



Colton by Blood (The Coltons of Wyoming Book 2)

By Melissa Cutler

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Rising romantic suspense star Melissa Cutler reveals more secrets from the Coltons of Wyoming... An unsolved murder haunts those who live and work at Dead River Ranch. When called to care for the ailing Colton patriarch, Dr. Levi Colton must face the father who never claimed him. He's not looking for distraction, but he finds it in Kate McCord, the irresistible pastry chef. Beneath her sweet smile are scars from her own tragedy—and a determination for justice.

As a wildfire forces them together with an unknown killer, Levi and Kate must confront an attraction that flares hotter than flames. They edge closer to the truth, discovering that the secret that links their pasts could lead them straight into the killer's trap.

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Colton by Blood (The Coltons of Wyoming Book 2) By Melissa Cutler Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #133006 in eBooks
- Published on: 2013-08-01
- Released on: 2013-08-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Any second now.

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

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

She shivered.

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

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

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

A boom of great force sounded from nearby. A door slamming or something hitting a wall. A tree falling, perhaps. Fierce windstorms were most likely to blame for the power outage. They'd plagued western Wyoming for more than a week, beating on the ranch house and surrounding wilderness, unrelenting. Sinister.

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

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

Poor Faye.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

threatened to do almost daily since Kate took the assistant-cook job four years earlier.

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

A savior or the devil?

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

"Hello?" she whispered.

No answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course she does, dear. She was a darling woman and we all miss her terribly. I'm sure the police are doing all they can. The Coltons are working closely with them, as am I. There is no need to put yourself at risk unnecessarily." She returned the letter to Kate. "My advice—destroy this before it gets you into trouble."

"Yes, ma'am." She folded the paper and returned it to her pocket.

"Why do you also have a tray, Agnes?" Mathilda's tone was placating.

"Mr. Colton buzzed. He hadn't received his dessert yet and was in quite a state. That Fiona is a lazy one. Makes us all look bad. She probably would've stolen away to eat the sweets herself. Takes advantage, that girl. And you—" She leveled a sneer at Kate. "I have half a mind to fire you both."

Kate set the last manageable shard on the tray and straightened. The remaining debris would require the use of a broom. There was no use defending herself during one of Agnes's tirades. The best course of action was to wait it out in stoic silence.

Mathilda's expression cracked into a smile that didn't quite reach her vibrant blue eyes. "Now, Agnes. It's not the poor girl's fault that the wind knocked a tree onto the power lines."

So she was a poor girl now, as if she was twelve instead of twenty-seven. Kate kicked a tiny shard of teacup with a bit too much oomph.

Glancing at the disturbance, Mathilda continued. "I'm certain there is a perfectly reasonable explanation as to why Kate is doing the task you specifically assigned to Fiona. Isn't that right, Kate?"

"Yes, ma'am. Fiona isn't feeling well tonight, with the new baby on the way, and I offered to help so she could get off her feet."

"That's kind of you."

"Oh, now, Mathilda, you're being too easy on her," Agnes objected. She wagged a finger at Kate. "You know good and well that we can't have the likes of you parading in front of the family in your stained chef smock and—" she flicked a grimace at Kate's neck, where Kate could feel the wisps of hair at her nape sticking to her perspiring skin "—common sweat."

There would be no use in pointing out that she was wearing a jacket, not a smock—and a pristine one at that—or that the air-conditioning unit had shut off along with the lights and Kate was perspiring because she'd been standing in an unventilated shaft for nearly ten minutes.

"And you decided, all on your own," Agnes continued, "that you're good enough to serve not just any Colton, but the head of the household?" She hunched her arms around the fresh tray she'd brought with her, holding it as if Kate's lowly station might taint the precious dish of bread pudding sitting atop it.

This new pudding was from the same batch as the ruined one, but without the whipped cream and whiskey sauce. Agnes had forgotten to add them. Kate squelched a sniff of shock.

From everything Kate knew about Jethro Colton's long list of sins, it was he who wasn't fit to lick her chef clogs, not the other way around. And anyhow, Agnes might think Kate too beneath Mr. Colton's station to serve him like a proper maid, but she would never, *ever*, present him with an incomplete dessert.

She summoned the remnants of her composure. "I thought, with it being so late and with the ranch short on staff, it wouldn't be so bad for me to step in."

Agnes threw an arm up in dramatic disgust. "Wouldn't be so bad? In the name of all things holy, she'll get us all canned."

"Agnes," Mathilda soothed, "of course Kate's face is flushed from working in the heat of the kitchen." She set a supportive hand on Kate's shoulder. "But am I noticing correctly that you changed into a clean smock, dear?"

"A clean jacket, yes, ma'am." Kate's face heated. She loathed being talked down to day in and day out by these women who controlled the flow of life and information at Dead River Ranch. But with no money or family she could turn to, this job was all she had. At least it came with a well-stocked kitchen to work in and a house of people hungry for sweets.

"As you so astutely pointed out, there's no time to waste," Mathilda said to Agnes. "If Mr. Colton doesn't get his dessert in short order, we'll all pay the price for the delay. There's no sense in you traipsing up two flights of stairs to Mr. Colton's quarters, not after the scrumptious meals you slaved all day to prepare." Agnes swelled up like a toad at the saccharine compliment. "Allow Kate to do the work."

Well, gee. Thanks. She mashed her lips together and thought about cheesecake. Plain, with a single fresh

strawberry sliced on top.

"It would serve you right, Miss High and Mighty. You might as well take over serving Mr. Colton all his meals. If anyone can teach you a lesson about keeping to your rightful place in this house, it would be Jethro Colton."

Mathilda interrupted with a reproachful tsk. "Mind your tone. He's *Mr. Colton* to you."

Agnes's glare cut past Kate and narrowed on Mathilda. "As if you don't know what he's like."

A chorus of chimes, low but distinctive, came through the open ground-level door.

Mathilda gazed at the door, her lips pursed. "What in the world would someone be thinking, intruding on the family at such a late hour?"

"You're not expecting anyone?" Agnes asked.

"Of course not. Mr. Colton needs his rest. I'm afraid our late-night visitor is going to be sorely disappointed. Excuse me." Holding her long, black skirt out of the way of the spill, Mathilda sidestepped around Agnes's ample form and strode with neat, stiff steps down the stairs and through the door.

"I think I'd like to see who it is myself." Agnes shoved the dessert tray into Kate's hands. "Go on, now, and hurry up. You think you're too good for kitchen work? Fine. From this point forward, Mr. Colton's meals are your responsibility. Maybe he'll have more mercy on you than he does on the rest of us."

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