanie’s voice shook, and I glanced at her. “So, we’ll just have a night when she’s not with you and leave it at that?”

“What more can it be? Are you going to tell your dad about us?” I asked her as she looked at me. “He’d fucking kill me, Melanie. I can’t stop thinking they’re going to just stop by and catch me here.”

“I go over there more than they have ever been here. They know my work schedule and family dinners are more our thing,” Melanie told me and I nodded, feeling a little better.

There would be no way to explain this away if they caught me here.

“Did your mom help you with this house?” I asked, and she smiled slightly.

“Yes. She helped me pick it out, and we decorated together. She was so proud of me and wanted to be a part of things. Since then, I go over there more. My best friend comes over sometimes, but she’s more into going out.” Melanie looked around. “I feel like this is my office as much as the real one is.”

“I understand that. I feel like I’m always working on something.” I agreed, thinking about my long nights at the office. I worked at home sometimes, but once I was at my desk at work, I just stayed there until I couldn’t keep my eyes open anymore if the house was empty. “I have a nice couch in my office for a reason.”

A phone rang inside the bedroom and we both listened intently.

“Mine.” Melanie stood and walked inside as I took a deep breath. I heard her talking to someone, making plans for tonight as I realized this ended today. At least, for now. Was that best after the vibes I’d been giving her? The walls were going back up around my heart since meeting Melanie. When she agreed to meet someone at a popular bar at nine, I felt jealousy flood me.

What the fuck?

Melanie came back out and resumed drinking coffee as I looked at her. “I can cook us some breakfast if you’re hungry. I have plans tonight, so I’ll have to cut this short today.”

“Going to Tides?” I asked in a bitter voice, as she arched a brow at me.

“Yes. I’m getting drinks with my best friend tonight. Is there a problem?” she asked, and I knew we were headed towards another tense conversation.

“Fuck. I should just leave. I feel like we’re going to go round and round today with this.” I set the cup down and

stood, heading inside to get dressed to leave. I had no right to feel jealous after telling her she'd never have an actual part in my life, but I didn't want Melanie to meet anybody else.

How fucked up was that?

Once I dressed, Melanie still hadn't come inside. I walked to her front door, checking to see that I could lock it before I walked out with my stuff in my pockets.

This was for the best. At least, that's what I told myself as I started my car. We'd end up fighting if I stayed and I didn't want it to go that far. Sex should stay casual and then life goes back to normal, whatever the fuck that had become since I saw Melanie again.

I drove out of the driveway, watching as the gate closed behind me and wondering if it was the last time I'd be there. A part of me knew that was best for both of us, but not sure if it was what I really wanted.

CHAPTER 20

Melanie

I felt a tear slide down my cheek as I realized I was alone. What was happening?

We spent an incredible night together, and I had the kind of sex I'd only read about, but Colton just walked out on me. There was a tension there between us that was palpable, but I didn't want it to end like that.

This needed to be over. I could sleep with someone else and get off, but I knew that nobody would make me feel like Colton did. Maybe I should go out tonight and have some extra drinks and just get involved with someone else.

Whatever was happening between us wouldn't end up going anywhere. We couldn't be an intricate part of each other's lives and never would. What was the point of continuing this?

I finished my coffee and walked back to my bedroom, seeing the messy bed as I paused. Another fucking memory here.

After locking the deadbolt on the front door, I walked to the kitchen to rinse the cups and cooked myself breakfast. This is how it should be, and I did some work through the afternoon before getting ready for the night out with Jamie.

I showered and dressed in a tight black dress that Jamie made me buy for these kinds of nights months ago. I curled my hair into loose ringlets and applied dark eye makeup to

make the green in my eyes pop, glossing my lips with a nude color.

I was a twenty-five-year-old woman that should enjoy myself, not worrying about my dad's best friend. I needed to be with men closer to my age that were fun and more available.

Men like Jack, who I'd turned away.

I slipped my feet into black heels and went into the garage to leave. I wondered if I should take an Uber if I drank too much, but that was always an option later. Chances were that I wouldn't and make it home just fine way too early for someone my age.

When I got to the bar, I handed my keys to the valet and headed inside to look for Jamie and Becca, a girl that hung around us frequently. She was kind and funny and I knew I could use something like that tonight. I saw them at a table as Jamie waved and smiled as I made my way through the crowd, feeling eyes on me as I passed.

"Hi!" I greeted them with hugs before taking my seat at the table by the window that looked to the outdoor portion of the bar. "How are you?"

"Great. We ordered a Cosmo for you." Becca gestured to the drink, and I smiled as I looked at it.

"Perfect. Thank you." I sipped it, letting the sweet liquid slide down my throat as I remembered the way Colton had when he filled my mouth last night.

Fuck.

"I'm so glad you came out tonight." Jamie reached over to squeeze my hand, and I grinned at her, forcing the thoughts of Colton out of my head.

"I can't work all the time. I spent so many hours at the office and in my home office this week...I need a break!" I told Jamie, as she chuckled. "I'm going to go back to New York in a couple of weeks for a while to see Isabella, so I need to have fun now."

“Again?” Jamie whined as I smiled at her.

“You should come for a weekend, and we can hit some bars there. How fun would that be?” I asked her as she stared thoughtfully at me.

“How long do you think you’ll be there?” Jamie pressed, and I thought about Isabella’s large kitchen.

“I think two weeks. Kitchen renos take a while.” In a way, I looked forward to the space where I could sort this all out.

“Maybe we can make that happen. What do you think, Becca?” Jamie asked, excitement in her voice as she looked at the blond with a smile.

“That sounds amazing to me,” Becca agreed, holding up her drink for a toast. We clinked glasses, laughing before I took another sip.

“I can get another suite, so there’s room. I like them anyway for long trips,” I told them, realizing I’d need to find a different place. I couldn’t stand being in the same hotel after everything with Colton and made a mental note to find a different one.

We drank and caught up throughout the night as Jamie flirted with various men in the room. I wasn’t there yet and couldn’t stop thinking about Colton. Would it be best to just leave this alone and see each other if we had to? That could feel normal in time, but I shared so much with him.

The room became more crowded the later it got, and music pumped loudly through the speakers as my second drink caught up to me. Jamie grabbed our hands and dragged us to the small dance floor, and I giggled as I moved to the beat of the popular song.

I didn’t dance enough. It had always been a favorite thing of mine to do, but I worked so much and focused on that aspect of my life. What if I really concentrated on taking weekends off and doing this more? It would thrill Jamie and I might relax a little more.

Jamie started talking to a group of guys around our age who joined us, each one of them dancing with one of us after

Jamie picked out her victim. Mine was a good-looking brunette with chocolate eyes and a cute smile. He introduced himself as Darren, and I replied in kind, wishing I could like him. He just made sense for a girl like me, just like Jack did, and I cursed Colton for coming back into my life as I grinned at something Darren said over the music as an automatic response.

We all went to get another drink, and I decided this would be my last one. I'd drink water the rest of the night and dance and feel great when the bar closed. There was no need to get home early tonight.

Darren kept up a steady conversation, and I found out he was a local graphic designer. We had a lot in common and chatted about it as we danced, and I drank water. He was a nice guy, and I knew I'd have fun if we went out, but my heart wasn't into it.

I wanted Colton, and I needed to get over that, so I didn't end up hurting someone else.

"Darren is totally into you. You should go out with him." Jamie told me as we went to the bathroom together. "I already have plans with Jim tomorrow night."

"He's nice, but I don't know, Jamie."

"It's a date, Mel. Dinner and a movie. Whatever. You're not marrying the guy, but you could end up getting a happy ending out of the deal," she told me, giggling as we walked into the small room.

I wished I could tell her about last night. She already thought Colton was hot, and that would send her over the edge. I wondered if Jamie had ever experienced that, but knowing her, she had. She'd always been experimental.

Normal women would give Darren a chance, and I needed to find my way back to that. Even Becca seemed to connect with the third guy, Wade. We could all go out together down the line and that could be fun. I'd never be able to make those plans with Colton, and I felt a pain in my heart at the thought of him. Damn it. He needed to get out of my head.

We finished the night and walked out together, and I was completely sober at that point. Sober and tired. Darren asked me for my number, and I gave it to him with a smile, wondering if it would ever go anywhere. I got into my car and headed home, seeing lights behind me as I frowned. There was traffic in LA at this time of night, but my suspicions rose as I made my way to my neighborhood.

When I pulled into the gate, I saw Colton's car parked behind me at the sidewalk across the street and let out a sigh of relief. I didn't want to think about why he followed me, but he remained there until I was inside, continuing down the road. I didn't see him at Tides, but even if he was there, I didn't do anything wrong.

The following day, Mom called to chat and mentioned that Dad wanted to set up Colton with a woman he knew from work, killing me inside. I couldn't ever tell her my feelings about it and agreed that he needed to settle back down at some point. Penelope could use a woman in her life when she stayed with him.

I agreed to dinner that night, wondering how the hell I could act happy about that in person. I didn't know if he'd be there, but either way, it would be hard to fake a smile during that conversation.

CHAPTER 21

Colton

On Wednesday of the next week, I was at lunch with Richard. I hadn't seen Melanie since following her home from Tides like a total stalker. I just wanted to make sure she got there okay and went on home after she was in her neighborhood.

"We have a new manager at the office. I think you'd like, Colton. Her name is Grace, and she's just a couple of years younger than you, with a ten-year-old daughter," Richard said after we ordered. I frowned at him.

"Where did this come from?" I asked, sipping my water as I composed myself.

"I just think you should get back out there at some point. Penelope would love for you to have someone in your life, I think. She took to Melanie easily enough after seeing her just a few times." He smiled, and I knew he was right, but the mention of his daughter got my heart racing. I couldn't get the night we spent together out of my head, but he'd never understand that. "Grace is warm and witty. You'd have a good time with her."

"I work a lot and have Penelope," I reminded him as Richard nodded.

"She shares custody like you do. The same weeks, as a matter of fact. You two could hang out when you're both free." Richard looked at me. "She's pretty, Colton. She's no

Dana, but she has blond hair and brown eyes. Successful at her job and she's going to make an excellent manager for me."

On paper, this woman sounded great. But she wasn't Melanie, and I hated that for me. How would I tell my best friend that?

"Give me her number and I'll call her. Feel things out." I told him as he reached into his suit pocket for his wallet. Richard extracted a card, and I saw it was her business card. He must have been planning this for a while, but could I blame him? As far as anyone in my life knew, I was single.

Fuck. I was single. I walked away from Melanie, and we hadn't spoken. Based on what I saw at Tides last weekend, she was moving on like we both needed to do. Dating a woman with a kid that Penelope might get along with didn't sound awful in theory.

"Thanks." I tucked the card into my wallet and sipped my water again, letting the cold liquid slide down my throat. "Maybe I'll give it a go."

"I love that you focus so much on Penelope. It's a sign of a good dad but you need a life for yourself as well, Colton. I'm not saying that you should get married and all of that again, but dating wouldn't hurt," Richard suggested, and I knew he was right. "I can't even imagine being out in that world."

"You got spoiled early," I teased him, thinking how Melanie was a lot like her mom.

"Damn right, I did." He agreed as they placed our entrees on the table. We talked business for the rest of the day as I thought about Melanie. Was I ready to just walk away from her?

As I went back to my office, I considered dating someone. Would it be so awful to go out to dinner and get to know a woman my best friend recommended to me? There would be boundaries as far as our children went and I could ease into things.

It wouldn't be a terrible idea.

This was my week with Penelope, and I left work early every day to spend time with her. She'd forgotten about Melanie at this point, and I hoped it stayed that way for my sanity. I already had a hard enough time not wondering how she was without reminders.

We ate dinner out on the deck every night we were home and even spent some time at the beach before it got dark. I tried to tell myself that this was enough for me, but at night, after Penelope fell asleep, I felt a void. I wasn't sure if Melanie was part of that or just having someone in my life. I hadn't given anyone else a chance.

Over the weekend, I took Penelope out to keep busy. She was an active girl, and I loved that about her. When Richard invited us to dinner before I had to drop her off at Andrea's, I had to consider my answer. Melanie would likely be there, and it could set this cycle up all over again.

I could also just try to ease into something normal where I could see her and feel fine going home alone. Either way, it had to be done because we had a connection we couldn't break. I accepted and told Penelope as I had her pack her bag early.

"Will Melanie be there?" Penelope asked, as her eyes lit up.

"I don't know, but probably. I know Devin is looking forward to seeing you." She put her favorite stuffed animal into her backpack.

"That's true. I like playing soccer with him. Can I get a net for our yard?" she asked, and I nodded.

"I could sign you up for soccer, too. Want me to talk to your mom about it?" I asked her, as she nodded with a happy smile.

We headed over that evening and I let out a sigh when I saw Melanie's car in the driveway. Penelope ran to the door and as Dana opened it, she headed into the house, calling out for Melanie and Devin.

“I guess she’s excited,” Dana told me, hugging me once I was at the door. “How are you?”

“Doing well. How are you?” I asked as we walked through the living room to the kitchen. I didn’t see Melanie, but I didn’t say anything as Richard grabbed us beers from the fridge.

“Richard. Thanks for the invitation. I take it Penelope is already out back?” I asked, taking it with a smile.

“Sure is. I barely saw more than a blur as she went out there.” He laughed, and I sipped my beer, enjoying the taste. “Did you two have a good week?”

“We did. I spent a lot of time with her just hanging out. It gets better as they grow up, though I miss my little girl every day,” I admitted as Dana nodded with a serious expression.

“Just wait until she moves out for college. I’m trying to slow that process down with Devin,” she told me as I wondered again where Melanie was.

“Don’t even say that.” I warned her as she chuckled, stirring something in a pot.

“I think this is ready. Can you call the kids in, honey?” she asked Richard, as she carried a pot to the sink.

He opened the door to announce dinner, and I asked if I could help her with anything. I carried a large platter of spaghetti and meatballs to the table, and she followed with garlic bread as I heard laughter in the kitchen.

Melanie and the kids came into the room carrying their drinks and I looked at her with her hair in pigtails. Melanie was sweating and obviously had been playing with the kids, teasing Penelope about a goal she scored before she looked at me.

I saw her on her bed in front of me, taking my cock. I heard her scream my name as she came and blinked, pushing the memory away.

“Hi, Colton. How are you?” She offered me a friendly smile, but nothing more.

“I’m great. Yourself?” I asked, taking on a civil tone as we passed the food around.

“The usual. You know how it is,” Melanie replied lightly, spooning some pasta onto her plate before passing it to me. She looked good in fitted leggings and a loose long-sleeved shirt, and I forced my eyes away from her.

We made small talk, and the kids talked more than any of us, as I shared looks with Melanie a few times. I wanted to tell her I didn’t want her to go out with the guy from the bar. Richard hadn’t mentioned Grace, and I felt relieved since I didn’t want to go out with her. Not yet. There was something sad about Melanie’s eyes that made me wonder if she knew about it already, since she spoke to her mom regularly.

When did this get so complicated?

We finished dinner, and the kids continued their game as I talked about rec soccer with Richard. Devin played several sports and had for years, and Richard recommended a great coach to me as I watched Melanie block the goal, laughing as she slid on the grass.

Her ass looked excellent in those pants.

Fuck. I turned my attention to my daughter, watching her handle the ball with some skill.

We had dessert, and I headed out to get Penelope to her mom’s house before bedtime, meeting Melanie’s eyes as I left the kitchen with my daughter in tow.

I saw the need in her eyes as I wondered what to do once I dropped my daughter off.

CHAPTER 22

Melanie

I drove home from dinner at my parent's house feeling unsettled. The kids wore me out, but I had a great time with them. I felt like I could go right to bed and struggled to get ready for the following morning.

Seeing Colton hurt after the way we left things. Neither of us had reached out, and I knew we were trying to do the right thing and just let this fade away.

He didn't say anything about a few weeks ago when he followed me home from the bar, and I didn't know if he went on the blind date my father wanted to set up for Colton. In fact, part of the reason I played soccer with the kids was to avoid Colton, so I wouldn't have to deal with that.

I went to work with my coffee, though it didn't appeal to me as much as usual. It just smelled bitter, and I sipped it, wrinkling my nose as I set it on the desk. Maybe I should switch to tea for the day. I yawned as I warmed up my computer and Lauren stopped in my doorway.

"Are you good, Melanie?" she asked with concern on her face.

"Yeah, yeah. Just Monday." I smiled, feeling slightly nauseous. I didn't do anything too hardcore to warrant this, but I might be coming down with something. I went into my emails, sending something back to Isabella about my return trip.

From there, I went on a search for a new suite to call home for a couple of weeks and purchased tickets for the flight. I found a hotel in the same area that offered everything my old one did and reserved a suite in case my friends made it. I hadn't hung out this weekend since I felt a little tired and wanted to catch up on sleep.

I checked in with local clients throughout the day, sipping some tea as I worked. I never drank it, but today, I appreciated the milder taste. Mom came by for lunch to surprise me and we went to a little sandwich place.

I ordered a small sandwich and fruit plate, taking a big drink of my lemonade.

"What are you doing here?" I asked her as she sipped her water.

"Just a little shopping. We haven't had lunch for a while and even though I saw you last night, I never mind doing it again. How's work? You look tired." Mom looked closely at me, and I wondered how bad I looked today.

"Just tired, but it's Monday, and those kids ran me ragged last night." I admitted as she nodded. "I don't know where they get their energy."

"It's a mystery," Mom sighed with a smile. We ate and chatted about random stuff, and I choked down enough to not make her worry about me, though the fruit was better than the sandwich.

I talked to Jamie later that week and told her how I'd been feeling, and she went quiet on the other end.

"You're nauseous and tired?" she asked me as I frowned, resting on my couch.

"Yeah. Isn't there a flu going around?" I asked, closing my eyes.

"You never get sick. I think you've been sick once since I met you. Have you been eating?" Jamie asked me as I thought back to my attempt at meals.

“A little, but not a lot. I also haven’t wanted coffee, which equals death for me.” I joked as she gasped on the other end of the line. “What?”

“You’ve been holding out on me, haven’t you?” Jamie demanded, as I frowned.

“What are you talking about?”

“That sounds a lot like pregnancy symptoms to me. Who have you been sleeping with?” Jamie asked, as my heart sank into my stomach. She had a point, but I thought back to the times I’d been with Colton. We always used condoms, but I suppose nothing was perfect. “Mel!”

“I don’t think it’s that.” I protested weakly as reality set in. What if it was? Fuck.

“I am coming over and you’re going to be honest with me. What sounds good? I’ll bring dinner.”

We sat down with Thai food, which tasted exceptionally well.

“So, spill. I see it all over your face.” Jamie said once I’d eaten a few bites. “Who is he? Jack?”

I wasn’t ready for this at all. I’d been lying to her for weeks and for the truth to come out like this broke my heart. Jamie was also kind enough to bring some pregnancy tests, telling me I was taking them after dinner.

“No, not Jack. Things never got that far,” I told her, sipping my water that would help me take the test with a scowl on my face. “God. I didn’t want anyone to know about this.” I took a deep breath and looked at her. “Do you remember Colton? He’s my dad’s friend that was at the restaurant that day we had lunch.”

“Holy. Shit. You slept with him?” Jamie asked, as her mouth hung open. “When?”

“We ran into each other in New York and things started there, but we didn’t have sex until a few weeks ago here. Like here at my house. We were careful, though. How could I get pregnant?” I asked, as she shook her head in disbelief.

“I can’t believe you hid that from me,” she muttered as she sipped her wine. I watched her, wishing for my own bottle at this point. “Pills don’t always work, and condoms break. It sucks because we try so hard to take precautions, but shit happens. Oh, God. What will you do?”

“I don’t know! I’m going to New York next week for work, so I guess I’ll have plenty of time to think about it.” I snapped, feeling my stomach twist. “This can’t be happening.”

“You’re going to eat what you can and drink some more water. Then you’ll take a test, and we’ll know what you’re dealing with.” Jamie snapped her fingers as I stared at her. “No freaking out until we have a reason. Deal?”

“Sure.” I grumbled, looking at my noodles with distaste for a moment. There’s no way I’m pregnant. That would fuck everything up and I couldn’t hide it. I knew I wasn’t the kind of person to terminate a pregnancy, but to go through with it could break my entire foundation in half.

I ate a few more bites and finished a glass of water before Jamie guided us to my hallway bathroom. She opened the boxes and probably would have watched me pee if I let her, but I kicked her out of the room.

I did two of the tests and set them on the counter, staring at them as though it might speed up this hellish process. I imagined if they were positive and telling my parents the news. Would I hide who the father was and just make up some casual guy?

No. I wasn’t a casual girl, and they knew that better than anyone.

Maybe it wouldn’t be positive, and I wouldn’t have to worry about it. I liked that idea so much better.

I walked out of the bathroom and into the living room since I had a few minutes and looked at Jamie. She looked back, offering me a supportive smile.

“We’ve got this, Mel. I am here for you, no matter what.”

“I’ll need you when my family disowns me.” As I sat on the couch, I was sad.

“Will he be part of the baby’s life if they’re positive? Were you guys dating?” she asked as I ran a hand through my hair.

“I can’t see him ignoring it, but we weren’t dating. It was more than sex, but we never labeled it. Every time we were together in the end, there was so much tension between us. I think he’d support the baby, and I’d never keep him away from the baby. I just think my parents would hate both of us for the rest of our lives.” I sighed and tried to picture my cloudy future. I saw his daughter in my mind and groaned. She’d be a great big sister.

“You’re both adults.” Jamie reminded me as I looked at her. “There’s nothing truly wrong with this and after seeing him in person, I think it’s kind of hot.”

“Tell my dad that,” I said, as she sighed.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t difficult to navigate. It is. After they think about it, everything will calm down and be okay. You guys will adjust to this.” Jamie sounded so strong, and I needed some of that for myself.

My watch vibrated, and I jumped before remembering I had set a timer on it. I stood up and Jamie followed suit, taking my hand as we walked to the bathroom. Every step seemed to take forever, and I swallowed the lump in my throat as I walked in the door and gazed down at the counter.

Here goes nothing.

Pregnant.

CHAPTER 23

Colton

I didn't see Melanie for a few days and didn't reach out to her.

I also didn't call Grace because the idea of dating another woman sounded awful.

I worked hard while Penelope was gone and slept for a few hours, if I made it home at all. I missed Melanie and thought about calling her a few times, but she seemed intent on keeping things casual between us when I saw her at dinner. She was kind enough not to draw attention to herself, but I could see that she just wanted to get through the evening.

I went to Richard's for dinner the following weekend with Penelope, but Melanie wasn't there.

Dana said she was getting ready to fly back to New York for a couple of weeks and that's why she didn't come over. That was a legit reason, but I saw the concern in Dana's eyes even as she smiled through the meal.

Richard brought up Grace, and I wanted to snap at him and demand to know if Melanie was fine. Instead, I told him I'd be heading to New York soon myself the week I didn't have Penelope. It was true, but I didn't have a strict timeline with it. I just needed to meet with the team and see how things were going.

I reserved a room at The Pierre for the first time since I couldn't stomach the thought of the other hotel. It reminded me too much of Melanie and I needed new scenery. I forced

the name of the hotel out of my head for that reason. I also booked a flight, thinking it would be a different one than Melanie chose with the timing.

I did plan on reaching out to her to make sure everything was fine. We didn't need to see each other, but something told me to worry about her right now. Hearing her voice would help ease my concern, and I set up meetings in the city for when I would be there.

My week with Penelope moved fast, as it usually did, and I felt like I dropped her off the day after I picked her up. Time with my daughter could never be enough for me, but I knew I had to get to New York for work, and hopefully, to connect with Melanie. I decided on a night flight again and had a car take me to the airport at ten o'clock that night, figuring I could sleep on the way.

There was only one other man on the flight near me and I settled back in my first-class seat to relax with a whiskey in my hand. I'd felt on edge for days now, and I knew I missed Melanie.

I slept for a few hours in the air. I needed it after a long day with Penelope and an early meeting in the city with time for a nap at the hotel if everything went smoothly. I planned just a meeting in Grant's office for the first day so I could catch up on rest and settle in for the week.

When the plane landed, I woke up and looked around. I must have been tired, and I stretched as the plane headed towards the building. I got my things together and grabbed my suitcase before finding a cab to the hotel. The streets were just getting crowded, and I thought about the two hours I had before the meeting.

Coffee might be a better plan since I'd slept on the plane. I also skipped eating entirely so I could grab some breakfast at the hotel and get a good start to my day. I thanked the cabbie and stepped onto the curb, looking into the large lobby.

The building was spectacular. Everything was neutral in here but classy, and I checked in easily. Someone was already

on the way up to my suite with my luggage and I checked the envelope in my hand before I entered the elevator.

My suite was on the fifteenth floor, and I walked in, seeing that it also had a neutral theme. It looked comfortable, and I knew I'd have a pleasant stay here as I tipped the man who brought my stuff.

From there, I picked a bedroom and changed into a fresh suit after a quick shower to wash the plane off. I had time to grab a quick breakfast and headed to the restaurant in the hotel, sipping coffee as I tried to organize my brain.

The energy hit me as soon as I stepped outside. People were everywhere and voices filled the air, along with the sound of honking horns. Everything felt alive here, and I caught a cab to Grant's office, shaking off my distractions as I entered the elevator in his building.

"Good morning, Colton. I'm glad you could come back. Everything is looking fantastic." Grant stood and shook my hand as I smiled, accepting his offer of coffee before I sat down.

He showed me the progress on an iPad, though we'd go there in person in a couple of days. It looked good, and I checked out the powerful lines of the building as I turned it around on the screen.

"I have a design team ready to step in once everything is in. Someone local who came highly recommended. They're known for an edgier design, which suits that part of the city." Grant told me as I looked up with interest. Would it be Melanie's company?

"I have a friend that's a designer, but she's from LA. She travels sometimes for jobs," I mentioned as I kept looking at the screen. "That looks incredible. You're going to do well. I can't wait to see it in person."

We ended the meeting and planned to make a trip in the morning on Wednesday before I headed out for the day. I felt a little tired, but I debated on giving Melanie a call to see where she was right now.

I went to the suite and changed into something more casual before I did anything. If I ended up walking around the city, it would be a hell of a lot more comfortable in jeans and my Converse. I headed into the lobby and approached the elevator, ready to press the button when it opened.

Melanie stepped out, looking at her phone as she walked forward. She glanced up and paled when she saw me.

“Colton. You’re staying here?” she asked as our eyes locked. Something rushed through her eyes, but I didn’t know what and I stepped aside, gesturing for her to do the same.

“I am. What a coincidence,” I said, as she gave me a solemn look. “How long are you here for?”

“The rest of the week,” she replied and looked around with a nervous gaze. “I have to meet with a client, Colton.”

“If that’s true, then go. We need to talk, Melanie. Can I call you later?” I asked her as she nibbled on her full lower lip, making me hard.

“Yes. I’ll be busy all afternoon.” Something about her seemed different, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. I looked her over and nodded, stepping back so Melanie could walk away. I watched her, taking in her ass in the black slacks she wore.

I went up to the room, deciding to sleep for a while. If I saw Melanie later, I needed to be alert to figure out what was going on with her. I wanted to get her to have dinner with me, but I knew that was pushing it.

I slept for a while and got a hold of the office back home to check in on things. They were busy there, and I liked to keep on top of everything, even though I trusted my staff.

When I finished that, I paced the room and looked out of the window a few times. The view of the park was lovely and if I wasn’t so caught up in my thoughts, I’d want to go take a walk out there.

I considered bringing Penelope here in the summer and showing her around the city. She came with me when she was around five, but it would be a different experience now for her.

An image of being here with Melanie and Penelope together flashed through my mind and I blinked, knowing that could never happen. Didn't I tell her they'd never be a part of each other's life the last morning I saw her like a complete asshole?

I'd go back and change all of that if I'd known I'd feel this way now. There might not be a way to fix us, but we needed to be on some good level again. Something just felt off with us the last time we were together, and it might have been the sex or just something emotional going on between us. I knew I was in deep with Melanie, but I needed her in my life in some form.

I just wasn't sure if it could be as casual as sex anymore, but was I willing to risk everything for her?

CHAPTER 24

Melanie

I finished the day with Isabella with a tired smile. It had been one of the longest days of my life knowing that Colton was here and wanted to see me. I didn't think I looked different at this point, but what if he could tell something had changed?

"I'll see you tomorrow. Have a great evening," I told my client before I walked to the curb, looking for a cab. I couldn't decide if I was more tired than hungry at this point and let out a long yawn.

I got a car and considered grabbing something to eat near the hotel, worrying about Colton's call. Should I tell him now about the baby? If I waited, I might be showing, and he was a smart man. He could do the math.

There was always the story about a casual fling that didn't want anything to do with the baby but based on how much his daughter looked like Colton, his genes appeared to be strong.

This was such a fucking mess.

My phone rang as I stepped out of the cab back to the hotel, and I looked down to see Colton's name flashing on the screen. I sighed and got this over with.

"Hey, Colton," I said as I moved out of the way of the surrounding crowd.

"Melanie. Are you still working?" he asked as I frowned.

“No. I just got back to the hotel.” I looked out at the darkness and realized how wrapped up I got in Isabella’s kitchen, wondering how the hell I’d be able to do this further into the pregnancy.

“You weren’t kidding when you said how much you worked, were you?” He muttered as I smiled. “Have you eaten yet?”

“I haven’t. I was just thinking about that.” I admitted slowly, not ready for a meal with Colton.

“Let me come down and meet you. We can grab something and catch up.”

“Okay. I’ll wait here.” After the call, I put my phone in my purse. I’d gotten better about eating since learning I was pregnant. Once the shock started wearing off, I realized that the worst part about it was the discomfort of slight nausea. I still didn’t like coffee, but had grown to appreciate tea.

I had an appointment back home when I returned, and I’d get to see my baby for the first time. Excitement and anxiety both flooded me every time I thought about it and telling Colton about the baby meant he might want to be a part of things.

Would he want to go to the appointment?

I was lost in thought when I heard my name and looked up to see Colton.

“Melanie? Where were you?” he asked as he looked around. “You’re on a street in a busy city.”

“Of course. I was just thinking about work.” I lied as he arched a brow at me.

“What sounds good?”

“There’s a pizza place around the corner.” I suggested, feeling my stomach growl. “Does that sound good?”

“New York City pizza always sounds good.” Colton assured me, offering me his arm. I sighed before taking it and we walked with the crowd the two blocks to the restaurant, getting seated immediately.

“How are you? How is Penelope?” I asked politely, trying not to think of the little girl as a big sister.

“Both are good. I miss her, but it’s Andrea’s week, anyway. We talk every evening,” Colton told me as I smiled and nodded. “How are you?”

“I’m good. I’ve been busy working and then this trip came up. Since I’m just working with the one client, I feel like I get more rest here sometimes.” I saw the server approach us and asked for lemonade while he chose soda. I’d been drinking water all day and peeing regularly to prove it. “When did you get here?”

“I just arrived this morning. We were a week apart this time, though I took the late flight again.” Colton smiled, and I nodded.

“I took a morning flight this time around. The night one sounded too long, though I guess there’s no difference, right?” God, we sucked at talking now. “Did you get to sleep this time?”

“I didn’t have a beautiful blond distracting me this time. I didn’t have anything else to do.” Our eyes locked for a long moment and I reached for my drink as the server set it down, asking if we were ready to order.

We agreed on all meat pizza with some salads and were alone again.

“I feel like I should apologize for the last time we saw each other. I was a dick to you,” he said, and I pressed my lips together.

“It was tense, Colton. It’s okay. We were just confused about things, but now that we’re friends, things are better.” I assured him as anger crossed his face.

“Friends. Have you let this go that easily? I guess you moved on with the guy from the bar?” he demanded as my eyes widened.

“You were there? That’s why you followed me!”

“I wanted to make sure you got home safely. I wasn’t sure how much you had to drink there.” Colton defended himself as I closed my eyes. “I wasn’t there for a long time. I just wanted to see you, but I left you alone, Melanie.”

This was the father of my baby, and he was acting like a stalker. Fabulous.

“I never went out with Darren from the club, just so you know. Did you ever have your blind date?” I asked, as he let out a resigned sigh.

“No. Your father has been asking, but I don’t want to go out with anyone. I feel like we have unfinished business.” Colton confessed as I considered the truth of his words.

Would telling him in a public place be the best way to deal with this? He’d be less likely to freak out and have some time to think about it. We’d also be here all week and be able to deal with this on our own.

“I’ve been worried about you. I can’t put my finger on it, but when you skipped dinner with your parents, something kicked in,” he told me as I remembered that night. I had my flight the following morning, but I didn’t want to see anybody.

“The night before I left. I was rushing around getting ready.” He nodded and searched my face. I was too nervous to see my parents and feared my mom would see right through me. She knew me so well and I didn’t know what I planned to do when I got home.

I’d decided to keep the baby no matter what. I’d do this alone if I had to, since I had the means to do it financially.

“Have you let this go?” I blinked at Colton as he stared at me.

“I don’t see how we can be together, Colton. There’s still so much against us.” He sighed.

“I can’t stop thinking about you. I’ve tried, Melanie.”

The pregnancy might be the perfect way to get him over me.

“I have something I need to tell you, Colton. If this does anything, running might be the first thing you do.” I heard the words slip out of my throat and he frowned at me. “I found out I’m pregnant about a week ago.”

“Pregnant.” A range of emotions passed through his eyes, and I watched them, identifying each one. None of them were a look of happiness, and I reached for my lemonade. “It’s mine? We were careful.”

“Do you think I’m the kind of girl who would sleep with someone else while I am with you? Come on, Colton.” I scoffed as he held up his hands.

“I had to ask. How far along are you?” he asked as I shrugged.

“I have an appointment when I get home, but I’m guessing a few weeks. Everything is fine. I felt off in the beginning, but it’s tolerable now,” I explained as he nodded, shock on his face.

“You traveled in that condition?” Colton asked with a dark look in his eyes.

“Yes. It’s okay since it’s so new and I’ll listen to the doctor about that as I get further along. My job requires travel,” I reminded him, as his jaw clenched. “You’re going to go caveman on me, aren’t you?”

“I want you to take care of the both of you.” Colton looked up as the server brought our food. “Eat something.”

“That won’t be an issue,” I assured him, taking one salad and stabbing the lettuce with the fork.

“I wore condoms every time with you. How do you think this happened?” he asked as I chewed.

“They break. I don’t know. I probably should have been on birth control, but I hadn’t been involved with anyone for a while. Either way, it’s too late.” I sighed and reality washed over me. “I don’t know what to do. My dad is going to hate me and want to murder you. I don’t expect you to be a part of our lives, Colton. I’m fine with taking care of a baby. I just

hope Mom doesn't disown me and that she's there to help me."

I'd cried about this countless nights. I didn't think it would happen, but it was scary to think about.

"You're not alone. I'm here for you and we'll figure this out together." Colton promised me as I looked at him.

"You're in?"

CHAPTER 25

Colton

The news ricocheted through my brain as I tried to make sense of it. Melanie was pregnant with my baby.

It wasn't good news and more fucked up than I thought it could ever get. I'd always used condoms, and they never failed me before, since we planned Penelope when I thought I was in a happy marriage.

Still, I pictured Penelope as a big sister to someone and having a family again.

I imagined the look on my best friend's face and how quick that friendship might end when he found out I knocked up his much younger daughter. It wasn't wrong on a legal level at all, but it wasn't going to be fine for a long time.

I watched as Melanie ate her salad, still sniffing about her mom. I suspected Dana would go to any length to be with her daughter when she was pregnant and then a mother. Even Richard would love the baby once the idea rolled around in his head for a while.

I had the means to give Melanie and the baby anything they could ever want, just like I did with Penelope. There was an interest in getting to know my second child, though I didn't know what capacity that might be in. I just knew I'd never leave her alone in this and doubted that anybody else would.

She had an appetite, and I smiled as Melanie took a bite of pizza.

“I guess you’re eating fine?” I asked, forking some of the lettuce from my salad.

“At first, I didn’t want to eat too much. I can’t drink coffee anymore, which is probably best, but I’ve grown to love herbal tea.” She took another bite and sighed happily. When she swallowed, she looked shyly at me. “Now I plan to tear this town up and eat anywhere I can. I already started last week.”

“Jesus. You’re here alone and pregnant?” She rolled her eyes, and I groaned.

“I am a big girl and travel a lot. I am usually in bed early every night since my energy level has dropped significantly.” Melanie smiled, looking beautiful as I memorized her face. “You don’t have to worry.”

“Deep down, I know that, but fuck. I’m going to worry,” I told her as Melanie tilted her head at me.

“You seem to be handling this well, so I’ll keep you up to date on everything that happens. Are you okay with it?” she asked, looking at me with open curiosity.

“I’m stunned and I don’t know how to feel. Not completely. But I’m going to remain here for you, and we’ll figure all of this out.”

“I understand. I’ve had time to let it simmer.” She reached for another slice of pizza and took a bite.

We finished eating and boxed the rest up for her before walking back to the hotel. It was less crowded on the streets, but I felt happier with her on my arm than too far away, and I knew I’d drive Melanie crazy with my behavior. I felt overprotective when I cared for someone, and the fact she was pregnant compounded that.

She was on a different floor than I was in the hotel, and I walked her to her door, looking down at her.

“I don’t expect to get together or anything because of this. I don’t want you to feel obligated, Colton.” She looked at me and I sighed.

“It wouldn’t be an obligation, Melanie. We’re having a baby,” I told her as I cupped her face.

“Take some time to think this over. It’s a lot between my family and Penelope. I can’t imagine how this will make her feel.” Melanie looked sad for a moment. “She’s had you all to yourself for so long.”

I kissed her forehead, giving in since I didn’t want to fight in the hallway. What I’d really like to do is go inside that room with her and hold her while she sleeps, knowing that Melanie is carrying my baby. I’d like to make love to her slowly, making her come for me as I watched her.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I told her with a smile. “Get in there and lock the door.”

I watched as she walked in, and the door closed before making my way to the elevator. It played over and over as I blindly went to my room and let myself in. Melanie was pregnant, but she didn’t want to be together.

She thought I’d feel obligated. I hadn’t stopped thinking about her since I left her house that last morning, hating myself for what I had said to her.

Telling everyone would be a fucking nightmare. I had her family to worry about, let alone how to tell Penelope. Devin was already like a nephew to me and having a baby with his sister sounded so twisted in my mind.

I changed into shorts and settled on my bed to catch up on some scores. My mind kept wandering, and I sighed as I leaned my head back against the pillows. I still had a job to do here, and I needed to fucking focus and not obsess about Melanie’s every step in this city.

I slept fitfully, tossing and turning, until the sun woke me up. I didn’t have any meetings today, so I stayed in bed, knowing Melanie would be working. She made it clear she didn’t need me hovering over her and I had to trust that she’d let me know anything important.

Andrea had been more than happy to let me fuss over her and take care of everything, but Melanie was a different

woman.

I finally got hungry and took a quick shower before heading down to find something to eat. I sent a message to Melanie, and she assured me she ate before work and felt great. We agreed to meet for dinner if she was up to it, but I knew I'd been friend zoned.

With both of us working, I didn't get to see a lot of Melanie. We had two meals together, but otherwise, she'd be at work or too tired to go anywhere. Melanie joked that her room service bill might be higher than the cost of the room itself but told me I wasn't paying for it. I paid for the lunch and dinner we shared.

At the end of the week, I felt good about the project. The building was incredible, and Grant hired a great team to build it. They would be done early, and we made loose plans for me to visit again later on Friday over lunch.

I would fly back tomorrow so I'd be there to pick up Penelope, but Melanie told me she wasn't going home until Monday. Apparently, kitchens took forever to renovate, and her client really likes her.

At least the client was feeding Melanie, and she looked healthy. I needed to rein it in with my control issues.

I walked Melanie to her room after dinner, and she looked at me.

"You will not be a worried wreck all weekend, right?" Melanie asked as I rolled my eyes.

"No. But you need to promise to take care of yourself and the baby." I looked down at her stomach and smiled.

"I will. I have been since I found out." She smiled at me, and I leaned in to press my lips to hers. I'd been holding back all week, and it almost killed me. I didn't just want to share a baby with Melanie.

She moaned and touched my shirt, pulling me closer. I pushed her gently against the door and cupped her face as I deepened the kiss, groaning against her mouth. Melanie was

different in every way for me. I never felt this way about my ex-wife when she was pregnant.

I felt her moving her hand and pulled away to see her turning to slide the key over the door. It opened, and she pulled me inside, walking to the bed. There, I kissed her again, and we moved to the mattress, and I slid my body between her legs.

I moved my mouth from her swollen lips to her jaw and then her neck. Melanie moaned with all of it, and I looked down at her floral blouse.

“This needs to be off. Everything needs to be,” I told her as she looked at me and nodded. We moved to where we could strip our clothes off, and then I told her to relax against the pillows before diving between her thighs. I teased her with my fingers before tasting her sweet desire, teasing her clit with my tongue.

“You taste so fucking good.” I groaned before I went for more, gripping her thighs with my hands. When she came, I felt it flood my mouth as she cried out my name, jerking against me.

As I looked at her, I crawled over her body and positioned myself.

“I’m clean and you’re already pregnant. I haven’t been with anyone else since we started,” I told her. Melanie nodded.

“Fuck me, Colton.” I let out a sigh of relief and entered her, feeling her wet heat everywhere. With nothing covering me, I felt her every surface as she gripped me and knew that I’d lose control soon. “Oh, God. I have thought about this so much. My hormones are out of control.”

I fucked her harder, needing this after the time apart. I knew it wouldn’t magically put us back together, and we still had a mess to fix, but it was something. It was the beginning of something new.

CHAPTER 26

Melanie

I spent Saturday at Isabella's house, monitoring the installation of the new kitchen cabinets. Colton flew home this morning, and after our night together, I needed some space. My attraction to him was only stronger with the pregnancy, but there was still so much to think about.

When I got back on Monday, I'd need to sit down and talk with him about all of this. We also had our appointment to go to and find out more about the baby. From stories from pregnant friends, I knew many people waited until the twelve-week mark to tell anybody. That was a good thing to stick to for us, so we didn't get everyone worked up and then have something terrible happen.

I didn't want that, but I was a realistic person and needed to look at everything from all angles. I knew what a shit storm this was going to start and putting it off wasn't a bad idea for anyone involved. I just hoped that Mom wouldn't pick up on it the way she always had with me.

"That looks great. I love the granite with the backsplash," I told Isabella as she grinned at the progress. "Now, you will get the new appliances and it'll be done. Aren't you excited?"

"I cannot wait to cook in here again, but you're leaving before I can feed you properly." Isabella smoothed my ponytail, and I smiled at her. She knew about the pregnancy since she'd seen some of my rougher mornings, but swore she'd keep it a secret.

“You have fed me very well the last two weeks, Isabella.” I laughed as the guys stood back to check their work. “I don’t know what to do when I get back home.”

“That man of yours will take care of you.” She assured me as I sighed. I told her everything because I couldn’t hold it in any longer and I trusted this quirky lady.

“We’ll see. He’d like to lock me up and never let me see the light of day again is what he’d like to do,” I muttered as she laughed. “I mean, I’m sure they will limit later traveling, but right now? I’ve got this.”

I actually felt sick for a lot of the flight and hated it, but I’d never tell Colton that. I soothed myself with a lot of juice. Once I felt better, I added a couple of cookies. I might do the same thing on Monday when I went home.

Home. I dreaded being there dealing with all this reality. There were so many secrets right now that couldn’t stay hidden, and people would get hurt. I could only hope that it all came back together for the sake of my baby.

“Well, now that this is done, let’s go have lunch at that Thai place one more time before you go home,” Isabella told me as I smiled.

“Now you’re speaking my language.” Food was something I could comfort myself with, and this baby seemed to like everything.

Sunday was the last day of the reno as far as my role, and I left it to the team after that. I did pop in one more time to spend some time with Isabella and have lunch at the Indian place I fell in love with, but Monday morning, I would head back home after being away for over two weeks in New York.

I boarded the plane and settled into my seat, looking forward to a nap. Colton had messaged me this morning to check in and see how I was, and I assured him I’d be back in LA soon. I still wasn’t sure what to think about the fact we slept together in New York or what it meant. Telling him about the baby out of the blue that way fueled some hormones and emotions, so I could blame it on that.

I smiled at the flight attendant and asked for some juice to settle my stomach as I relaxed. Two weeks in New York and I felt so much further along than when I left California. I even thought I was showing some days, but that probably wasn't true. I'd know everything in a few days about this baby, and Colton would be by my side.

I closed my eyes and thought about the appointment and where to go from there. I wanted to break the news as late as possible and avoid the bomb, but I didn't know how long that was. I didn't even know how long Colton wanted to wait, but of course, he'd be stronger than I was about this.

I didn't want to rip my dad's heart out and stomp on it. He trusted me and Colton and probably never thought twice about anything ever happening between us. Having a baby together probably wasn't anywhere on his radar, and they were so close that I didn't know what to expect. Penelope was another issue completely and she might be thrilled with the news or hate the fact she'll have to share her dad. It wasn't like we were announcing we were getting married and going to be a family in the same breath.

There had been a lot of difficulties with Colton, and mainly, it was our situation. I knew we both felt the push and pull with each other. Now that we had this connection, I knew it would never end. He'd always be my baby's father, and we'd need to get along for that reason. I'd never keep the baby away from their family and hoped we could co-parent together as well as he did with Andrea.

Once we were in the air, I snuggled under a blanket and took a nap. Since seeing Colton in New York, I hadn't slept as well. It was unexpected and put me into a mindset I wasn't sure I felt ready for. I didn't know when I planned to tell him about the baby, but suddenly he was there, and I just told him.

Jamie had been in my ear the whole trip and told me telling him was a good thing. He wasn't going to abandon me now, and I reminded her he might want more than I did. She laughed at me when I told her we slept together again, telling me that was bound to happen. He was hot and she wouldn't have turned him down, so why should I?

I blinked as a voice filled my head and looked around. We must be landing soon, and I looked out of the window to see that we were still high up and stretched. A woman walked by and told me we had about another forty-five minutes left of the flight and offered to get me anything I needed.

The last part of my flight was where I got two cookies and some water. I didn't really give anyone my exact itinerary, but there were always cabs waiting at the airport. I'd get home fine and be able to take a nap in my bed today. God, I missed it, even though the hotel was lovely this time around.

What I didn't expect to see at the airport was Mom waving when she saw me. I froze when I looked behind her to see Colton entering through the door. He almost missed a step as he narrowed his eyes at me. It was then that he saw Mom and his eyes widened as he darted back out of the door.

"Mom. What are you doing here?" I asked as I hugged her.

"I heard you were coming home today and wanted to see you. I know you might be exhausted and just go straight home, but if you're hungry, we could grab some lunch." She offered, as I almost groaned. It had been a long two weeks and had taken a lot out of me and going to sleep sounded amazing. She was already here though, and looking to spend time together, so I shoved the urge to sleep away.

"I guess I could eat. I slept a bunch on the plane." We went to get my suitcase and took it to her Discovery, loading it into the back. Mom chatted about the last few weeks as we drove, telling me that Devin was at school, so she had some time to spend with me. I had no idea what happened to Colton, but hoped he left the airport as soon as possible.

"What sounds good?" Mom asked me as I glanced at her. "For lunch?"

"Oh. Burgers?" I asked, and she nodded, turning right down a street. We had a favorite place we enjoyed going to since I was young and I saw us taking my child there later in life, seeing a little boy that looked a lot like his dad in the image in my head. A boy from Colton would be a handful, but we could also raise him to be the best he could be in life.

I almost choked up at the thought and glanced at Mom as she made her way through the parking lot. She knew me well, and I needed to get my emotions under control. We walked inside the restaurant and found a table. I sipped my water as I read the menu.

“So, it went well with the client?” Mom asked, and I nodded with a smile.

“Isabella is great. We’re more like friends at this point. She took me out to eat every chance she got.” I giggled at the memory of all the lunches and then wondered if Colton told them he was in New York as well. “I hope to see the finished apartment once it’s all completed.”

“You look tired. Are you sure all this traveling is good for you?” Mom asked, looking me over with a shrewd gaze. “Two weeks away is a long trip and hotels aren’t like being home.”

“At least I was in New York for two weeks where I could eat the best food.” I smiled, and she nodded in agreement. I made it home without her asking me anything strange and thanked her, telling Mom I’d be there for dinner next Sunday.

Could I keep this up?

CHAPTER 27

Colton

I hadn't been thinking straight since I got home from New York. The news of the pregnancy threw me, and I struggled to focus on Penelope after I picked her up from her mom's house. She always got in the car telling me every detail of everything she did while she was gone and asked me to do the same thing when I took trips. I always explained to her that trips were for work and not for fun, but she still asked for details of where I'd been.

I worried about telling her about the baby but also pictured her excited to be a big sister and willing to help with a baby. Penelope was old enough to be a big help now and she might love the idea. She already liked Melanie and she might envision Melanie as a cool mom to hang out and have fun with.

I took her out to dinner to stay busy on Sunday night and get her to bed faster so I could relax and obsess about my future in peace. It's all I'd done since Melanie told me the news. I didn't think I'd have a second child, and it wasn't in my plans. I could handle it and take care of a baby in every way needed, especially with my feelings for the mom. When I went to the airport to pick her up and saw Dana there, I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I could have made some excuse for why I was there, but panic was my first thought.

Would she know there was something different about her daughter? I'd heard stories of moms knowing their daughters were pregnant before the new mom did and Dana and Melanie

were close. That's part of what killed me so much to break the news to her and Richard. It would change everything.

I called Melanie on Monday evening to see how the ride home had been and she seemed grateful that her mom hadn't said anything to her other than she looked tired. That was reasonable after a two-week trip newly pregnant, and I still felt angry that she did that. So much could go wrong. Melanie planned to go to bed early and go into the office the next day as I raised my voice again.

"Hey. I've been working for a long time, and can handle it. That will not stop when I have this baby, Colton. Calm down. I'm going to be careful, and I'll see you on Wednesday at the doctor's office." I knew where it was and what time, but Melanie insisted on meeting me there since she planned to come from work. She was going to be a pain in my ass through this and so much different from how Andrea had been.

We ended the call, not talking about my last night there and what it meant. I had a feeling that Melanie would avoid that as long as she could. It did further complicate things, but we needed to figure out what we were to each other. We could really make something of this and be a family, but I sighed and leaned back on my bed.

I needed to give her time to find her way through this.

"You seem testy. Is everything okay?" Keith asked me after a meeting on Tuesday through zoom with a client. I'd gotten snappy twice, which was unlike me, with a client.

"Fine. It's just been a busy week since I got back. I'm not sleeping great and it's catching up to me," I replied, thinking about how much I tossed and turned at night now.

"Maybe take a little time off to relax. You know we can handle things." He suggested, and I shrugged. I was already not working tomorrow for what I had on the calendar as a client meeting and fuck knows how I'd feel after that. I already wanted to ask the doctor every single question I could think of about what Melanie should or shouldn't be doing.

I also wanted to know that the baby and Melanie were okay.

“I might go home after the meeting tomorrow. I think you’ll be fine the rest of the day, right?” When I made eye contact with him, he nodded. I wouldn’t be in any frame of mind to return to work, no matter what the doctor told me.

Wednesday dragged, and I left in a hurry to make the appointment. The office building was modern, and I looked around as I located where it was I planned to meet Melanie. When I found the waiting room, she was there typing something on her phone. I looked her over in her black slacks and a green blouse, wondering when she’d swell from my baby.

I sat down beside her, and Melanie jumped.

“You scared me,” she chided me as I looked at her with a smile. “Did you find it okay?”

“Yes. Where did you hear about this place?” I asked, looking at the front reception area and around the yellow room.

“My health insurance recommended her as one of the best.” Melanie assured me as I looked at her. “I haven’t exactly shared the news with anyone other than Jamie and she wouldn’t know a good baby doctor.”

“You told her?” I asked as Melanie arched a brow at me.

“She’s the one that told me to take the test and she was there for me. Don’t worry. I trust Jamie and you don’t even know her,” Melanie told me as I thought about the bar. Jamie had been one of those girls trying to get Melanie hooked up with someone. Someone called her name, and we stood and walked through the door where Melanie was weighed and checked out before they led us to a spacious office done in a pale green color.

She settled on the bed and a woman about my age walked in with a smile on her face. “I’m Dr. Kinsley. You must be Melanie.” She shook hands with Melanie and then glanced at me. “Are you the father?”

“I am,” I replied in a gruff voice as Melanie grimaced.

“Let’s get started.” The doctor went over Melanie’s last period and determined her to be around nine weeks pregnant, which she would confirm with an ultrasound to see how the baby was doing. When Melanie lowered her pants and revealed her flat stomach, the doctor put the gel on her skin and used the device I remembered from Andrea’s pregnancy. “Hear that sound? It’s the heartbeat, and it sounds wonderful. That’s your baby there, though it looks more like a peanut at this stage. I think that nine weeks is accurate based on what I’m seeing, and everything looks good.” She smiled at us, and Melanie kept staring at the screen as a tear slid down her cheek. “I am going to print some pictures out for you, and we’ll set up some appointments. You look great, Melanie.”

I looked at her, feeling a little choked up myself at the baby. I’d been so proud when I saw Penelope for the first time, but this felt as emotional, if not more so. A part of me didn’t care what anybody thought about it, and I helped Melanie up once she fixed her clothing. The doctor set up some appointments, and I asked her if there was anything Melanie should avoid or be careful of and she handed us a folder that would explain a lot and a card in case we had questions.

We left the office and Melanie took a deep breath. “I can’t believe I have a baby growing inside of me. It’s so small.”

“I know. You’re going to love seeing the progress.” I assured her as we walked outside. “Where are you?”

“I’m over there,” Melanie said, looking at me for a moment. “I was going to pick up some lunch and read through all this stuff. Want to join me?”

“I’ll get some sandwiches and meet you at your place?” I asked, and she nodded. “Drive safe.”

We settled at her table with the food, and each read the papers describing various things about a healthy pregnancy. It all sounded relatively easy, but I read a few things closer as Melanie watched me.

“You’re going to be incredibly protective of this baby, aren’t you?” she asked as I glanced at her. “And me?”

“Fuck, yes. You’re carrying precious cargo.” I growled as she laughed. “When do you want to announce it?”

“I was thinking twelve weeks since that’s the end of the first trimester and a common point to get to for many people before they say anything. That gives us three weeks to prepare and decide how to do this.” She suggested as I frowned.

“The doctor said that everything looked good, Melanie.” I reminded her as she gave me wide eyes.

“I know. It’s just a kind of rule of thumb and it gives us time,” she replied, and I nodded.

“Okay. We’ll figure it out before that.” We finished the food, and she yawned as I cleaned up. “You’re off work for the day?” Melanie glanced up from the ultrasound pictures and nodded.

“Yeah. I figured I’d take a nap. I knew today would be emotional,” she replied as she set the pictures aside. When she stood, I pulled her into my arms for a hug as she pressed into me. Melanie kissed me this time, and I slid a hand into her hair as she moaned.

CHAPTER 28

Melanie

I moaned Colton's name as his tongue dragged over my pussy, hating myself for letting this happen again. I wasn't clearing up anything by ending up in bed with him, but my body craved him so fucking much.

I came and cried out his name, feeling him lick me clean before kissing his way up my body. He spread my legs with his knees, leaning down to take a sensitive nipple into his mouth as I whimpered. Colton teased me with his mouth and teeth, and I almost came just from that before he slid inside of me, filling me perfectly.

He moved slowly, making me think he was concerned about the baby even though the doctor said sex was safe. I wrapped my body around him, grateful I still could at this point, and pulled him in deeper.

"Colton," I moaned as he kept moving, burying his face in my neck as I groaned. "Oh. God."

"Come for me, Mel. I want to feel you on my cock." He told me as I arched into him, feeling him graze over me. I let out a cry and came again, feeling him slide into me before jerking and filling me. "You feel so damn good."

"So do you," I told him, watching as he rolled beside me.

"Can't we make something of this? We're having a baby, Melanie," Colton said with an edge to his voice. "I want to be there for you."

“I don’t know, Colton. We’re still sneaking around until we tell anyone assuming nobody guesses, and you have Penelope to think about,” I replied, feeling my head throb. “It’s enough to get through my days right now.” I reached for my sheet, pulling it over my body.

“But you’ll fuck me when you’re horny?” he challenged as I looked at him.

“I didn’t drag you back here kicking and screaming,” I replied, feeling tears in my eyes.

Push and pull.

“I can’t do this shit with you, Melanie. You want all of me or you don’t. I want to be here for you and the baby, especially after today.”

“I don’t want a relationship with you right now, Colton. I’m sorry, but this is a lot to deal with, anyway. When we have to tell people about this baby, everything will change,” I told him, hearing my voice rise.

“That’s why we need to stick together. Do you think your dad will respect me for knocking you up but not being with you through the pregnancy?” He sat up and stared at me. “I’m a better man than that, Melanie.”

“We can do that without being together. We don’t know how Penelope will take this and she might need you. She’s already going to be sharing you with a baby.” I yelled as his face set in a scowl.

“I need to get out of here.” He dressed, and I watched him from the bed. “I’ll be in touch.” Colton walked out of my room, and I heard my front door slam as I closed my eyes. I walked to the door to lock it and returned to bed, hating the smell of Colton and sex that filled the room. Why couldn’t I resist him?

I woke up a few hours later and looked around. The sun was still out, and I assumed it was late afternoon at this point as I yawned. I searched the room for my phone and realized

that I left everything in the dining room when I lost my mind and kissed Colton.

I went to the bathroom and pulled on my robe to go back in there. I grabbed a bottle of water and sat down to look at my phone, seeing that Jamie and my mom had called me while I was asleep.

Nothing from Colton, but that was probably a good thing.

I called Mom back and lied about being with a client and then coming home and falling asleep on the couch. When I ended the call, I cried because I wanted to tell her about the appointment. I called Jamie instead and told her everything that had happened.

“That man wants you, Melanie. Has he told you he loves you?” Jamie asked me as I gasped.

“No. It’s nothing like that. I’m just pregnant and want sex every second of the day, and he’s good at it.” I shot back, not even willing to think about this being love. “It’s too complicated to be anything close to love.”

“Love happens when you least expect it, Mel,” Jamie told me as I cursed the fact that she’d become sentimental on me.

“I just want to get through the next few weeks and figure out where to go from there without Colton in my bed.” I assured her as she chuckled.

“You keep telling yourself that.”

Mom invited me for dinner on Sunday and I accepted, knowing that she missed me when I was gone. I hoped Colton wasn’t going to be there, but he hadn’t mentioned it in any of his messages. Yes, we messaged about how I was feeling. Nothing more, nothing less.

When I got ready to go over, I selected a pair of stretchy jeans with a loose t-shirt over them. I looked casual and comfortable and there was no way of seeing my stomach, which I’d swear was bigger. Everything seemed bigger to me, and I sighed as I looked in the mirror.

I went over and saw Colton's car in the driveway as I cursed. I swore I'd get through this and walked inside with a smile on my face as Mom grinned at me.

"Hey. Do I smell lasagna?" I asked as I went to hug her, praying she didn't feel the differences in my body.

"You sure do," she replied as I went to hug my dad, meeting Colton's stony stare.

"Hi, Dad. How are you?" I asked, as I offered Colton a smile. "Hi, Colton."

"How are you, Melanie?" he asked without changing his expression.

"Are the kids outside?" I asked, not hearing them in the house.

"Yes. They want you to play with them if you're up to it." Mom replied as Colton stared at me. I wasn't restricted from activity and what harm could a little game of soccer do? I told them I'd be down in the yard and walked out to the deck, taking the stairs down as the kids called my name.

Instead of my brother and Penelope, I saw the baby's half-sister and nephew. I tried to play goalie and missed several balls as I got lost in my thoughts and my brother poked fun at me. I felt relieved when it was time to eat and declined wine from Mom, asking for water instead. After dessert, I lied about going into work early just to escape and get home.

How the hell was I supposed to get through the next few months? Two weeks sounded like a lot to me and after that, it would be out in the world. I washed up and crawled into bed, exhausted from my thoughts all day.

The weekend that marked the twelve-week mark came too fast, and I stared at the ceiling in my bedroom. Colton had continued to be withdrawn, and we didn't plan to see each other until the next appointment, but this would need to be addressed.

Should I go to my parent's house and just tell them? He didn't need to be there since we weren't together. I heard my phone chime beside me and saw Jamie's name on the screen.

Jamie: Happy three months, Mama!

Melanie: Thank you. I can't believe I have to tell people about this.

Jamie: Want me to go with you?

Melanie: I haven't even decided how to do it yet. Thank you, Jamie, but I'll figure this out.

Mom sent a message about Sunday dinner the following day and I cried for ten minutes after I accepted. I couldn't put this off any longer, but I couldn't do it with Colton and the kids there. I wanted to tell my parents with or without him and I thought he should tell Penelope.

Fate has a way of handling things.

On the way to my parent's house, someone in a truck rear-ended me and while it was a minor accident, it sent me into a panic. I told the paramedic that I was pregnant, and they thought it best to take me to the hospital to be looked at, just to be safe. My car was fine to drive, but I left it parked on the side of the road and got into the ambulance.

I got there and waited for the doctor in the small room, staring at my phone.

Mom: Mel? Are you okay?

There was no way around this.

Colton: Where the fuck are you, Melanie?

Who would be better to respond to? I assumed the kids were there and someone would be at this hospital within minutes.

Melanie: I'm okay, Mom. I got into a fender bender and they're just taking a look at me at the hospital. I'm sure they'll release me, and I'll catch an Uber back to my car. It probably just needs a body shop or something.

Mom: What? I'll be right there. Is it the ER close to us?

Melanie: Yes.

Mom: I'll be there as soon as I can.

Well, fuck. Game on.

CHAPTER 29

Colton

I looked at Dana as she paled, wondering what the fuck Melanie had told her. We were all wondering where she was, and dinner was delayed because of the wait. That wasn't like Melanie, even though things were fucked up between us right now.

“She got into a car accident. She says it was minor, but I'm going to run down to the hospital and be with her. Why don't you guys stay here with the kids and eat dinner?” Dana asked as my ears started ringing.

The baby.

“Is she okay?” I asked, watching as she spoke without hearing her at first.

“She said she's fine. It's just a precaution,” Dana said as Richard shot me a curious look. “I'm going to take her to her car when she's done if she's up to it. If not, she's coming here so I can keep an eye on her.” She left through the garage and I balanced between staying or insisting on driving.

“What's wrong, Colton? Dana said she's fine,” Richard said, as I forced myself to listen to him. I had to consider that we had kids to feed and took a deep breath.

“I worry. Let's get the kids fed,” I told him and he nodded, still looking at me funny. We called them in, and they ate, not knowing anything was wrong. I picked at the food and watched the garage door, needing them to be here. I had to see Melanie and know she was fine, and the baby was okay.

What felt like hours later, the door opened, and Dana led Melanie inside. They'd both been crying, and I knew Melanie had to tell her about the baby.

"What's wrong?" Richard asked, jumping to his feet. "Are you okay?" He walked over to Melanie and pulled her into his arms as she cried.

"I need to talk to you, Dad. I'm fine," she replied in a shaking voice as I stood. Dana looked at me and I understood she knew everything by her expression. "Can we go into your office?"

"What's going on?" Richard looked between us, and Melanie led the way down the hall to what I assumed was his office.

"Can you watch Pen?" I asked Dana, as she nodded somberly. Both kids were asking why they were crying, and I left her to it, needing to know everything.

I closed the door of the office as Richard turned to face us.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded as Melanie looked at me.

"Are you okay?" I asked her, as she nodded.

"Everything is good," she assured me before looking at her dad. "Dad, I'm pregnant. Three months along."

I watched as his face shifted through several emotions before he stared at me.

"What does this have to do with you, Colton?" His voice was bitter, and I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. "Did you sleep with my fucking daughter?"

"I'm in love with her," I said, as he looked shocked.

"When did this happen and how?" he asked, looking sick. "You're supposed to be my best friend, Colton. She's twenty years younger than you are."

I glanced at Melanie to see the shock on her face as she stared at me.

“I know all of that. We know that,” I told him, keeping my voice controlled. “This wasn’t planned, Richard. We’re dealing with it right along with everyone else. I am in love with Melanie and willing to be there for her every step of the way. This wasn’t just a fling for me.”

“You love me?” Melanie asked me, and I nodded as I stared at her.

“Yes. If we could talk without fighting, I’d tell you that,” I told her, lost in the moment before Richard barked my name.

“When?” he demanded, glaring at me.

“It started when I went to New York a few months ago. We bumped into each other on the plane and spent some time together after that. I never meant for this to happen. Believe me. It just did, and I can’t fight my feelings for her. I am all in with this baby. I want to be there for her and be with her.” As I looked between their surprised faces, I explained to both. “I haven’t seen anyone else since this started with Melanie.”

Richard sat down on the couch, pinching the bridge of his nose as I saw years of friendship crumble to the ground. Above everything, my concern for the baby was strong, and I looked at Melanie. “You mean everything to me, Melanie. I don’t want to do this without you. Before tonight, I should have told you I love you. I’m sorry.”

“I need to talk to my daughter, Colton. Alone,” Richard said as I glared at him. He met with a steel gaze of his own and I crossed my arms over my chest. “Get out of my house.”

I knew things were forever different and stared at Melanie. He’d never hurt her, and I needed to get Penelope home. I had a daughter to think about.

“Call me,” I told Melanie before leaving the office and closing the door behind me as the air rushed out of my lungs.

Dana was in the living room with the kids as they watched a movie, staring off into space. She jerked up when she saw me, and I saw the worry in her eyes.

“We should go, Penelope. You have school in the morning,” I said, as my daughter pouted.

“Why is Melanie sad, Daddy? Did the other car scare her?” she asked me as I took a deep breath.

“It scared her, is all. She’s fine, Pen. We have to get home so you can clean up and get to bed.” She heard my tone and glanced at Devin before standing up. She hugged Dana goodbye and thanked her for dinner as taught, and I shared a long look with the woman. In it, she told me she would take care of Melanie.

We left, and I struggled to keep it together through the rest of the evening. Once Penelope was finally asleep, I waited on my bed for Melanie to call. I needed to know what the fuck happened over there, but it probably wasn’t good.

I woke up in the morning to my alarm and looked around. She never called me, and I took a deep breath. She was with her family and no matter what, they loved her. I rose and got Penelope ready for school, dropping her off before I decided if I could handle work or not. I felt like I’d been through hell and couldn’t focus on anything.

My phone chimed, and I jumped, reaching for it in front of the school where I stayed parked.

Dana: She’s fine and stayed the night with us. She and Richard stayed up talking for a long time and she’s calling in sick today. We’re keeping her safe, Colton.

Did that mean there was something from the accident bothering Melanie? Did she need to go to the doctor again? I breathed in, reminding myself she was safe.

I took the day off and spent the day at the beach, thinking everything through. No matter what happened, I loved Melanie, and I’d be there for her. We had a baby coming and they would need both of their parents. I picked up Penelope from school and picked up something for dinner, too distracted to cook anything.

When she was asleep for the night, I rested on my pillows. I felt wide awake and stared at the moon through my window, thinking about my future. Our future.

Was there a future for me and Melanie? My daughter would have a sibling either way and I needed to find a time to tell her.

My phone chimed, and I jumped. Grabbing it, I saw Melanie's name on the screen.

"Melanie? Are you okay?" I asked as I sat up.

"I stayed at my parent's house last night and I'm still there. We talked a lot most of the night after they got Devin to bed," Melanie replied in a small voice. "Dad's disappointed and angry, Colton. It's going to take some time for him to work through this, but what else can we expect?" She let out a shallow laugh. "Did you mean what you said?"

"About being in love with you?" I asked, and she fell silent. "Every word. I've felt it for a long time, but everything was so complicated. I should have told you that so much earlier, Melanie. The accident made me see that."

"I told Mom and Dad that I loved you. I don't know what that means right now with everything so up in the air, but I do. I've denied it for a while." Melanie sniffled and I felt my heart soar. "Maybe we should get together and talk at some point and figure out where to go from here. I thought that something might happen to the baby, and I was so scared, Colton. I feel like this is a second chance."

"Can I take you to lunch tomorrow?" I asked her and smiled when she accepted the invitation.

CHAPTER 30

Melanie

I picked up the rental car two days after the accident since mine would be in the shop for a while. Touching my stomach, I told my baby I loved them for what felt like the millionth time.

I thought I'd lose them after the accident. It had only been a matter of weeks, but I loved my baby and I cried to Mom in my old room about it when she tried to tuck me in on the night of the accident.

I also loved the baby's father, for better or worse.

I talked to my dad for a long time, trying to explain everything. It was hard to make sense of it even in my head and I lived it. He was hurt and angry. He cursed Colton for taking advantage of me and I told him that wasn't the case. I reminded him I was an adult, and I made the choice to be with him.

When I apologized to him, I cried.

I told them both that I was in love with Colton Briggs. I wanted the complicated and probably messy times with him, and I wanted a life with our baby. I wanted to raise Penelope alongside our baby and make a beautiful family.

Things weren't perfect when Mom took me to pick up the rental and I looked at her as we parked.

"I love you and everything will work out. Your dad needs time," Mom told me as I slowly nodded. "Give Dad some time

to work through this, Mel. I'm just glad you're okay."

She didn't know that I called Colton last night, and we were having lunch today. I hugged her and thanked her for being there for me before getting out and walking to the office. I hurt all over my body, but it wasn't anything permanent and me and the baby were good. They checked all of that at the hospital and Mom was there to hear the heartbeat and see the ultrasound, sending her into tears.

I got the keys and slid into the chunky SUV, appreciating the size after the accident. Driving home, I pulled into the driveway and realized I had time to freshen up before Colton got there with lunch.

I took a quick shower and changed into a loose sun dress, pulling my hair into a messy bun. When I heard the doorbell in the bathroom, I went to the door. I opened it and saw Colton standing there with a bag in his hands. I took it and hugged him, feeling a sense of relief that we didn't have to hide this anymore. There was still a lot to deal with, but I could hug him like this in my open doorway without feeling guilty.

We stayed that way for a long time until my stomach growled and Colton ushered me inside to eat. Once we were at the table with hamburgers, fries and shakes from our favorite place, he took a long look at me.

"Things might be messy for a while, but I think it will work out just fine. Dad needs time, but he loves me and the baby more than anything. He just needs to catch up," I told Colton as he nodded with his jaw set. "We need to talk about us today. I love you, Colton. I want there to be an us in this, even though it won't be easy. Are you in?"

"I already told you I was," he reminded me as I smiled at him. "I haven't told Penelope yet. We could go to dinner and tell her everything. She's eight and old enough to understand, but I'd like to be there together if she has questions."

"I'd like that. I don't know how I want to handle houses or anything like that yet. We have a few months to work all of that out, but I want to be with you, Colton." He stared at me, his gaze burning a hole through me.

“I can accept that for a while as Penelope gets used to the idea,” he replied, and I laughed.

“We’re really doing this.” I looked at the table and back at him. “I need this second chance after thinking I lost everything. I have never been that scared before and I can’t fight this anymore with you.”

“I agree.” He told me gruffly, concern crossing his face. “I don’t know how I stayed at the house that night, Melanie.”

“You’re a wonderful dad and you stayed with your daughter. My mom was there, and she got me through it like she does everything. We cried a lot, listening to the heartbeat and watching the monitors and then cried some more on the way home. She’s surprised, but she thinks you’re a good man, Colton. I guess we have her blessing even though we’re adults and we can make our own choices.” My face fell after I chuckled weakly. “I just want that from my dad.”

“So do I,” he said as he stared at the table.

We finished lunch and cuddled on the couch for a while, talking about taking Penelope to dinner the following Sunday to talk to her. Colton told me how worried she’d been after the accident, and I knew she was a sweet girl. She could handle this even if there were some insecurities along the way.

He took me to my room and made love to me with all the truths in the surrounding air. Since he didn’t have Penelope this week, he stayed there with me, and we cooked dinner together. It felt good to just be here with him, even though we both needed to be at work the following day.

He held me in his arms that night and I closed my eyes, feeling safe and loved.

We kept in touch throughout the week, speaking daily. When the weekend came, he picked up Penelope and then me and we took her to her favorite pizza place. She didn’t seem to think it was strange at all and asked me to play games with her after we had ordered dinner.

It was after dinner and during dessert that I shared a look with Colton. He sat with Penelope on the opposite side of the

table and cleared his throat as she looked at him.

“We have something to tell you, Pen.” He started as she looked at me.

“She’s your girlfriend?” she asked as we laughed. “Mom has a boyfriend, Daddy. I like Melanie and I wanted her to be your girlfriend.”

“Well, now that we got that out of the way, there’s more. You’re going to be a big sister in around six months.” I watched Penelope as she looked shocked and then smiled, taking in what her dad had just told her.

“A sister or a brother?” she asked as the surrounding tables glanced over.

“We won’t know for a little while. What would you like?” I asked, as she looked at me with a big smile.

“Well, I like playing with Devin a lot, but I think a sister would be a lot of fun.” She put a lot of thought into it, and I grinned at Colton. “Are you going to get married?”

Colton choked, and I laughed.

“We’re not there yet, Pen. We need to get ready for a baby and figure everything out as we go.” He looked at me, shaking his head.

He dropped me off at home that night, giving me a kiss before I hugged Penelope. I walked inside, surprised at how well it went before I thought about my dad. Maybe he’d feel as happy about this soon.

It took five months for me to move in with him and set up a nursery for our daughter. We fought because he hated that I waited until I was ready to pop, but I told him we had a month left. How much could a tiny human need right away?

It took six months for my father to calm down over the relationship. Mom was there when we found out it was a girl and she cried with us.

Dad didn’t show up until Lola was born and I glanced up to see him in the doorway, looking at me with tears in his eyes.

He stared at me and the little bundle of blankets in my arms before stepping forward. Colton glanced up and glanced at me as Dad walked over to me.

“This is Lola Marie Briggs, Dad. She’s your granddaughter,” I said in a shaking voice. I hadn’t been to my parents for dinner for months and I missed my dad. Mom saw me through the pregnancy, but he stayed away, getting over everything.

“She’s beautiful, Mel.” He sniffled and wiped at his eyes. He looked at Colton, extending his hand. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Colton said, shaking Dad’s hand. I knew Mom would be there soon with Devin and Penelope to introduce them to Lola and when I heard laughter in the hallway, I knew she was here.

Mom walked in with a smile on her face and looked at Dad. She smiled, and the kids rushed forward to see the baby, telling me how pretty she was. Devin thought it was cool that he was an uncle now, and we thrilled Penelope with her little sister and I felt tears in my eyes.

I cried when I saw Lola for the first time and seeing her surrounded by my family sent me into another crying fit. Mom hugged me, holding Dad’s hand as I lost it. Lola fussed, and she pulled away as I looked down at my baby with her daddy’s blue eyes.

At least so far.

Once I got her calmed down, everyone took turns holding Lola as Colton stayed by my side, observing. I knew his girls would always be safe under his watch and they were lucky to have him, even though Penelope told him to chill out often.

This was my future, and everyone was in it I loved. Jamie was on her way, so she’d be here soon and complete my circle.

EPILOGUE

Colton

One Year Later

I looked around my yard, decorated in far too much pink and purple. It was Lola's first birthday and friends and family filled the yard and the house, getting food ready and celebrating my baby girl. I looked at her on the lawn with her sister and uncle, toddling after the soccer ball as I winced.

Luckily, they were good with her, and Devin was almost as protective as I was towards Lola.

I looked across the deck to see Melanie setting up food with her mom, laughing at something Jamie said to them. She was beautiful and Lola looked so much like her, with my blue eyes. I smiled as she looked at me, blowing a kiss in my direction.

Richard walked over, offering me a beer as he grinned. "How fast did that year go by?" he joked as I thought back to sleepless nights, a lot of firsts, and more love than I could ever imagine.

"I blinked, and it was gone," I replied, and we clinked our bottles together. We'd rebuilt the friendship over time and now he knew I loved his daughter and the little girl we shared at least half as much as he claimed to. It was a running joke with us, and we sipped our beer as someone stacked another gift on the outdoor table. "Good lord. I won't have room for all of this."

“There’s always room in Lola’s playroom at our house.” He reminded me as I nodded, thinking about the large room that served as her playroom and bedroom when she spent the night, but that hadn’t happened a lot. Melanie and I both hated for her to be gone too long, but Dana told us to have more date nights and she’d watch the baby with Penelope if she was with us for the week.

Now that she was older, I thought I’d need to take Dana up on it. I missed alone time with Melanie and with Penelope getting older. She was at the age where she wanted to be with her friends. It was tough to find time for sex sometimes, with Lola being so young and I considered a trip away for the weekend.

We ate food and mingled with guests as the kids played. Melanie decided we’d just do cake and open gifts later since it would take a while based on how many there were. Lola would also take forever since she didn’t quite grasp the idea quite yet.

I had friends from work and so did she, besides the regular fixtures in Lola’s life. The rest of the time was just fun time for the kids and trying to talk to everybody, but I enjoyed every moment.

My little blond daughter went right for her cake, scooping the pink frosting into her mouth as she smeared it all over her face. Melanie groaned about the bath she’d need later, and I took pictures, telling everyone she’d be taking over the company someday as people laughed.

Penelope already told me she planned to be an artist and, based on her talent and all the classes Melanie put her in, it could happen. I appreciated she had the creative gene and encouraged it every step of the way.

When the party wound down a few hours later, Melanie took Lola to take a bath as I saw people out. Dana assured me she’d be over the next day to help clean up as she hugged me and followed Richard to their car as he laughed at the expression on my face.

It felt good to have my best friend back in my life. I'd be with Melanie even if that didn't happen because I loved her so damn much, but it felt so much better with family in our life.

I looked around my empty house and then into the yard, carrying the presents into the den for the following day when we opened them with Lola. Everything else was a mess, but what needed to be done got completed before Dana went home and that's what mattered.

I had bigger matters to worry about tonight.

I walked back into the house and went to the nursery that was slowly turning into a little girl's room, watching as Melanie cuddled with Lola in the chair in the corner of the dim room. It was fucking beautiful, and I smiled as Melanie glanced up at me.

"Is she asleep?" I asked as Melanie nodded and I stepped forward to pick Lola up and put her into the crib. I took Melanie's hand and led her out, closing the door as we walked into the hallway.

"Today was good," she told me as I nodded with a smile on my face. "I'm so happy that we're all a family again."

"Me, too." I walked to the living room as Melanie followed slowly.

"What are we doing, Colton?"

Penelope was on the couch on her tablet, and she looked up at me with a smile. I told Melanie to sit down, and she glanced between us with a smile.

"What are you two up to?" Melanie asked as she settled back against the cushions.

I dropped to my knee, and she gasped as her eyes filled with tears.

"Colton?"

"This has been a long time coming, baby. I know that but this last year and a half flew by, and it was the best time of my life. Our life." I smile at Penelope. "I love you more than anything, Melanie. I feel so complete with my girls and our

chaos, and I'd like you to be my wife. I want you in my life forever, Melanie."

"I want you to be my stepmom!" Penelope chimed in as Melanie wiped tears from her eyes.

"I want all of that," Melanie replied as she cried. "I love you both so much and you make this life of mine so perfect, along with that little girl upstairs."

Melanie stared at the diamond in stunned silence as I pulled the ring out of my pocket.

"Will you marry me, Melanie Cross?"

"Yes. A thousand times, yes." She dropped to the floor to hug me as I struggled to hold on to the ring. I laughed and Penelope hugged us for a moment as I broke into laughter. I got the ring on Melanie's finger, and she stared at the diamond band with a perfect square diamond centered on it.

"I love you," she told me, and I knew hearing that would never get old. We started off as something so forbidden and wrong, but now I knew it was meant to be with Melanie. We were supposed to meet on that plane, and she was here to make me come to life again.

Six Months Later

Melanie

I looked in the mirror, taking in how the white dress skimmed my body and ended in a short train. My makeup was subtle and perfect and my hair in curls and I knew my future husband looked incredible wherever he was.

Today was my wedding, just over two years since this all started with Colton. In about an hour, I'd be walking down the aisle with my father as he gave me to his best friend in marriage, securing the blessing I always wanted.

I heard the door open and looked up to see Jamie and Mom walk into the hotel room, with Lola and Penelope following them. It was time to dress the girls for the wedding, and I smiled at the group as Mom stopped to stare at me.

“You look incredible,” she said as tears filled her eyes. “Oh, God. You look like an angel.”

I blinked, trying not to cry as I went to hug my mom. I followed that by hugging Jamie. She wore the light green dress we picked together a few months ago and would stand alongside me at the ceremony.

“Are you guys ready to get dressed?” I asked, looking down at my girls. Lola clapped and giggled, and I took in the curls that sprung so naturally from her head and bounced over her shoulders. Between the four of us, we got Lola in her green dress and then Penelope put hers on quickly. I had the hair and makeup done earlier by a team so we could just wrap this part up quickly so all we had to do was get ready to walk down the aisle.

Penelope would lead Lola down the aisle and then sit down with her by my mom. She was too little to be expected to stay still while we said our vows and since the wedding was on a beach, we’d likely lose Lola to the water. She loved nothing more than a day at a beach and loved the fact we lived on one.

Jamie would stand beside me, and after he walked me down the aisle, my dad would join Colton. After some rough times, their friendship was right back to where it had been before.

I heard the first song starting as we stood behind a wall that blocked me from seeing the beach we chose as our wedding location. Everyone walked around the corner and disappeared, and I stood there for a moment, taking this all in. My dad walked up to me dressed to the nines in a tuxedo and he hugged me with tears in his eyes.

“You look beautiful, Melanie. I’m so happy for you.” His voice shook, and I smiled, so thankful that he was here for this part of the day. There was a time I worried that he’d miss everything.

“I love you, Dad. Thank you for walking me down the aisle,” I told him, feeling my eyes watering with tears. “It wouldn’t have been the same without you.”

“He loves you. It took me a while to see it, but Colton loves you in the way I wanted someone to. I’m so glad we’re finally in this place.” My dad cleared his throat and pulled away. My music started, and he held out his arm as I smiled.

We walked together as I held the bouquet of tulips and roses in my hand. Colton had to look down for a moment before he met my gaze, and I saw the tears in his eyes. I smiled as the ocean air crossed my path and tossed a curl out of my face as I giggled.

I opted for a flower crown that was slightly bigger than the one that Penelope wore, not wanting to do a veil for this ceremony. Everything was simple about my dress and my hair, but the way Colton looked at me made me feel like a princess.

When we reached Colton, my father shook his hand and moved to stand beside him as I stepped up to my groom. Our vows were brief and sweet, and I could hear Mom crying behind me as Jamie sniffled next to me. We exchanged rings and when he was given permission, Colton cupped my face and kissed me. I closed my eyes and lost myself in our first kiss as husband and wife before the guests started cheering.

We took a million pictures and joined the guests in the restaurant that overlooked the beach for the reception. Music played and people smiled as we greeted them. It was like a bigger version of Lola’s birthday party just a few months ago, and I looked around as Colton held my hand tight, keeping me by his side.

There was nowhere I’d rather be, and we enjoyed the party. There was plenty of food and drinks to enjoy and a wide selection of music to dance to, including the most important moments of all.

I danced with my dad as Mom cried again and then with my husband as the twinkle lights around us lit up the night. The kids started dancing when everyone else joined us, and I looked around with a huge smile. Lola insisted on dancing

several times with her dad and I moved around the floor with Penelope, acting silly and making everyone laugh.

Whenever I was offered champagne, I declined with a soft smile, and after the main toast, Colton arched a brow at me. He knew me well, and I'd never turn down wine or champagne, especially during an event like our wedding toast.

"Is there something you need to tell me, Mrs. Briggs?" He leaned close and kissed me, and I smiled against his mouth. "Are you going to give me that boy we've been talking about?"

I laughed, and he held me close, telling me how much he loved me. I found out I was pregnant a couple of weeks ago and wanted to tell him later tonight, but my husband knew how much I loved a glass of wine. He picked up on it fast and I looked into his eyes and kissed him.

"We'll find out in a few months. Do you think you can wait that long?"

"I can wait forever," Colton told me, kissing me again as I heard the guests cheering us on.

I was all in.

The End

Colton Briggs was arrogant.

The man was grumpy and pushed all my buttons.

On a late-night flight to New York City, he was my distraction.

He was also forbidden since he was my father's best friend.

We tried to stay apart and do the right thing, but I just couldn't and now we're going to shatter my family's world.

I never wanted my dad to find out about us, but life has a way of taking control sometimes.

Do I choose my family or the love of an older man?
Why can't I have it all?

DID YOU ENJOY THIS BOOK?

Did you like this book? Then you'll LOVE "Grumpy Fake Fiancé".

We're supposed to be faking it, but I think I'm falling hard for my silver fox boss.

Jordan is my arrogant, self-centered, crazy rich, and infuriatingly hot boss.

He has a different woman every week and I know I should stay far away.

But he's presented me an offer I can't refuse:

Pretend to be in love with him and be his fake fiancé.

He gets the upper hand in the custody battle for his daughter and I get a huge payout, I desperately need, to pay off my massive student loans.

Everyone wins... or so it seems.

We are so different I thought pretending to be in love would be painful.

Only one problem... I was dead wrong.

The more we act like a couple in public and tuck his daughter into bed,
the more my heart forgets that this is pretend.

The electricity I feel when we kiss is 100% real.
I'm not acting anymore, and I secretly hope he isn't either.
Getting my heart shattered was NOT part of the deal, but it's a risk I might just take...

Start reading Grumpy Fake Fiancé NOW! - [My Book](#)

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Do you like FREEBIE Romance books?

Sign up for my newsletter and get *Bossy Fake Fiancé* for free!

Getting fake engaged to a hot billionaire single dad was easy... Not falling in love is MUCH harder.

I'm falling for my fake fiancé.

That was NOT part of the plan.

I couldn't resist the no-brainer offer:

Pretend to be engaged to my boss's arrogant, infuriatingly hot billionaire son.

He gets to secure the CEO position in his dad's company.

I get a sweet payout that I desperately need so I can help my mom.

Seemed like a win-win for everybody...

Except I can't stand the guy, and the feeling is definitely mutual.

We clash on every level, so I thought pretending to be in love would be torturous.

But, I was dead wrong and that's a HUGE problem.

Hand-holding and laughing in public feels natural.

The way he wraps his protective arms around me sends electricity through my veins.

His soft lips meeting mine ignite a million sparks.

Seeing him lovingly play with his daughter melts my heart.

Putting my heart on the line was NOT part of the deal.

I'm not pretending anymore and I secretly hope he isn't
either...

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