

Chapter One (Five years in the past)

Althea Carson tapped her long nails against the desk. She looked at the clock. She hadn't heard a word from her top client, Colton Blackwell, all day long. She was antsy about him getting everything together for the trip they'd planned out with military precision. It was one of the advantages of having been in the Marines—the experience of which continued to amaze her and her clients in civilian life. She bit the bullet and dialed Colton's number. The call connected, and she didn't even let him say "Hello."

"Are you packed for your trip, kiddo?" Althea inquired cautiously.

This would be Colton's first book tour—or Jackson Gregory's, the pen name he chose to keep himself as far away from his well-known father, Samuel Blackwell. He, or Jackson, would be promoting the boxed set of male/male romance novels he'd just finished after the fourth of the set was in print. The series was based on the lives of four high school friends, two gay, one straight, and one... undecided? The stories began after their ten-year high school reunion. They were all successful in their own rights, but none of them had much luck with love since high school. Of course, each book gave the men "HEAs," or "Happily Ever Afters."

"Yes, I'm packed... I guess. Well... not quite. I can't decide whether..."

"Don't make me come over there. I've worked my butt off for this tour, and I'm not about to have you miss it because you can figure out if you're more adorable in that teal blue or charcoal gray sweater. They both work—pack them both!"

"How did you know that I..."

"Bitch, I have eyes everywhere. Besides, I've missed too many Happy Hours at our favorite bar because you couldn't make a goddamn wardrobe decision!"

Althea had outdone herself in the planning of the tour. Colton would hit all the LGBTQAI+ bookstores in seven different cities. While he was in town, there would be a talk, some reading of the material, a Q&A session, and a book signing. She'd even hinted that she was working on a European tour, as he had numerous people buying his books overseas. But his agent poopooed the idea that she had anything finalized. Knowing Althea, he'd probably have little time to pack before leaving on another tour.

"I'll manage. Don't worry. I already have my boarding pass on my phone and..." Colton's phone was getting another call... from *Samuel Blackman*. "Hey, Althea. My dad's calling on the other line. Can I check in with you later?"

"Your *dad*? The one that never—okay, seldom—speaks to you because you didn't follow in his footsteps?"

"Yeah. That dad. My only dad. If he's calling, there must be something important. Later."

Colton disconnected Althea and accepted his father's call.

"Hey, Dad. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Colton... do not be curt with me. I'm not in the mood."

"Fine. Fine. Whatever. So, who died?"

"Aunt Cheryl."

Colton's face grew pale as he considered the situation. Ever since Colton's mother passed away almost a decade ago, his father's sister, Cheryl, had been an invaluable source of support. She not only took charge of managing the estate they resided on, but also played a crucial role in maintaining a harmonious relationship between Colton and his father, Samuel. Colton had come out as gay during his early years in high school, a fact that his Anglican father did not fully embrace. Samuel made a clear distinction between Anglicanism and Episcopalianism, a detail that his father would swiftly correct, should anyone confuse the two. As such, being devoted Anglicans and having a gay son was not in line with the local Church's teachings at the time—his father held the esteemed position of a lay deacon in the church and served on its board. The news would not be well-received by many of the board members in his father's corporation either.

"Dad... I'm... forgive me. I'm so sorry. What..."

"She had what appeared to be a massive heart attack over two days ago. Her cardiologist insisted she watch her salt intake and lose at least thirty pounds, but... well, you know Cheryl... or did. She loved her French fries and never met a rare steak she didn't salt abundantly."

"Wow... but why did you wait so long to call? Are there arrangements that have been made?"

"You're the first person I called. Madisyn took the call from the sheriff's department less than a half an hour ago. The letter carrier found her when he was delivering her mail this morning. He hadn't seen her in a couple of days. Her car was in the driveway, and when she didn't come to the door, he peeked through the windows and saw Cheryl lying face down on the kitchen floor. He immediately called 911."

Madisyn Ford was Samuel's personal assistant. While he still sat on the board of the corporation Cheryl and he founded, Samuel had turned the daily running of the corporation, Blackwell Enterprises, over to a new CEO. His day-to-day interactions with the company were minimal. Madisyn helped him oversee The Blackwell Foundation, the family's philanthropical arm. She also assisted with his current financial ventures and whatever action the board of Blackwell Enterprises needed him to take—as the major stockholder, Samuel still had a position on the board of directors. Cheryl had long since sold all of her shares in the corporation to her brother, but lived an active life in charity work from her home in Montecito, not far from where Samuel's estate was located.

"Dad, what can I do?"

"Having you here would be a great help... son." Their relationship had been amazing before Colton came out. Afterwards? Not so much. Strained at best, perhaps adversarial at worst.

Colton sighed and shook his head. With the book tour beginning in only two days, this couldn't have come at a more inopportune time. Althea was going to have his head after all the work she'd done over the past month.

"Of course, Dad. I can take a flight out of LaGuardia later today. Let me make some calls, check in with my agent, and I'll text you the arrival flight info."

"Sounds like you're busy."

"I'm always busy, Dad. Even I'm though I'm not running a multimillion-dollar corporation, I *do* work for a living." Colton thought a moment, then decided telling his father what he was about to be in the middle of was better than trying to ignore it. "I've just finished packing. I'm scheduled to leave on a seven-city book tour with the last series I finished. But..."

"Colton. You don't have to come. I'm sorry to have imposed."

"Dad. No. I'm coming. My agent will have to make some adjustments, but I can do this. I owe it to Aunt Cheryl, after all she did after mom passed. The fact that you and I are even having this conversation is evidence of how much she helped our family."

Samuel was silent. But Colton knew his father. One didn't interrupt the great Samuel Blackwell when he was obviously deep in thought. Finally, Samuel spoke.

"I... I appreciate that, son." Colton realized his father was weeping. When he thought about it, the tears were probably as much for Cheryl as they were for his late wife, a loss from which he'd never completely recovered. "I'll let you get on with your arrangements. Text me the information and I'll have Willard pick you up at the airport."

Samuel ended the call without a "Goodbye," which didn't surprise Colton in the least. It was typical of his father. He'd make a call, get what he wanted, then go on to the next event. It didn't bother him that his father wasn't chummy with him, even under the circumstances. Besides, he had an obligatory call to make of his own.

"Althea... I have some bad news."

Colton had hired a town car to pick him up at his place in Chelsea to get to the airport. He didn't want to deal with finding an Uber that could take all his luggage... and there was a lot of luggage. He took pretty much everything with him that he'd already packed, and then some. His outfits were business casual to clubwear, considering the crowd he was meeting with in the various cities. But there were a few different climates as well; a selection of light-to-heavy clothes was necessary.

His agent couldn't have been more accommodating if she had tried to. Colton was confident a Long Island Iced Tea would be in order the next time they met... perhaps a *couple* of them. But Althea assured him that she'd work with the bookstores and felt he could have plenty of time in California before picking up at what was to be the third or fourth stop. As it turned out, those cities were out west anyway—Los Angeles and San Francisco—so he could start there and then pick up the first two on his way back to New York.

Colton used his miles to upgrade to business class on his flight. He wasn't charged additional fees for his two checked bags due to his frequent flyer status with the airline, and there was plenty of room on board for his smaller rollaboard and his backpack, which included his laptop. The purser on the flight greeted him and inquired if he'd want a beverage before takeoff.

"I'd love a lemon drop martini, but you don't have martinis. A vodka tonic will be fine."

The purser smiled. He was cute, about Colton's age, but his smile didn't indicate he was trying to flirt.

"I can make you a martini, Mr. Blackwell. If it doesn't suit you, I'll bring you the vodka tonic."

Before Colton could say anything, the purser was off to take the drink orders for the next row. Less than three minutes later, the purser set down a glass... what seemed to resemble a lemon drop martini. Colton gazed at the glass, then back at the flight attendant.

"Taste it."

Colton regarded the drink suspiciously. He noticed there was sugar around the rim, and one sip indicated the guy had made it a double.

"That's... okay... that's probably one of the best lemon drop martinis I've had. How did you make it? Do you keep your own stash on board?"

"Nope. Just used what we have. We have vodka, of course, and enough fresh lemon slices to add to the drink. I put two minis in a cup full of ice to chill. While that's happening, I take the glass you're drinking right now and rub sugar on the rim. Then I swirl a half bottle of the small champagne bottles we carry, throw that out, add just a touch of OJ. Finally, I strain the ice out by pouring the vodka into the glass, add two squeezed lemon slices, and put a third one on the rim. The champagne and OJ is a quick trick to take the place of Cointreau or triple sec and the simple syrup."

Colton took another sip. "Can I request you on my next flight?"

"I hardly think so. You appeared stressed, and I wanted to help. Flag me down if you need me to keep those coming."

The purser smiled again, delivered the rest of the cocktails, and then returned to the galley to finish making his final announcements.

After takeoff, another double lemon drop martini and hot, mixed nuts were set before him by another flight attendant assisting in the cabin. Colton had the barbecued ribeye for dinner, which ranked higher in quality than many restaurants he'd frequented in the past, and switched to a glass—just one glass—of red wine. As the tray was cleared away and his coffee brought to him, he got out his laptop. He stared at the screen, hoping to get at least some thoughts into a document to work out a few plotlines on the next book he had in mind. The next thing he knew, the purser was making the landing announcements.

So much for getting any work done. I guess I was more tired than I thought.

As he deplaned, he held out his hand to the purser, thanked him again for the martinis and service, and smiled as he let go of the man's hand. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the look on the purser's face when he realized Colton had put a tip in his hand for him. The guy's eyes widened—it was a \$50 bill—and he started to protest, but Colton just smiled, shook his head, said, “Thanks, again,” and walked up the jet bridge to catch his connecting flight to Santa Barbara.

Just before takeoff, Colton texted his father with his flight number and arrival information. He didn't expect a response from him, so the lack of acknowledgment wasn't a disappointment. True to form, as soon as he deplaned in Santa Barbara and headed toward baggage claim, he saw the family's chauffeur, Willard, walking toward him.

“Master Blackwell. I'm so sorry for your loss. Do you have any other bags?”

“Thanks, Willard. And please, call me Colton? Even though you've been our chauffeur since before I was born, *Master* Blackwell is kinda dated and no longer fits me, doncha think? And yes, I have two more bags. I see them on the carousel.”

“Colton would be out of character from my years in your family's service... but I'll try. In the meantime, at least accept a few *Mister* Blackwells? I'll get your bag, sir.”

They walked to the limousine, with Willard taking both the bags. He wanted to take the backpack as well, but Colton refused. He had to fight Willard to let him take the rollaboard, but he finally relented. Less than a half hour later, they were pulling up to the front of the mansion on the estate. Uncharacteristically, his father opened the door as they arrived. He also walked up to the car, stepping in front of Willard, who was trying to do his job. But Samuel only shook his head and opened the limousine door for Colton. Willard gave them their privacy. He got the bags out of the trunk, took them inside, and up to the room the staff had prepared for Colton's stay.

Colton noted Samuel's eyes were bloodshot. He'd been crying, and his breath indicated a “few” drinks that afternoon. Before he was completely out of the car, he found father's arms around him. Neither of the men spoke. Samuel's arms tightened around Colton. As he hugged his father, he felt him tremble.

“Thank you for coming, Colton. Thank you so much.”

Madisyn stopped by the next morning to check on Samuel and joined the two men for breakfast. The personal assistant had come into his father's life a short time after he'd left home. With the still-strained relationship between father and son, Colton hadn't spent much time with Madisyn.

Madisyn Ford appeared to be the picture-perfect assistant. After checking in to see how Samuel was holding up, and how Colton's trip out was, she launched into a litany of questions about the arrangements for the funeral.

“Are you having a minister, or anyone in particular, to conduct the funeral?” she inquired.

“Cheryl wasn’t religious, so having one of the priests from the parish preside seems inappropriate,” Samuel explained. “If it had been up to her, there wouldn’t be any funeral, but she’d have had us throw one helluva party.”

“That would be Aunt Cheryl, Dad. Maybe you could think of this as more of a celebration of her life? The funeral director could say a few words—I’ve attended services where they’ve done that—and then he could ask people to share thoughts or an experience they had of her.”

“We *are* her only family, son. She never married, so that might be the best idea.”

“True, but I’m sure there are plenty of people who also volunteered at the charities she served, not to speak of the tons of people who were helped by her work. If we put out the word to the organizations, I’m sure they would be willing to share the information.” His father nodded.

“I agreed,” Madisyn added. “I become acquainted with Cheryl over the years. I think she’d approve.”

“Let’s settle on that then. Madisyn, would you call the funeral home and arrange that for us? I already set the time for Thursday at 2:00 p.m.”

“Of course,” she agreed. Madisyn reached for another bagel and turned to Colton. “So how is your writing career coming, or should I say Jackson Gregory’s career? I was anxious to see that you’d finished this last series.”

Colton stopped eating and stared at her. “You read my book? Why?”

“No, I didn’t read *a* book. I’ve read all four of them. I’m sure you’re aware that most of your readers are women over forty, right? I’ve never figured that out, frankly, but then that’s also the demographic of most of the male/male romance authors as well.”

“I *did* know that—both facts, by the way—but I’m surprised you do. My agent, Althea, is convinced that women are far more interested in romance than men are, at least straight guys. Not only do the stories have a romantic theme, but the additional attraction for women—and for my gay or bi male readers—is that the male characters are, or become, vulnerable. Most women crave to have an inside view of what goes on inside their boyfriend’s or husband’s head.”

“That was the appeal to me, even though caring about what a man thinks about me is of no importance. Do I care about what my girlfriend thinks? Oh, hell yeah.”

Colton raised his eyebrows at Madisyn’s last comment. She missed the question on Colton’s face, as she was spreading some of the blueberry jam on her bagel. His face inquired slyly of his father.

“Yes, Colton. I knew Madisyn was—*is*—a lesbian.”

“That came out in my interview years ago,” continued Madisyn. “I think the board and Cheryl felt that I was less likely to try to worm my way into your father’s fortune after your mother passed. But getting back to your books, Colton, they are exactly what I love to read as far as romance is

concerned. It's funny. I suppose years ago, gay or bi men probably read those Harlequin novels, dreaming about the man they wanted to sweep them away."

"Gay guys—me included—vacillate between wanting to be both the damsel in distress *and* the knight in shining armor."

Samuel choked on his juice at his son's comment.

"I hadn't thought of it that way, but I suppose you're right. You don't have to choose a particular role, though, frankly, neither does anyone else either these days. What I very much appreciate about your novels is that you don't dive right into the sex or lovemaking scene on page two. I was appalled by the first novel I read—not yours, of course, and I won't say whose it was—but it was more of a series of sex scenes tied together with a loose—and lame—story."

"Thank you for that. But I've written my fair share of erotic scenes..."

"Oh, I'm well aware."

"Okay... but what I was going to say—it's my intention to focus on the romance. The sex can't usually happen right away."

"You've done an excellent job of that, Colton," Samuel remarked, much to Colton's surprise.

"Wait... you've read one my books?"

What's up with my dad? First, he's had a lesbian as his personal assistant for years, which was news to me; and second, he's been reading my work?

"To quote Madisyn, 'No, I didn't read *a* book. I've read all four of them.'" Samuel reached casually for the carafe of orange juice and poured himself some, then raised his eyebrows in the direction of Colton and Madisyn, as if to ask if they wanted some, too.

"I'm fine. Thank you, Samuel."

"I'm not fine," Colton announced. "I'm... I'm blown away! I thought you still didn't approve of me—my career or my gender as a gay man."

Samuel shrugged. "Love is love. We haven't talked in long while—too long, I'm sorry to say—and I hate the reason that you're out here, I mean, for Cheryl's funeral. But I'm glad this conversation came up. I'm proud of you, son. You've chosen a path that I wouldn't have thought was your best course of action. Yet you've proven repeatedly how excellent you are at what you do. And, thanks to my daily interactions with Madisyn, I'm no longer going to let the church try to dictate who you can love. I don't understand how you could feel about another man the way I felt for your mother. But that doesn't mean you can't, and I hope you'll someday find that with your equal... someone to help you create a life the way your mother and I did. Our relationship stood the test of time because of how we consistently interacted with one another."

"How's that?" Colton questioned.

“We upheld each other’s strengths and lovingly compensated for the other person’s deficiencies. Wait... that’s not the correct word. Your mother was never deficient in anything, but she did have her weaknesses. She tended to believe people’s words and not see that their actions didn’t correspond. We disagreed on that issue many times. On the other hand, she’d call me to task when I was too pragmatic about buying or selling one of our companies... or what flowers to plant around the house.”

Samuel stopped, seeming to go into a memory he held dear. Colton gave him a moment, then continued with the conversation when he seemed complete.

“Thanks, Dad. I’ve never sought your approval, but having it—especially for this—means a great deal to me.”

Samuel smiled and patted his son’s hand. “Now. Tell us everything about this book tour you’re about to begin.”

Colton reviewed the various cities, the amount of work Althea had put into the trip, and how expertly she’d handled the last-minute changes without flinching. Madisyn asked what the closest local stop would be and promised she’d attend. His dad also beamed in agreement.

Cheryl funeral was the celebration of life that Colton had suggested for her. Not only was the funeral director amicable to taking the lead, but those in attendance practically lined up to speak on Cheryl’s behalf. Those who could make it were invited back to the estate for a light supper, where more stories about Cheryl were shared with one another.

When Colton left the Santa Barbara airport, his father came along. They chatted amicably for the entire trip. Samuel repeatedly reminded Colton how much it meant to him that they were on better terms. When he got out of the car, his dad not only hugged him warmly—he planted a kiss on his son’s cheek.

“I love you, Colton. Never forget that.”