



Cementing Her Love

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Category: Romance, Action

Description: Moving back home after retiring from the Army, I have two goals—begin my new career as a cement designer/contractor and win over the woman who's made me want to give up my confirmed bachelor badge.

Shayla is a curvy single mom, and my sister's business partner, who seems uninterested in anything personal and only grudgingly appreciates my designs when we work together on a remodeling project.

But what she doesn't realize is that I will do everything to cement her love.

Whether they're carpenters, plumbers, mechanics, electricians, framers, forklift drivers, loggers, farmers, high-voltage linemen, cement or masonry workers, tow truck drivers, oil rig workers, septic system technicians or arborists, these blue-collar heroes all have in two things in common:

They're good with their hands, and they're not afraid to get dirty. Really, really dirty.

Total Pages (Source): 14

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

1

SHAYLA

As I stepped outside of All In Bloom where I worked as a floral designer, I collided into a man who hadn't been there point two seconds ago when I flipped open the deadbolt and pushed open the glass door to begin the day.

"What the—," the rest of my sentence was muffled as my face smashed into a chest which can only be described as a hunk of cement encased in soft cotton and scented with a musk I wasn't entirely sure was from a bottle or the real thing.

Pheromones.

The kind you read about but don't really believe in. The ones that cause a woman's insides to melt, turning into fluttery pulses in her nether regions, which instantly lowers all her, okay mine, inhibitions as she, me, continues to inhale them, him, in a oh so unladylike manner.

Yeah, those pheromones.

But that declaration wasn't even the most embarrassing part. What's worse than snuffling a complete stranger? How about wobbling like a baby deer and turning instantly into the klutz that I am before almost pulling us both off balance onto our asses?

I clenched onto his forearms, that even I, in my hyper aware and panicked state, could

tell were densely roped in muscle. I prayed that I hadn't somehow managed to dig my short nails deep enough to have drawn blood.

But every fear I had of ending up on my ass was soon forgotten when he then let out the sexiest sound as his head dipped close to the side of my face and tickled my ear with a breathy "Oof," from our impact. That sound threw my jumbled-up hormones into a tailspin. It was then followed by an equally deadly and raspy chuckle. And in that split second, it was as if my fate was sealed.

My body recognized his body, and it wanted closer and possibly forever.

But that was insane.

Get a grip Shay.

The entire moment felt like forever, but in reality, was probably not more than four seconds. Before I could come up with an intelligent response, let alone an apology for not looking up as I stepped through the shop's threshold, I read the words that shattered my short-lived excitement.

Emblazoned across the man's breath-stealing chest was the logo of his business. And as my gaze traveled higher, I locked onto a pair of eyes the darkest brown I'd only ever seen once in my life. On my best friend and business partner, Brenley.

Dammit. She told me he was showing up today to discuss the remodel.

I'd just managed to fall into the arms of her brother, the one man I had no business falling for or silently lusting after.

As he stared back at me, I was struck dumb by his deep laugh lines, silver-dusted hairline and the sexiest grin ever to be aimed at me. What was it about a man with

silver threads sprinkled in his hair that had me on the verge of giggling like a schoolgirl?

Again, get it together, Shay. I hadn't been a schoolgirl for more years than I cared to admit. And wouldn't you know the first man to stir my...er...petals was the one man who needed to be off limits.

Brenley hadn't actually warned me off him, but her tales of his dedicated bachelorhood and numerous girlfriends that never seemed to last more than a month or two had.

There was no way I was going to let Colton Lynch know just how much he affected me because one disastrous relationship with a known heartbreaker was enough to last me a lifetime.

"Shayla, I forgot to tell you that my brother is stopping by this morning, and oh, well, guess you've figured that out." Brenley's words filtered through my brain. I dropped my hands and ran them down my jeans, took in a steadying breath and turned to greet my business partner, thinking her timing really sucked.

If she'd been here just five minutes ago, this entire mortifying situation could have been avoided. But no, she and her hubby, Hayden, had probably been arguing about who was going to miss the other more or something equally cutesy and unobtainable for the majority of Pineville's almost forty and perpetually single population.

I mean, I loved them both, but their constant PDAs and declarations of love for one another tended to make me feel like a pre-pubescent teen having to suffer from the embarrassment of parents deeply in love.

Yeah, sometimes I sucked as a friend but instead of focusing on the reason Brenley hadn't saved me from ending up in her brother's muscular arms, I needed to cool

down the furnace blasting my insides because more likely my cheeks had bloomed apple red alerting everyone to how I really felt.

“Yup. Here he is.” I waved a hand in Colton’s general direction without actually looking at him. Was he staring at me? Feeling just as awkward or turned on as I was? Most likely, he was trying to widen the distance between us. Lord, I hope I hadn’t drooled on his chest when my face had been plastered against it. Even worse, had he heard me sniff him?

Dammit, if my face wasn’t red before, it had to be now from just the memory of being smooshed up against all that hard steel and unconsciously huffing his manly scent. I didn’t dare touch my face to verify the heat I felt, and I didn’t dare look at Brenley, either. She could read my expressions better than most. And as much as I tried to maintain a poker face when I was feeling my feelings, my face could be read like a spicy bestseller: fast and ready for book two.

Blowing a strand of hair that had escaped my ponytail, the breeze seemed to lower my temperature, so I did it a couple more times as I managed to walk back into the shop without making eye contact with either one.

“Hey sis. Sorry for running over Shayla. I guess I was, uh, thinking about the condition of the sidewalk and how I could re-do it for you before we start work on pouring the cement at the new place next week.”

Brenley had followed me inside, then stood across from me as I turned on the register and tidied the already tidy display of blank cards on the counter. I could feel her gaze on me and I caved. When I looked into her face, she wore this odd expression, her brow furrowed and her lips pursed. Which could be interpreted as anything from she’d noticed how I’d reacted to Colton to the baby was kicking her again like a champion soccer player.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

“I’ll leave you two to discuss permits and designs. I’ve already checked the online orders and today’s going to be busy, so I’ll just get—” Unfortunately, I didn’t get very far from the counter or Colton’s unnervingly observant stare.

“About that, I’d really like you to work with Colton on the floor design for the new shop. I trust your eye more than mine right now. I’ve been so sleep deprived because of this darn acid reflux, I might revert back to arguing with Colton like we did as teenagers. It’d really help me out if I could come in a couple hours later in the mornings.”

Darn it. She just had to pull the baby card on me. I knew what it was like with one baby interrupting your sleep and still having to work, but now she had a toddler and another on the way and refusing her request would simply be mean. Working with her brother wouldn’t take more than a few hours, tops, right?

We’d outgrown the current space and were working on a new shop in a more central location. Our plan was to have it completed by Thanksgiving. He’d be onto his next project soon enough and there was a good possibility I’d never see him again.

I just needed to tamp down my body’s crazy reaction to him and all his muscles and sexy grin for a handful of meetings, right? Maybe.

I’m not sure what made me look at Colton before I answered her, but I swear I saw a flash of excitement in those near black eyes.

No, that couldn’t be right. Must’ve been the fluorescent lighting. I didn’t know him well enough to read his expressions. It was probably polite acceptance or even

sympathy for his perpetually exhausted sister, who'd insisted on working right up until the baby was born.

I tore my gaze from his before I forgot my resolve to appear unruffled and disinterested in him as anything but a guy we were doing business with. "Of course, Bren. Give me a couple minutes to start a pot of coffee and I'll set us up in the back." Nodding at Colton, I made a fast exit toward the room in the back of the shop we'd set up for lunch breaks.

I tried to control my racing heart rate as I counted out scoops of coffee grounds. Except I was soon comparing the color of his eyes to my favorite drink. Oh shit, how many was that? Four, five, or six scoops? I settled on five and if it turned out too strong, well we had creamer in the fridge or there was tap water.

Jeez, I couldn't even make the coffee without daydreaming about him, how was I going to pull this project off without turning into a love-starved fool who hadn't had sex in over a year because no one had tripped my alert system quite like the former Army Ranger turned cement contractor just did.

Dammit, why couldn't my best friend's brother be average looking or have an annoying personality or an overbite and severe halitosis at the very least?

2

COLTON

"What? What'd I do now?" I tried to walk around my sister and follow Shayla, but she stopped me with a finger to my chest and a glare I hadn't been on the receiving end of in years.

"Don't even think about it." Brenley poked me a second time and just when I thought

she was going to lay into me even more, she broke into a huge yawn. I chuckled, and she rolled her eyes at me. Just like the good ‘ol days.

“How do you know what I’m thinking?” I’m sure she was thinking what I was thinking, but it was fun pulling her chain. I hadn’t been able to in such a long time and if I had to listen to a lecture, it’d be worth it. Being back home in Pineville, back with my sisters and their husbands, plus my nieces and nephew, was exactly what I wanted and needed.

“Do not look at Shay, do not charm her, do not ask her out. She’s my best friend and business partner. And she’s a single mom who doesn’t need good-time-Colton romancing her for a month, then disappearing.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong. But that was the old me. The man I was when I was in the military was someone who had no interest in settling down, having kids, and a mortgage. But retired ranger Colton had come back home for a reason. And I was just lucky enough that Shayla was still single.

Not that she’d ever given me a second glance when I first met her at Brenley and Hayden’s wedding last year. Her little girl hadn’t been feeling well, and they’d left early. But not before she’d made an impression on me.

With her blown pupils and sweetly flushed face after we’d been tangled up in each other had nailed it for me. Oh, yeah, she’d felt our connection, and I wanted to prove to her and Brenley it could be so much more than that.

There was something about Shayla Morales and no amount of warning from my sister was going to keep me from my goal.

“Brenley, I’m not going to try to convince you I’ve changed. But I have. You’ll just have to trust me. But it’s not really up to you, is it? Would it surprise you if I told you

I'm no longer just looking for short-term hook-ups? No, don't answer that. I haven't been around that much, but that's changing now, right? I bought some property to build a house. I started my own business and heck, I might even get a dog, or maybe a cat. Cats do better on their own, right?"

My sister had crossed her arms during my mini-speech, but she didn't look convinced.

"I'm home for good. Ready to be the fun uncle and not be alone anymore. I played soldier and now I'm ready to settle in, settle down and find someone to?—"

"Play house? Is that what you want, Colton? You think you can just get a mortgage, slap a decal on the side of a work truck and you'll be satisfied with a hard day's work that doesn't involve carrying a weapon and defending democracy? You're telling me you're now a one-woman man?"

Wow, neither of his sisters had expressed their opinions about his personal life before, but he supposed from their perspective his constant deployment to places he couldn't tell them about and his lack of long-term relationships if nothing else had been consistent. To convince Brenley he'd changed wasn't going to happen overnight. He hadn't seen much of Thea, their younger sister since he's moved back, but I'm sure her reaction would be the same.

"That's pretty harsh and completely understandable. So, I'll just have to prove to you that despite the way I lived when I was in the service, I want a different life. I want what both you and Thea have found."

Brenley's face softened, but she didn't say anything for so long I began to worry. "Why am I getting the vibe you've already found someone? And that someone has no idea how tenacious you are?"

I relaxed my clenched hands and shook my head at her backhanded blessing. “Well, at least that’s a step up from annoying.” I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and said, “I better not keep her waiting. Grab some coffee and I’ll see you, Hayden, and the kids at dinner tonight, okay?”

The bell over the door jingled and their cashier, followed by an early bird customer, entered. Perfect timing. Bren would be distracted, and I’d have time to impress, hopefully, Shayla with my ideas and maybe convince her to have dinner with me this weekend.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

Before I made it out of earshot, I heard her mumble something about me still be annoying. Hopefully, she hadn't shared any of my youthful transgressions with Shayla.

3

SHAYLA

Stay strong, Shay. I can't let his rugged jaw line and his toned body or his large hands distract me from what was important. And that was making our vision for the new shop come to life. Brenley and I had planned for this move over the past year, even as she battled through morning sickness and uncertainty about taking on more work with two young kids.

If we wanted All in Bloom to continuing growing, we needed more space for the special events we've been taking on. When I'd first started with her, it was just us and a part-time employee. But with Pineville's growth we'd been the go-to floral design shop and seeing the business become something I wanted to spend the rest of my career nurturing, maybe even a place where my daughter, Aria might want to work at, had created more stress than I'd anticipated.

Thinking about Colton in any other way other than a professional one was not going to happen.

"Sorry about that. Bren wanted to make sure I, uh, don't take up too much of your time this morning. Wow, this place is amazing."

I jumped at his voice, letting out a high-pitched squeal reminiscent of my little girl's excitement at getting a new accessory for her favorite Barbie. Darn it, he'd caught me off guard. Again. And the intense way he looked at me elevated my heart rate. It had taken me five minutes to get the first hit to my system under control and now, with a simple compliment and another of his crooked grins; I was right back to feeling like a teenager crushing on the most popular boy in school.

"Um, yeah. Thanks." I waved him into the breakroom. He'd stopped just short of the threshold his gaze locked on the storeroom where all the refrigerated flowers stood lining walls of the cramped space.

He stepped inside smiling at me, which was bad enough, but when he settled his legs shoulder-width apart, then crossed his arms over his chest, my stomach flipped and my nipples went on full alert. It was such a masculine stance. I had to hold on to the back of a chair to keep myself from doing something stupid, like swooning or launching myself into his arms.

What the ever-living heck is wrong with me? It's not like I've never been around attractive guys before. We had plenty of them in Pineville, especially since the Idaho Outlaws baseball team had moved here a few years ago. Hot athletes everywhere. Brenley's sister Thea had even married one of the players and was happily living in wedded bliss and expecting their third baby.

But Colton was different. Comfortable in his own skin, and confident enough to make his second career a blue collar one. There was something extremely sexy about a man who worked with his hands. And just like that, my gaze landed back on those hands, long tapered fingers and oh no, stop imagining them caressing and stroking and jeez, I was freaking losing it.

This was not going to happen. I'm a mom with a demanding job and a life that had no room for fantasies of a hot guy I had no business lusting after. He's not the settling

down type, and he's my best friend's brother. No, no, no. Just no.

"I have some examples of patterns for the flooring I think will work for what you and Bren are looking for. But, if not, no problem." Colton kept talking, and I kept looking at his hands.

So much for my lecture.

Before I could look at what he'd created for us, our cashier runs into the room, embarrassment flushing her cheeks. "I'm sorry Shay, but we've, uh, sorta have a flower emergency."

Colton's left eyebrow quirks up and I'm forced to swallow another moan. Why does every twitch of his body cause me to react? I really need to spend more time with my battery-operated boyfriend. It had almost as much dust on it as my..., dang it, I had to stop thinking like that with him less than two feet away.

"You have flower emergencies often around here?" Colton's words were laced with laughter.

I released a slow breath and silently thanked Tricia for the interruption. Now with someone else in the room, I could relax a bit and stop wondering what he looked like naked.

"More often than you'd think. Especially if it's a man whose forgotten an anniversary or—" The enthusiasm in her voice almost made me gag.

"Tricia, what's going on? We don't open for another thirty."

Our cashier was young enough to be his daughter and only dated long-haired wanna be influencers, but even she seemed to be caught up in Colton's charm and built for

sin body.

“Oh, right. The supplier for the dahlia’s called. There was an accident over the mountain pass late last night, and he can’t guarantee when the truck will show.” Tricia kept peeking at Colton as she spoke, and I felt something I’m pretty sure I’d never ever experienced over a guy before. I’d never been the jealous type, even when my ex had told me he’d met someone and was leaving me and our baby daughter.

“Great. Now I’m going to have to call the McLean’s. Thanks, Tricia. I’ll handle it.” The mother-daughter duo had both been on the verge of being in the mother-of-the-bridezilla and bridezilla hall of fame. Typically, Brenley could turn around any demanding customer’s expectations, but they had been the outlier. And only dahlias dyed in sapphire would do for the bride’s bouquet. Something about white and blue being the colors of the groom’s alma-mater. At least the white flowers were more easily obtainable.

I looked at Colton to apologize, but he beat me to it.

“No need to explain. Work first, fun with stamped cement second.”

“Fun, huh? Well, anything compared to dealing with the McLean’s is fun, even a root canal. But yeah, can we do this later today?”

Colton pulled out his phone and scrolled. “I’m booked solid, till six. Same pretty much the rest of the week.”

I tore my gaze from his hand holding the phone, lucky phone, and picked up my coffee mug. I was going to need another hit of caffeine before I dealt with this mess. The wedding was tomorrow, and I needed a miracle to get this order filled without tears and screaming: theirs not mine.

“Shoot, okay, so I guess we could do it after work?” I zapped the coffee in the microwave and turned back to Colton. His body jerked. I’d caught him checking out my ass. Well, that was unexpected. I guess the attraction wasn’t just on my end.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

He cleared his throat, but didn't apologize for getting caught. Another flush of warmth settled in my lower belly from the realization he found me attractive. But that had to be where it stopped. I couldn't act on anything with him. He needed to be firmly in the friend/brother of my best friend zone.

"How about we meet at Hart's Pass for dinner or a drink or whatever? That way we can make any changes sooner rather than later since we're pouring the floor next week."

Dinner or whatever? The way he said that word, then let his gaze fall to my chest, made me yearn for the whatever option. But whatever was not in the cards. I'd promised Brenley I'd handle this so we could stay on schedule.

Sighing, I took a quick sip of my coffee. "I'll need to see if I can find someone to hang out with my daughter, Aria. She's only seven, thinks she's seventeen, but obviously can't be on her own if I'm late. Can I text you?"

"You can text me anytime. Do you have your phone handy?"

Colton followed me way too close as I walked back out to the front of the shop and grabbed my purse. "Okay, what's your number? I'll type it in and, wait, what are you doing?"

His fingers gently wrapped around mine, tugging the cell out of my hand.

"Go deal with your flower emergency. I'll put my number in your contacts, along with my address, just in case." He winked, then waved me toward the end of the

counter.

In a daze from another dose of adrenaline at Colton's touch, I nodded and did as instructed. Lord knows how I would react if he'd leaned in and kissed me. If I hadn't already made a promise to myself to put all thoughts of seeing where our attraction would lead us, I might just have complied.

If this was how I reacted to him from a simple request in my place of business, how was I going to handle myself with him outside of work mode?

4

COLTON

I'd never sweated waiting to hear back from a woman as much as I did in the hours it took for Shayla to text me. I prayed she'd found a babysitter and could meet me for a quick meal. I had no doubt that she'd like at least one of the stamps I had made for the shop, but the mixed signals she'd given me this morning had me barking at my crew more than once.

We were working on the summer home of my brother-in-law's best friend and one of the producers for his adventure television show, Globetrekking. Hayden's friend had been easy to deal with, but I just wanted the day over so I could meet up with Shayla. Any slight delay as the day wore on had me falling back into ranger form. And that life was over. Not that it hadn't been exciting at times, I was just ready for the next chapter.

The spring day was unusually hot and by lunch I knew I'd have to find time to make it home for a shower. There was no way I was showing up at the restaurant in cement caked jeans, smelling as if I'd run a half-marathon.

“It’s gotta be a woman. He’s never like this. Yeah, I don’t think he’s dated since I started working for him.”

It took me a while to catch on that my crew was talking about me. Not until the cement had finally set enough that I could begin laying out the mats. The design the homeowner had chosen would be a head turner once the patio was complete. Taking pride in my work, I ignored the gossiping behind me and pulled the first stamp up. Satisfaction filled me. There was nothing like seeing the near-finished project that I’d designed. I enjoyed the hard work, being outside, knowing that something I created would be around for years to come and enjoyed just as long.

“Looks awesome boss.” Sammy, the college kid I took a chance on because I’m a sucker for lost souls, wore a sincere look.

“Alright, you smartasses, line up the rest of the mats. I’m not paying you to critique my mood. And yeah, it’s a woman, but that’s all you’re getting out of me. Now let’s get serious and finish the job.”

Forty-five minutes later, the patio was fully stamped, and the crew was finishing with the clean-up when my text tone chimed. Crossing my fingers, I walked away toward my truck for some privacy. I didn’t want the guys seeing my reaction, good or bad. I know I shouldn’t put too much meaning behind Shayla’s decision to meet with me after work, but I already felt like I’d wasted enough time since I’d moved back to Pineville.

Today’s interaction with her further confirmed what I already felt. And having her in my arms had been the biggest stroke of luck I’d ever had. She. Is. The. One. And I couldn’t wait to see her reaction when I told her.

I didn’t expect her to feel the same instant knowing. Some people needed a bit of time with someone before they knew if they liked, let alone loved someone. But I still

remember the day last year when I first saw her. I'd felt like I'd been struck by lightning and if I didn't talk to her, I'd regret it.

It was at my sister's wedding, and she'd been a beautiful bride, but Shayla was stunning as her maid of honor.

She didn't wear much makeup, didn't need it. Her glowing light bronze skin, curvy hips and expressive eyes caught my attention immediately. You can tell a lot about a person by the way they treat people and I had a front row to her gentle reassurance as Brenley walked down the aisle, then stood next to Hayden, overcome with emotion as she read her vows.

Unfortunately, her daughter had become ill during the reception, so I never got my chance to approach Shayla. But I never forgot the feelings she set off in me. In fact, they carried me through my decision to retire from the Army and move back to Pineville.

If someone had told me ten, five years ago, hell even the day before I first saw Shayla that I would fall in love with a woman at first sight, then not even speak to her for almost a year, I would have laughed my ass off.

But this morning, with her in my arms, and seeing her reaction to me, I didn't want to wait one more day to let her know my intentions.

I read her text and had to bite my tongue to keep from shouting out in triumph. At dinner, once we finished with the discussion on which design she wanted, the real work would begin: convincing her I wasn't crazy and, two, I wasn't going anywhere.

"These are awesome, Colton. In fact, I'm not sure which one I like better." Shayla beamed at me. I could have died a happy man right then and there. This was going better and quicker than I'd hoped. Now I can focus on her. And me and us getting to

know each other beyond business.

“Sleep on it and the first one you think about after you wake up is the one you should go with.” I set aside the samples, making sure to brush my fingers against hers. Any excuse to touch her and I was going to take it. Not in a creepy, intrusive way. Just enough to let her know where my interest was. It was on her. Not on the other customers or the servers, or any of the various distractions in the very busy pub.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

And Shayla was easy to focus on. Beautiful and funny, but as the minutes ticked by when the business stuff was done, she was doing her best to avoid anything personal. But I persevered.

“So, I bet you're happy to be back and able to spend more time with your family. And now you're like the fun uncle, huh?” Shayla tucked a shiny lock of hair behind her ear. The move drew my gaze to her delicate hands marred by scratches in various states of healing.

I took her hand in mine before she could hide it back in her lap, and rubbed the longest mark. “Hazards of the job?” I asked.

She tried to tug her hand free, however when I gently tugged back, she relaxed and left her hand in mine. I loved the sweet, sexy sounds she probably had no idea she was making as I massaged her tender flesh.

“Yes. I forgot to wear my gloves today.” Her breathy answer went straight to my dick and visions of her beneath me, begging me to take her, filled my thoughts. When she licked her lips, I almost lost it. And it was all I could do not to drag her across the table onto my lap.

“Colton, you need to stop looking like you want to gobble me up.” Shayla pulled her hand back and scanned the room. “I think I might have given you the wrong impression, but this,” she waved a hand between us, “needs to be business focused. Business friendly if you'd like. But I work with your sister.” She took a long pause then said, “And this,” again with the waving fingers, “isn't going to happen.”

Uh, uh. Not letting her use that excuse. The fact that she was close to my sister I saw as a bonus. Probably part of the reason I'd never introduced a woman to my family had more to do with what they would think of the person I wanted in my life versus how serious I actually was about a relationship. And that all changed from the first time I saw Shayla.

Shayla was already beloved by my family, and I couldn't imagine myself without her in my life.

"I can see your viewpoint. However, we're not in high school or in our twenties when neither of us were ready to settle down. But the way I see things, we're mature enough to put our own happiness first. And if that's with your best friend's brother, then all the better, right? I couldn't be happier that the woman I want in my life is already a part of my sister's life. So, win-win. And now we can focus on us and what we want."

Her gorgeous eyes went wide at my comment, and I saw her drawing back, attempting to formulate some type of response that would warn me off. But I wasn't so easily discouraged. When I saw what I wanted, I went after it full force. And I wanted Shayla Morales. I'd prepped myself, listing every obstacle she might think of against us being together. I was ready.

And I also wasn't above using our intense physical connection to my advantage.

"Confident, aren't you?" Her expression was unreadable.

"Well, I've been accused of worse. But yeah. Especially when it comes to how I feel about you. I'm just a guy asking the beautiful woman in front of him to give him, them, a chance." My words might be corny, but my feelings weren't.

Shayla released a groan. But then her face split into a grin, and the pink flush on her

face was all the encouragement I needed. “Say no. Tell me you don’t feel the same, or never will. But I can’t stop thinking about what those soft, full lips will feel like under mine.”

Her lips formed into a sweet O, and all amusement vanished. Her gaze locked on my lips, her tongue dipped out with a quick swipe across her top lip, and that was all I needed.

I didn’t care how many people saw us, I needed to brand this woman as mine.

5

SHAYLA

This was crazy times ten. I heard his words, welcomed his kiss and was rocked, literally almost off my chair. The first touch of his lips sent a flood of warmth as it wound its way through me, igniting a fire that had been on slow burn since this morning.

But I had to stop this. It took me another thirty seconds or so for my lips to listen to my brain, but I found the strength to break the best kiss of my life.

“I, uh. That can’t mean anything Colt.” With shaky hands, I fixed my hair, then gathered my purse and the folder of flower patterns.

“Oh, that meant everything. I think we’re old enough not to pretend it didn’t. I want to see you again. Outside of the project. What are you doing tomorrow night?”

Nothing came to mind other than another Friday movie night with Aria watching her favorite

Disney movie for the dozenth time. “Um....my daughter....” I felt like my head was swimming in molasses, and I couldn’t come up with an excuse he might believe. “This isn’t a good idea.”

Colton stood and he gently placed his hands on my shoulders. I had no choice but to look up. The desire I saw in his eyes, however, told me it could be.

“Listen, how about I take you two out? I’ll pick you up after you get off and we can go out for pizza or burgers, or?—”

Stepping back, I had to get his hands off me. Because I so wanted to say yes. To the date, and more. And the longer he touched me, the more I wanted to dive into the deep end of the pool with him. “No, that’s nice of you, but I don’t introduce Aria to men I date. That’s a hard and fast rule I never break.”

He looked a little hurt, and that was the last thing I wanted, but I’d held firm. “Look, a long time ago, I made a promise to myself that I wouldn’t confuse my little girl by meeting someone I wasn’t serious about. It’s hard enough raising her alone without getting her attached to a guy that wouldn’t be around in a few months.”

“Wow, so you’d go into a new relationship already expecting it to end? That’s kind of sad, don’t you think?”

“No, it’s realistic and smart. I don’t expect you to understand since you’re not a parent. If we were to date or...whatever, Aria is not going to be part of the equation.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

Colton threw down some bills to cover our meal and drinks. He was silent as he followed me out to my car. I really didn't want to hurt his feelings, but it's always better, to be honest. A lesson I'd learned after my ex left. I wasn't closed off to having a new relationship. I was just going to be sure that the next man I let into my heart, and into Aria's, was a hundred percent in with forever and becoming the father figure she'd never had.

I hadn't planned on the evening ending on such a heavy tone. And I hadn't expected Colton's declaration, either. There was so much to think about.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

We both spoke at the same time, and I wish I could say that I wasn't contemplating breaking all my rules to see where our attraction led. I just needed to be strong. And to forget how that kiss made me feel.

"I really am, Shayla. I was just thinking about us without looking at it from the parent angle. And that's on me. But what I feel for you isn't going to stop. I'm ready to wait and show you I'm the right guy for you and your daughter."

"That's a pretty bold statement coming from a confirmed bachelor." The hope I'd heard in his voice did funny things to my lower belly, and I needed more space. I unlocked my car, then opened the door as I tried to hide my shaking hands. Colton was saying all the right things, and damn if I didn't want to throw myself at him right now, plaster myself to all his hard angles and kiss him again.

Before I could get inside, he spoke.

“I made a promise to myself too, Shayla.”

His words made me pause. One foot in the car, one still on the pavement, I took the bait. “Oh. What was it?”

“I promised myself I wasn’t ever going to settle and get married, start a family just because I was getting older. That unless a woman stirred me to my very soul, made me forget my own name, and want to drag her to bed the moment I saw her, then no one would be good enough for me.”

“How do you know I’m that woman?”

“Go out with me, and I’ll show you.” Colton brushed his lips against mine, grinned, then turned and walked to his truck, whistling a familiar tune I couldn’t name.

Struck dumb again by how damn sexy his confidence was, I watched him walk away, wondering if I could take a chance on him, on us.

6

COLTON

I walked into my sister Thea’s backyard on Sunday and was immediately swarmed by a gang of toddlers. Poppy, the oldest of the trio, and Beau, who was barely toddling, were Thea and Brock’s kids, and then right behind them was Brenley’s mini-me, Allie, who launched herself into my arms. The other two were not having that and started jumping up and down.

“Up, up. Uncle Colt, pick me up!”

Hayden walked up to me, put his arms out to Allie, who happily snuggled into her father. “No candy this time, Uncle Colton. Otherwise, your sister will have a fit and the last thing I need is my very pregnant wife stressing over our amped up daughter.”

“Lesson learned, man. Its carrot sticks and raisins from now on. Scouts honor.” Then I took off with Poppy and Beau who were now securely tucked against me in football holds. One on each side. I ran the perimeter of the backyard and ended at the play set.

“Man, you were never a scout. From what Bren says, more like a scoundrel.” Hayden’s laughter reached me from where he stood next to the grill.

Allie wiggled out of Hayden’s arms to join us, and I spent the next twenty minutes pushing them all on the swing set.

Still breathing hard and even with all the physical activity at work, I’m not ashamed to admit I was a bit winded. Since retiring and starting up the business, I’d let my daily workouts go, thinking I’d get enough exercise working with cement. Which it was great for my major muscle groups, but I got little to no cardio. With a fourth niece or nephew on the way, I was going to have to up my game, especially if I wanted to keep my fun uncle title.

“You really should have one of those for yourself.” Brenley handed me a beer and settled in next to me.

I ignored her comment, because that was exactly what I was thinking. But I was more interested in finding what kind of stories she’d been telling her husband about me. “So why does Hayden think I’m some kind of player? You know me, sis. I’ve never led a woman on. My life until now wasn’t set up for a family.”

The kids saved her. “Mama, can we eat now?” The whine of hungry toddlers filled the air and right on cue, Brock called out. “Food’s ready! Where are my customers?”

Cries of “Me! Me!” and “I’m coming, Daddy!” rang out. And just like that, I was forsaken for hot dogs and potato chips.

Instead of following the troops, I wrapped an arm around Brenley’s shoulder and waited her out. “Don’t think because you’re pregnant that I’m going to let you off the hook. So, what gives?”

She shifted her weight from foot to foot as she cradled her bump. “Okay, you know I hate gossip.”

“But....”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

“But I ran into Laci Hart at the store this morning and she’s typically not a gossip either, but she was curious and happy to see you in the pub with a date. And she mentioned that there was some serious PDA going on, but?—”

“That’s a lot of buts, sis. Just spill it. What do you want to know?”

Brenley slipped out of the hug and gave me a hard glare. Like the one I used to get when I annoyed her when we were kids. “You pretty much declared your intentions with Shayla the other day and now you’re lip locked in public with some other woman. So, yeah, I was irritated with you and I may have shared that with Hayden.”

I could let her stew about it for the rest of the afternoon or I could let her off the hook and reassure her. Part of me understood why she was upset, but another was hurt that she would believe I would do anything to ruin my chances with Shayla after I told her how I felt.

“Did Laci recognize the woman?” I wasn’t sure if Shayla had ever been to Hart’s Pass Pub before or if she knew Laci, but it was possible that the women hadn’t ever met.

“No, she only saw her from the back. She was only in there to drop something off for Luke and didn’t have a lot of time to stop by your table to say hi. But she did say she could tell how into this woman you were. Like the two of you were in your own little world.”

My face split into a grin at the description because it was true. I couldn’t even say what our waitress looked like. I was so focused on Shayla. “Look, you know me, so

you should know that when I'm committed to something, or in this case, someone, I'm laser focused. And that woman I was with? It was Shayla. We met to go over the samples I had made because we were interrupted by a bridal emergency."

"This is why I don't do gossip! OMG I was so freaked out, Colton." Brenley pinched me in the side, then hugged me.

Her bump got in the way, so she grabbed both sides of my face and pulled me down and looked me in the eye. "I'm sorry. I've never been so relieved in my life. So, what does this mean? Are you two dating?"

I wish I knew. It had been two days since that unforgettable kiss, and she still hadn't texted me. I wanted to text her so many times this weekend, but I really wanted her to reach out to me first.

Brenley didn't give me time to respond. She clapped her hands in excitement and said, "Wait, she's coming today. With Aria. They should be here soon. Oh, I can't wait to talk to her and?"

"Hold up. She's not quite there yet. But I'm not giving up. But I know she's the one, Bren. I'm going to give her time. So please, no pressure, okay?"

"Pfft. I've got this. You can count on me. Have you forgotten I still haven't told Mom who broke her favorite pie dish? Oh, they're here!"

Shaking my head, I watched Brenley waddle off toward the sliding doors where Shayla and Aria had just stepped out. The look on Shayla's face at seeing me wasn't exactly encouraging.

SHAYLA

How had I'd totally forgotten that, of course, Colton would be at the family barbeque? Brenley and I always included each other in our extended family events. She often joined me when my sister and mom visited and we'd schedule a spa day or fancy dinner out. I had spent many holidays with her and Hayden and his big family. It was one of the things I loved about our friendship. We'd become like sisters over the years.

But today was different. I wasn't anywhere near ready to be around her family, and Colton, when I still hadn't figured out what to do about my growing feelings for him. And darn him, he wasn't going to make it easy. I could see the huge smile on his face and the quick look toward Aria that had him altering his course to stop by the grill where Brock was entertaining the kids by eating a loaded hot dog in two bites.

Thankfully, I now had a bit of time to decide how to introduce my daughter to him, just as a friend though. Shoot, I needed to come up with an excuse to make a quick escape.

"Stop right now, Shay. I see the wheels turning. You and Aria are staying. No one is going to say anything about you and Colton sucking face at the pub the other day." Brenley teased me as she breezed by on her way back into the house and my heart nearly stopped.

Turning to where Aria had been beside me, I released a heavy sigh. She'd already skipped off to join the kid's table. She loved being the oldest and playing mom. She considered them her cousins at this point, which was one more reason not to start something with Colton. There was no way I'd make things awkward for my daughter should things not work out.

"Hi, Shay. Beer?" Hayden offered me a frosty bottle of my favorite IPA and I

grabbed it like a lifeline. One was my limit, but I could use the liquid courage to calm my jangled nerves and tame the butterflies running havoc in my midsection every time I peeked over at Colton.

Since our kiss, I'd used my vibrator more times than I had in the past couple months, but it hadn't touched the intense need I felt looking at him now. Only having Colton's hands on me would quench this insane desire.

The fantasy that had been the most recent hit me. Where Colton filled and stretched me as I rode him till I collapsed and achieving an epic orgasm.

What the hell was I doing to myself right now? My daughter wasn't fifty yards away and I'm thinking about Colton in very inappropriate and very un-mom-like ways. Okay, deep breaths. I'm just ramped up because it's been so long since I had sex. And not just sex, but really good sex. Being a single mom had its challenges and a non-existent love life had been the norm for way too long.

Yeah, Shay, you're kidding yourself right now. No one else was going to do. Like you don't want Colt's work-roughened hands and his hard body wrapped around yours. My inner sarcasm made me giggle.

While I kept an eye on the kids, he'd been entertaining them with a story and had them in stitches, clutching their sides. Sighing, I plopped myself down into the closest lounge chair and one that faced away from Colton. I was beginning to feel like a stalker.

So he was good with kids. That didn't mean anything. Anyone could make toddlers laugh, right?

"What's so funny?" Colton asked as he stepped from behind my chair.

“Ack! Where’d you come from?” I bobbed the drink in my hand then placed a hand over my heart and looked up into his handsome face. “Didn’t your mother ever tell not to sneak up on people like that?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

“Yeah, but what’s the fun in that?” He sat across from me and took a long pull from his bottle of beer.

I watched him swallow and as his Adam’s apple bobbed, my gaze traveled to the open vee of his shirt, landing on that sexy dent of skin nestled between his collarbones. The top swell of his pecs were prominently outlined beneath the soft material, and the urge to lick and taste him overwhelmed me.

Loud throat clearing knocked me from my sexual haze and dammit, why couldn’t I control myself around this man?

“Keep looking at me like that and I’ll get ideas. Do you want me to get ideas, Shayla?” Colton leaned forward so close I could feel the heat of his body.

Shaking my head, I strangled out, “Not right now.”

Both his eyebrows shot up and his gaze did a slow run over me, down to my freshly painted cotton candy toenails and back up. “I’ll be ready. Just let me know when.”

My mouth went dry, and all I could manage was a slight nod.

“Okay, then. So, I came over to ask if you wanted some ribs, or a cheeseburger? Maybe a hot dog?” He shifted in his chair, then tugged on his jeans. “Sweetie, you’re going to have to stop looking at me like that, otherwise I won’t be able to stand up and walk back to where every member of my family is enjoying their barbeque.”

Another giggle escaped me. Don’t look, Shay. Do not look at the hot guy’s crotch to

see how big his erection is.

Dammit, I looked.

“Shay.” He growled my name in warning.

It was the sexiest sound I’d ever heard.

“I’ll, uh. I’ll go get a plate. You want anything?” I rose up like he hadn’t offered to get the food, ready to bolt. My cheeks were hot and I could feel sweat dripping down my back, and it wasn’t that hot out today.

“Oh, I want plenty, but I’ll take a burger. And the coldest bottle of water you can find.”

Again, words failed me, so I left and walked quickly toward the cooler. I grabbed a couple of waters, then Brock handed me a plate with a couple of burgers. When I thanked him, he gave me a wink, then looked around before he said, “You two look good together.”

Really? Did everyone know about what Colton said to me the other day? Or that kiss in the restaurant? “Um,” was all I could manage. I awkwardly turned around and marched back to my seat. From the corner of my eye, I could tell Aria was having a good time and had no clue that her mother was dealing with very adult issues.

Colton watched me the whole way, and I almost tipped the plate and lost the burgers: twice.

“You can’t look at me like that.” I held out the bottle of water and the plate of food.

“You started it.” He took a big bite of his cheeseburger but held my gaze.

“Well, one of us has to finish it, because...because. Just because.” I uncapped my water and drank my fill and looked everywhere but at him.

“Because you want me. I understand. It’s exactly how I’ve felt about you since the first time I saw you.” Colton released a heavy sigh.

I’d never done a spit take, but I did today, and it sprayed all over Colton’s shirt. Like he needed a wet t-shirt to further turn me on. Sheesh, I was a mess.

He pulled the material out from his chest, chuckling. “Well, at least that helped cool me off a bit.”

This is ridiculous. I’m not touching that statement with a ten-foot pole. I should have left when we first got here. But now, I’ve seen him with his family, playing with the kids, helping his pregnant sister, and looking comfortable in his skin the entire time. And to top it off, I couldn’t stop myself from imagining climbing into his lap and riding him till we both got off.

“I’m so sorry, but I need to go see how Aria’s doing.” Leaving my food untouched, I managed to look at him without checking to see if his zipper was still threatening to bust wide open.

“That’s okay darling. I like the view coming and going. By the way, have I told you how beautiful you look today? Especially when you blush.” Colton’s voice was loaded with promise...so much promise.

Without thinking, I tugged on the hem of my sleeveless blouse. And realized my mistake as soon as I did it. It made the material tighten against my chest, highlighting just how turned on I was. Stupid nipples.

It was one of my favorite tops and flattered my curves. I was not going to look at him

again to see his reaction. The stretchy jeans I was wearing had the bonus of tummy control and also did wonders for my ass. If I'd remembered that Colton would be here today, and I wanted him to look at me, the way he was already looking at me, I would have chosen this very outfit since it made me feel confident and, yes, sexy.

His compliments made me feel so good, but I needed to avoid him for the rest of the evening. With a small smile, I made a beeline for Brenley while calling myself a coward. His low rumble of laughter rang in my ears the entire way and, just like that, I knew I was fooling myself if I thought I could go back to only seeing him as my best friend's brother.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

COLTON

Watching Shayla pretend not to notice me watching her was beyond entertaining. It affirmed I'd gotten under her skin, in the best way possible. She played games with the kids while Hayden, Brock, and I discussed Brock's upcoming retirement from the Idaho Outlaws. He'd been with the United States Baseball Team since the franchise began, but he was ready to focus on other things now that he and Thea were expecting another baby.

By the time the kids' bedtime rolled around, I overheard Allie and Poppy conspiring to have a sleepover. Beau had moved on from the girls and was playing with trucks on the patio near his mom while the rest of us sat around the firepit.

Shayla sat directly across from me, but she kept her attention on my sisters as they discussed the new location for All in Bloom. She accepted another beer from Brock who wanted her to try a new brand he'd discovered. I'd tried it earlier and thought it might be too heavy for her taste, but Brock was thinking of investing, and wanted her thoughts as someone who enjoyed IPAs.

I might consider it as well, but I'd invested my salary from the Army wisely and most of the time I lived in base housing, so I really didn't have a lot of bills the past twenty years besides a personal vehicle.

Besides the property I'd purchased to build my home on, I'd put most of my money into my cement business.

The end of the evening was winding down and I tried to come up with a way to see

Shayla again, sooner rather than later. Little did I know my sister my sister was already working on it for me.

The next thirty minutes were a whirlwind of amped up kids and logistics. I helped Thea clean up while still being within earshot of Shayla.

“Of course, I’m okay to drive. I didn’t even finish that second beer and we’ve been here for hours.” Shay waved off her brother-in-law’s concerns.

“We can drop you off, Shayla. It’s not that far from our place.” Brenley yawned, then glanced over at me and grinned.

“Oh, wait. What am I thinking? Colton’s renting a place not too far from you. “Hey, Colt. Can you take Shay home? We’re taking the girls to our house, and it would really make me feel better knowing she got home safe.” Brenley kept a straight face as she spoke and I bit my tongue to keep myself from laughing at my sister’s match making. I definitely owed her big time.

“It would be my pleasure. Whenever you’re ready to go, Shayla, I’m ready.” I answered.

Brock and Hayden both busted out laughing, but Shayla wasn’t paying any attention to them. Looks like everyone was on my side in this one.

“I am perfectly fine to drive, but thank you. Brenley really.” Shayla stood with her hands on hips. Hips I couldn’t wait to get my hands on.

“Okay, but just humor the pregnant lady. Please?” Brenley gathered her things and walked over to her husband, making it literally impossible for Shayla to argue further.

Walking closer to her, I offered again. “Well, you didn’t have anything to eat so, it’s

not a bad idea. And we can wait to leave until after they do so Aria doesn't see you and me together in my truck. Sound good?" I did my best to keep the excitement at having her to myself from my expression, but it was tough. She was so damn cute when she was riled up.

Looking from my sister to me, Shayla shrugged her shoulders. "I'd forgotten about not eating. It makes sense and I appreciate the offer." She walked off to give Aria a hug while I finished with the clean-up.

Fifteen minutes later, Shayla and her unique scent of flowers and woman were in my truck. The sun was beginning to set, but there was still time to make a quick detour. "How'd you like to see my property? It's about five minutes from here and the view is almost as good as Thea and Brock's." I wanted to add, "and almost as good as the one I'm looking at," but I didn't want to appear desperate to impress her. Even if I was.

"Sure."

Her one-word answer had me wondering what was going on in that pretty head of hers. I couldn't quite get a read on her mood, but the air in the cab was definitely charged between us.

I'd picked the lot with the size in mind to add a shop next year. I was still going over floor plans with the builder, so the foundation hadn't yet been dug out. Parking near the lookout at the back of the lot, I'd angled the truck so we could see the protected wetland and meadow below.

"This is beautiful, Colton." Shay jumped out and walked to the edge.

Taking my time, I sat and watched her for a moment with the sun low in the sky and the thought of her and me building a home and family here felt more than right. It felt

inevitable.

She turned back to me and laughed. “Aren’t you going to join me?” She shouted.

I rolled down my window. “Nope. I like the view from here much better.”

Shayla’s shoulders went back and rigid at my words. I couldn’t read her face to see if she was scowling or not. Damn, did I just ruin the moment? I held her gaze. I wasn’t going to take back my words or apologize, but maybe I should join her. However, before I could open my door, she was marching back to her side of the truck, yanking the door open and climbing back in.

And she didn’t stop climbing until she was nestled in my lap with her thighs spread open, resting on either side of my growing erection. Instinctively, my hands went to her waist. There wasn’t a spare inch between us or between her back and the steering wheel.

I fumbled behind her, finding the lever below the dashboard and adjusted it as far up as it could go, then hit the electronic switch on the lower seat and pushed it back.

“I’m not complaining, but what did I say? Because I need to commit it to memory for future use. Damn Shayla, you make me harder than the cement I work with every day.”

Instead of answering, she just smiled and started to unbutton her blouse.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

Holy hell, she was perfect.

“Do you have a condom?” Her fingers unsnapped her jeans, and she wiggled to her backside, then shimmed out of them before climbing back.

“Damn. And yes. I just need to shift—ah, fuck, darling.” She’d opened the snaps on my jeans and freed my aching cock, taking me in hand. Her forehead fell onto mine. Our heavy breaths mingled between us, and I could have died and gone to heaven in that exact moment. Well, maybe after another five or so because if she kept stroking me, I was going to go off before she could.

“Hold on, Shay. Are you sure about this? I don’t want you to think I expected this, or?—”

“Shut up and kiss me.” But instead of waiting for me, she dipped her head and kissed me long and hard. Our tongues dueled, but I won and set a pace that she matched with her strokes until I had to put my hand over hers.

“As good, no, as great as that feels, I need to you to stop and let me take care of you first.” She leaned back with a wicked smile. I closed my eyes and sent up a prayer I’d survive this version of Shay. I fished my wallet out of my pocket and tossed it where I could easily reach it when I needed it. Thank god for bench seats. Best decision I made when I bought this truck.

SHAYLA

I’m not sure what actually made me jump onto Colton, but once I was there, I knew I

was home. And he felt so good, better than what I could ever imagine. Desperate for him, I couldn't wait. I simply acted.

When I took his velvety, hard length in hand, all I could think about was having it deep inside me. And when I thought I couldn't get any wetter, he told me he wanted to take care of me first, and a second flood of warmth pooled between my thighs. The need for release had me rocking my hips and pressing myself against his cock.

“Hold on, love. Let me. Do you know how fucking sexy you look perched above me? Your hair backlit by the setting sun and your luscious, pebbled nipples just begging to be sucked?”

Nodding, I reached behind my back and released my aching breasts, then arched closer, offering myself to him.

The first swipe of his tongue was a spark. The second had me lifting off and moving my hips again. “I need you, Colt. Please.” I didn't recognize my own voice. It sounded so husky, so needy.

“I've got you. I hope you're not attached to these panties.”

Before I could comprehend what he'd said, he tugged until I heard fabric tearing. Oh, my. His fingers tunneled between my folds and I wanted to throw my head back and beg him to make me come, but I also wanted the tease. I wanted it slow and to savor every moment.

“So wet for me.” He rasped out then kissed my neck in hot open mouth kisses as he strummed my swollen flesh. Flicking fast, then slow, I held as still as I could. The agony of the pleasure, and the release I knew I'd find from his wicked fingers, had me holding my breath. I wanted this first time to last forever. His whispered words between kisses emboldened me to ride his fingers and not worry about what I looked

like doing it.

Colton continued to stroke me, but when his kisses stopped, I opened my eyes to find his smoldering gaze locked on my face.

Sweat glistened on his forehead, and when he smiled, I nearly came.

“So, damn beautiful. Tell me what more can I do? Faster, slower?”

I couldn't have spoken if my life depended on it. It didn't matter that he was getting me off in the cab of his truck. This was the perfect place for us as far as I was concerned.

Colton's thumb began rubbing my clit, first in slow tortuous circles, then when I let out a low moan, he increased his speed and, thank god, the pressure. Sharp tingles erupted inside me and I was so very close. “Yes, please. Just. Like. That.” I begged.

When my orgasm hit, I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. I rode the waves as he milked me. My inner walls clamped down on the fingers he'd slipped inside me, seeking that magical spot.

“Breathe, baby. Scream if you need to. I've got you.” Colton's words released me and my cries filled the steam-filled cabin. My thighs burned, but I didn't care. I held onto his shoulders tight as aftershocks rocked my body and his fingers dug into my hips, steadying me.

I pressed myself against his cock, revealing at the hiss he released. “Your turn.” I lifted myself up just enough to give him space. He grabbed his wallet, tore into the condom, and rolled it on himself in record time.

Feeling surer of myself and my body than I ever have, I lifted his chin with a finger

and held his darkened gaze as I sheathed myself, taking his length inside me one inch at glorious inch at a time.

Better than I'd imagined, he stretched and filled me until I was seated in his lap. "Do you want me to move?" I teased.

"You're a vixen, and I like it. Hold on." Colton bucked once, then twice. The movements hitting my sensitized clit and I swear I saw stars.

"Um, yes. More. Just like that." I waited, and he did not disappoint.

"Lift yourself just a bit. There, right there." He groaned, then captured my lips. Kissing me as he pounded inside me, sending me even higher until another orgasm crept up on me.

Colton's thrusts became faster, deeper. How did I not know sex could be like this? Feel like this?

"You are so damn perfect. Come with me." Colton began to strum my clit once more. He shouted my name, and I tightened my hold around his neck and held on as I crested again. I didn't hold my voice back this time. Our shouts rang out and I swear our heartbeats drummed in sync with each other. He said I was perfect, but it was him that was perfect and I was another step closer to falling all the way.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

Long minutes ticked by as we embraced, each riding through our bodies aftershocks and soon our breathing evened out.

“So.” Colton’s husky voice filled my ear.

“So.” I mimicked.

“So, does this mean we’ll be doing that again?”

“Oh, we are so going to do that again.” How could I fight this connection? I couldn’t. So I was ready to roll the dice and see where this would lead while guarding my heart—just in case.

9

SHAYLA

It had been a month since Colton and I began seeing each and in all that time; he hadn’t pushed me for more than our quick meet ups, a handful of lunches, and one memorable make-out session in the back of a movie theater. And my heart was more than intact.

He also hadn’t pushed me to spend time with Aria or to let my daughter know how important we’d become to each other. And it was past time that I acknowledge just how important he was.

Beyond the awesome sex, we had similar interests and views on a variety of issues.

And he made me laugh and couldn't care less that I wasn't super thin. In fact, he loved my curves and the extra padding I carried around my middle. He made me feel like the most beautiful and desirable woman in the world.

While I waited for my alarm to go off, I realized that I'd had the perfect opportunity to not just let Aria, but Colton's family, know about our relationship a couple days ago when we were all together after Brenley had baby Micah. Now I couldn't wait to let him, and everyone know how I really felt about him.

Looking back on the last few weeks, Colton seemed pretty content with how things were going between us. So maybe it wasn't as serious as I now believed and wanted it to be? Nope, not going to talk myself out of believing this was real between us.

Throwing back the bedcovers, I decided to text Colton and ask him to come over tonight for dinner, but before I could get up, Aria comes running into my room and jumped onto my bed. Normally, I'd grab her and tickle her until she begged me to stop. But not today.

Today the motion of the mattress as Aria bounced several times made me dizzy, then a sudden surge of nausea rose up. "Sweetie stop." I placed a hand on the bed to steady myself, then took a deep breath. But that didn't help. And before I can say another word to my confused daughter, I took off for the bathroom and puked my guts out.

I managed to get her off to school and reassure her I'm fine, and that I must have eaten something that didn't agree with me. Then I made a beeline for the closest store before heading to work.

Thirty minutes later and a sleeve and a half of saltines and a glass of defizzed lemon line soda, I sat in the bathroom staring at six different brands of pregnancy tests all with the same result.

Someone knocked on the door. “Shay? Are you in there?”

What was Brenley doing here? Scooping up the tests, I shove them into the pockets of my apron. “Bren, what are you doing? You just had a baby!” Rushing out of the bathroom, I switch from freaked-out, holy-hell-I’m-pregnant mode to concerned-friend mode.

“Hayden was driving me nuts. He’s so worried about every little noise Micah was making. He was the same with Allie. So, I pumped enough for him to bottle feed the baby when he gets hungry, showered and headed over here.” She eyed me as I tried to put distance between us. “Why were you locked in the bathroom so long? You look like you didn’t get any sleep last night.”

“Yeah, well, that’ll be me again soon enough.” I mumbled under my breath.

“What was that? Shay, you’ve got me worried. You’re always ready to go first thing in the morning?—”

“I’m pregnant.” After I said it, I covered my eyes with my hands, then peeked through my fingers to see her reaction.

“That’s funny. It sounded like you said you’re pregnant...and you’re not joking. You’re pregnant! Oh, my lord, that’s awesome. What did Colton say?”

“I haven’t told him yet. I just found out. Look.” I pulled out the pee sticks and dumped them on the counter.

Instead of looking at the evidence, she looked at me, her eyes wide with concern. “Are you telling me I’m the first to know? Okay, I’ll cover for you. I can handle things around here for an hour before my husband comes looking for me. The girls should be here soon anyway to work the front end. Now get over to his place and tell

my brother he's going to be a daddy."

"But, I'm too old, Bren. And we used protection. Every time." I was losing it, but getting pregnant was so not on my radar.

"Thirty-seven isn't that old to be pregnant, Shay. You're in good health and you've always talked about regretting not having a sibling for Aria. I really don't see the problem here." Brenley said.

Pacing I threw up my hands at how rational she sounded. "The problem is, he's your brother. What if things don't work out between us? I couldn't handle it if something happened to our friendship." Why was she acting so calm? Why wasn't she freaking out like me?

"Okay, here's the thing, Shay. What if things do work out you and have a beautiful family together? Stop looking for the what if and live your life without any regrets, otherwise you're gonna be unhappy and miserable, and you don't want your daughter to see you that way? You want her to go on and have healthy relationships. So show her what's possible." Brenley stepped into my path and hugged me. "And I'm going to remind you of something you said to Hayden when you first met him." Brenley smirked.

I can't remember anything I said to Hayden that first day other than the slight shock that Brenley had fallen fast and hard for the silver fox adventure show host, and oh, damn. "Okay, let me have it." I hung my head and braced myself.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

“I’m not going to let you ‘have it’. I mean, it’s not like you two have been trying to hide things. It’s so obvious how you two feel about each other.”

She wasn’t wrong. I always showed my feelings on my face. I was a terrible poker player.

“You said to Hayden, ‘I’ve never seen her happier.’ And the same can be said about you. I’ve never seen you this way, Shay. And when I say I’ve never seen my brother treat a woman like he does you, as if you’re the most important person in the world. It’s never happened. Plus, the way he looks at you. I thought the air around you guys was going to combust the other day you two were trying so hard to not look at each other.”

Not sure how to respond because yeah, she’s my best friend but also Colton’s sister, so there was a small amount of discomfort talking about how he feels about me and vice versa or sharing the usual things besties shared. But yeah, since I’m pregnant, there was no getting around the fact that she knew we’d done the horizontal mambo.

“I’ve never felt this way before.” I whispered. Stupid hormones had me on the verge of tears. Knowing she accepted Colton and I being a couple meant more to me than anyone else’s opinion.

“Do you love him?” Brenley asked.

My eyes filled with tears before I could answer.

“Well, go. Tell him everything.”

He wasn't home. I texted him to get the address of where he was. I couldn't wait until the end of the day. Hopefully, the cement wasn't actually being poured when I got there because I don't think I could hold back and not blurt it out and then be forced to wait for his reaction while he and his crew had to get it spread out before it began to set.

When I arrived, I'd settled myself enough to sit and watch him through my windshield until he was at a point I could speak to him.

As I watched the process, I thought to myself, there's just something about a man who worked with his hands. How was it that Colton, with his rubber boots caked in cement, running a spreader with his ball cap worn backward, wearing a lopsided grin, looked sexier than any movie star I'd ever crushed on?

He exuded confidence and by the smile on his face: joy. He was actually enjoying himself. And isn't that what we all strive for in our work life? Many never achieved it. Sad but true. So, when you see it in someone, someone you care about, someone you're pretty sure you love and want to spend the rest of your life with, then seeing him excel at his chosen second act was one of the best feelings in the world.

He didn't look like a man who'd settle for less in his personal life. He wanted and deserved someone who was all in. I just hoped he'd still want to be with me after I shared my news with him.

When it looked like they were almost done, I walked over to where he stood talking to the cement truck driver. Colton's eyes lit up when he saw me and I held onto that as I continued to run options of how I was going to announce he was going to be a father.

"Hey, gorgeous." He leaned down and gave me a quick kiss, holding his hands out to the side to keep me from getting dirty. "Sorry, don't want to muss up your outfit. You

look cute. And tired. Everything, okay.” The concern in his voice was almost too much. I felt my eyes tear up. If I was this emotional in the first trimester, what was the rest of my pregnancy going to be like?

“Yeah, no I’m good. Um, do you have a few minutes? There’s something we need to talk about.” Without waiting for his answer, I walked back to my car, berating myself for rushing over. Maybe I should have waited? Giving him the news at work was suddenly feeling like the worst idea.

“Shay, hold up. Honey, what’s going on? You’ve got me worried.” He’d taken off his work gloves and stopped right behind me, then turned me around into his arms. “Hey, whatever it is, we’ll get through it.”

Burying my head in his chest, I mumbled, “I’m pregnant.” I was happy yet scared, and every emotion in between. Real tears began to fall, and I wiped my drippy nose against his shirt.

“What was that? Hey, don’t cry.” Colton curled his fingers under my chin and lifted my head up. His eyes were so full of concern, I lost my cool and started laughing and hiccupping like a loon.

“Colton, you need to go buy some lottery tickets because we’ve managed to be hit that two percent failure rate our first time together.” How I managed to string that many words together without snot shooting from my nose, I had no idea, but I waited for my nonsensical declaration to sink in.

“You want me to buy lottery tickets? Babe. Do you have a fever? I’m sorry but I’m?—”

“I’m pregnant!” I shouted. Unfortunately, at that same moment, the noise from his crew had stopped and instead of the moment being between the two of us, I had

announced to half a dozen men that their boss had knocked me up. I covered my face as another rush of tears leaked out.

“That’s, that’s...awesome. I mean, are you okay? Tell me what you’re thinking?” Colton’s expression flashed from confusion to shock and back to concern. “If you’re worried about me, don’t be. This is good news. Why wouldn’t I want the woman I love to be carrying my baby?”

Applause broke out along with shouts of congratulations. “Guys, give me a second here. And thanks.” Colton picked me up and carried me over to his truck, set me on the seat, then followed me in and shut out the world. Cocooned in the space where we’d unknowingly created our baby was almost too much. Suddenly, I wasn’t worried about his reaction. I was worried that I’d been too stubborn not to tell Colton my true feelings.

“Here, blow your nose and take some calming breaths and start from the beginning.” Colton handed me a tissue.

“I’m sure I look awful. Sorry for collapsing into a blubbering mess.” I wiped my nose and took a couple shaky breaths, then found the courage to look into his eyes. “I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you before. I would have handled this whole announcement better.”

“When did you find out?”

“I’m pretty sure from that first day when we collided.” I gave him a watery smile and, for the first time since I found out, I felt a sense of relief and peace.

“Wait, how could you, we...are we talking about the same thing because I’m pretty sure you didn’t get pregnant that first day.” Colton scratched his chin. He hadn’t shaved that morning, and he had that sexy scruff on his handsome face that I loved so much.

“Oh, no. Based on my cycle, I’m positive I got pregnant that first time we were together. Right here.” I patted the seat. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you how much I care about you sooner. I love you Colton Lynch and I’m sorry it took me until today to let you know I couldn’t imagine a better man to be the father of my baby. Our baby.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

The sexy grin I loved so much filled Colton's face as the realization of what I'd said sunk in. I was going to remember his reaction for the rest of my life.

Gathering me into his lap, he kissed my forehead, then each of my closed eyes. He ended with a slow, feathery kiss across my lips. It was so perfect another round of tears formed.

He placed his hand on my stomach and gently squeezed. "I don't know what to say other than you have nothing to be sorry for. I knew you'd eventually get there. But the baby? That's just icing on the cake."

"I'd eventually get there, huh? On any other man, I'd call that arrogance."

"And on me?" Colton kissed my forehead again, then his hand wandered from my stomach to under my breast and massaged my now sensitive flesh. Like clockwork, the butterflies filled my lower belly and the need to show him how much I loved him became my top priority.

"Justified confidence?" I covered the hand over my breast, wishing desperately we could recreate that magical moment, but exhibitionism was not on my bucket list. I'd have to wait until tonight after we told Aria and after she'd gone to sleep because there would be no more hiding our relationship from her.

Colton threw back his head and laughed. "I'll take it, and I'll take you and Aria, and this baby. When are you going to marry me?"

"As soon as possible. And I know the perfect spot."

“Oh, yeah. Where do you want to get married?” Colton asked.

“How about where this all happened?” I waved my hand over my midsection.

“You want to get married in the cab of my truck? Huh, I would have pictured you as the more traditional type, but I’m game.”

“Ha-ha. At your property. At sunset.” I could picture it now. Brenley as matron of honor, Aria as our flower girl and ring bearer. Family, friends and love. And flowers. Lots of flowers.

“Wherever you want, I’ll marry you anywhere, Shay. I love you so much.” Colton dipped his head and kissed me until the wolf whistles and clapping and the need for air broke us apart.

“See you when I get home?” He asked.

“Mine or yours?”

“How about your place, but we call it ours? Because I’m not spending another night without you.”

“Yes, I’ll see you when you get home. And Colton?”

“Yes, Shay?”

“I love you. So very much.”

“I never doubted it. I love you, too.”

EPILOGUE

SHAYLA

Each time I checked my rear-view mirror, my heart jumped at the vision that filled me with joy. There was another human in the backseat with Aria, and this one was ready to blow. His little red face was scrunched and any second the SUV was going to be filled by a healthy set of lungs.

“Mom, are we almost there? CJ is not happy.” The matter-of-fact declaration as my daughter covered her ears had become a normal occurrence since her brother had been born.

“Hang in there, sis. We’re here. Pop his Binky back in. He’ll be fine.” I heard a loud sigh as I hopped out to free him from the car seat. CJ hated the car seat and no matter what any of us did, his displeasure was constant.

“Mom, he doesn’t want it. He wants the boob.” Aria’s matter-of-fact declaration caught me off guard and I had to bite my lip not to bust out laughing. No sense encouraging with her. “Aria, please.”

“It’s not like it’s not true.” My daughter waved a hand, then unbuckled herself from the booster seat and exited the vehicle, shouting for Colton. She was definitely growing up too fast.

But, yeah, she wasn’t wrong. This little boy had a big appetite, just like his daddy. Nestling CJ on my hip, I followed Aria’s excited shouts. Sounds like she discovered the outdoor jungle gym Colton insisted on getting for her.

Today’s visit was extra special. The house, our forever home, was done, and we’d be moving in this weekend. But today Colt and his crew were finishing up the back patio and he wanted us there to see the design he’d done as a surprise for us.

Standing next to the patio, Colton finished spreading out the sealer, then stepped back, took off his gloves and opened his arms to Aria. She let out another squeal, launched herself into his arms and hugged him around his neck.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:48 am

Tears filled my eyes. That seemed to happen a lot since Colton and I found out I was pregnant, but they were always happy tears. Seeing how he had connected with Aria and she to him was another layer of love I hadn't expected. Then when CJ was born and how he bonded with his son, all bets were off whenever the two of them were together. Our family felt complete.

Colton set Aria down so she could run over to the new play set. He held out his arms for CJ, cradled our now sleeping son close, then pulled me into his side. "You ready to see my surprise?"

Nodding, my voice failing me as I took in all the love and excitement of the moment, he lifted his chin toward the patio and said, "Take a look."

Around the perimeter, the design gleamed from the fresh coat of sealant. It took a moment to register what species the flowers were that he'd chosen. That's because they weren't real flowers at all. They were our children's handprints used as the petals in a bouquet. Each one was slightly different and linked together with vines and leaves.

"Are you kidding? When did you get CJ's handprint? Oh, my Colton. It's perfect. I love it."

"One day when you were napping, and he wasn't. I made sure to give him a bottle right before, otherwise I knew he'd fuss and wake you."

Not caring if I woke our son up this time, I tugged Colton's face down to mine and kissed him. Unfortunately, gagging sounds came from behind us and we broke apart

laughing.

“How come you guys always have to do that?” Aria came up between us, took one of each of our hands, linking us all together.

“Well, when a daddy loves a mommy and she loves him, they show it with a kiss. And one day, far, far in the future, you’ll understand.” Colton explained, then added. “And when I say far, far in the future, Aria, I mean like when you’re twenty-nine.”

“Okay,” she responded, and that was that as far as she was concerned.

“Can we go inside, Mom? I want to see my room again.”

“Sure but go through the garage since the patio isn’t ready to be walked on yet. We’ll be right in.” Colton and I watched her skip around the corner of the house and disappear.

“You know you’re just deluding yourself, right? She’s going to discover boys in a few years, then what will you tell her?” I took CJ back and watched as Colton picked up his tools before we followed Aria.

“About boys, kissing or love?” He asked.

“Any of them.” I responded.

“I don’t. I plan on showing her by loving her mom so well that she’ll know how a boy, or a man, should treat a woman. As for the kissing part, I’m sure I’ll come up with something before her first date.”

Darn it, there went the waterworks again. “I’m so glad you moved back to Pineville and nearly knocked me over last year.” Somehow I managed to not burst into tears.

He stopped walking, picked me up, and kept going. Laughing, I adjusted CJ, so he was tucked in closer to me. Then I mock-scolded him. “Colton, put me down!”

“Why when you fit so perfectly? Nestled right up against my heart, where you belong. All three of you are right where you belong.”

Well, a woman couldn't argue with that. Especially not one who felt desired and cherished by the man who'd cemented her love.