

LITTLE SECRETS: HIS PREGNANT SECRETARY

Joanne Rock



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The boss's baby bargain... Becoming a father was never part of Jager McNeill's plan, until the heat between him and his luscious assistant turned into searing passion. Now Delia Rickard is carrying his baby. After growing up without a father, Jager's determined to be there for his child. And marriage would ensure that. But despite their chemistry, Delia's unwilling to marry for anything less than love. A trip with Jager to Manhattan could change all that. For in this enchanting city ablaze with Christmas lights, romance begins to blossom. And a kiss under the mistletoe just might turn into lasting love.

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"Something happened in the water today. Something changed between us."

No, Delia wanted to protest. Yet Jager was right and they both knew it.

"We can't let that happen." She needed to maintain the balance of power. Rebuild some guise of professionalism before it was too late. "This job is too important to me."

"And your professional skills are valuable to me, as well. But we can work around that. Besides, do you really believe ignoring it will make it go away, Delia?"

"If we both make an effort, yes. Of course. We're both adults with professional agendas. We can keep those work goals front and center when we're together."

"Like we did today."

"Today was an aberration." It had to be. "Emotions ran high. We were both scared for Emily." She wanted it to be as simple as that. "Just an adrenaline moment."

"So what about this moment, right now?" he asked. "Adrenaline?"

She willed a logical answer to explain the way the air simmered all around them.

Any answer she might have given was a moot point, however, since Jager chose that moment to lower his lips to hers.

* * *

Little Secrets: His Pregnant Secretary is part of the Little Secrets series: Untamed passion, unexpected pregnancy...

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Joanne Rock



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Four-time RITA® Award nominee **JOANNE ROCK** has penned over seventy stories for Mills & Boon. An optimist by nature and a perpetual seeker of silver linings, Joanne finds romance fits her life outlook perfectly—love is worth fighting for. A former Golden Heart® Award recipient, she has won numerous awards for her stories. Learn more about Joanne's imaginative Muse by visiting her website, www.joannerock.com, or following [@joannerock6](https://twitter.com/joannerock6) on Twitter.

For my sister-in-law, Kate,

thank you for joining our family!

My brother is lucky to have you, and so are we.

Wishing you much love and happiness.

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Sun glinted off the brilliant blue Atlantic, full of sailboats bobbing on the calm water. For Delia Rickard, the picturesque island scene meant only one thing. It was the perfect day to ask for a raise.

Delia mentally gave herself a pep talk as she rushed around the marina in Le François, Martinique. She anticipated meeting her boss at any moment. Her father desperately needed her help and that meant forcing herself to push for that raise. Her quiet nature and organizational skills made her great at her job but sometimes posed a challenge when it came time to stand up for herself.

She hadn't seen Jager McNeill in the last six months. Would he be impressed with the changes she'd made both at his family's marina and the nearby McNeill mansion where she'd taken over as on-site property manager a year ago, on top of her responsibilities assisting Jager?

She'd worked tirelessly for months just to be worthy of Jager McNeill's trust in her. He'd given her the job as a favor since she didn't have a four-year degree—showing more faith in her than anyone else in her life. At first, it had been enough to work hard to repay Jager for giving her a chance. But now, considering the hours she put in to manage both properties and the effort she made to execute every facet to the best of her ability, she knew it was time to approach her employer about a bump up in her paycheck. Her father couldn't afford his portion of the taxes on the Rickard family lands this year and Delia needed to help to keep the small plot in the family. Her former fiancé had tried to trick her out of her share of the land once and she wouldn't give his greedy corporate backers any chance to swoop in now and take it from her or her dad. But unless she made more money, the Rickard home would be up for auction by springtime.

Delia sidestepped a family loading their cooler onto a skippered sailboat as she hurried toward the dockmaster's office for an update. Just as she got there, guests on one of the new superyachts dialed up its sound system far more than the noise regulations allowed, alerting Delia to a sunset party just getting underway.

"Cyril?" she called into the small office, raising her voice to be heard. "Any word on Mr. McNeill's arrival?"

The sun-weathered dockmaster turned to her. "His seaplane just landed. The skiff picked him up a moment ago."

"Thank you." She smiled quickly before turning to glare out toward the party boat, wishing the group would take their ten-decibel fun out to sea for a few hours. She wanted Jager's arrival to be perfect. "I'll go speak to our guest about the noise."

Cyril shouldered his way out of his office. He shaded his eyes to peer down the dock past the multimillion-dollar boat blasting house music, toward the open water. “Do you know why Jager wants to meet here?”

Delia had been puzzled about that too. Why would their boss want to step off a plane and go straight to work after being away from home for over six months?

The McNeill family had been through a harrowing year. The three brothers, Jager, Damon and Gabriel, had all relocated to Los Altos Hills, California, a year ago to establish their tech company in the heart of Silicon Valley. The software start-up had been Damon’s brainchild, but both Jager and Gabriel played roles in managing the business as it grew. Shortly afterward, Damon had married. He planned to stay out West once the company took root, and Gabe and Jager would return to Martinique, where the family had a small hotel resort and the marina, in addition to the main house they sometimes rented out for upscale corporate retreats.

But then their lives had been turned upside down when Damon’s new bride was kidnapped and held for ransom. All of Damon’s focus had turned to getting his wife back, leaving Jager and Gabe to run the fledgling business. Eight months after the kidnapping—even after ransom had been paid—Caroline McNeill had not been returned. Damon’s father-in-law insisted the ransom note had been a hoax and that Caroline had left of her own volition. Damon refused to accept that story even though police refused to investigate. Damon had left the country and hadn’t been heard from since. To save his brother’s company before the value dropped with rumors of instability in the leadership, Jager had quietly shopped the software start-up to potential buyers. He hoped to sell the business as soon as possible.

“I’m not sure why he wants to visit the marina first,” Delia answered Cyril, her gaze trained on the water for signs of Jager’s arrival. “Maybe after the year his family has had, work is the only thing getting them through the days.”

Someone had threatened her family once and Delia had never forgotten the bite of betrayal. She couldn’t imagine the pain the McNeills had been through.

“I just hope he doesn’t decide to sell the marina too,” Cyril admitted before he retreated into the dockside office, leaving Delia with a new worry to add to her list.

It was bad enough she needed to ask for a raise. What would she do if Jager unloaded his Martinique assets?

Delia felt the thrum of bass in the repetitive techno-crap blaring from the deck speakers as she rushed up the long wooden dock as fast as her wedge-heeled sandals would allow. The superyacht had only been docked at Le François for three days and Cyril had already talked to them once about the noise and the parties.

“Excuse me!” Delia called up to the bow, which was at least ten feet above her head. She waved her arms to try to catch someone’s attention. A handful of swimsuit-clad couples lounged on big built-in sofas or milled around the bar. A few kids ran around the deck, squealing and chasing each other. “Hello!”

Delia backed up a step to make herself visible to the group. She could hardly hear herself shout; they were completely oblivious. She glanced behind her to make sure she had more clearance, well aware that the docks were narrow at the far end where the larger watercraft tied off.

She peered back up at the party boat just in time to see one of the kids—a girl in a fluttery white bathing suit cover-up—lose her balance near the rail. Her scream pierced the air right before she pitched headlong into the water with a splash.

Terrified and not sure if anyone else even saw the child go in, Delia scrambled to the edge of the dock. She toed off her shoes and tugged her phone out of the pocket of her simple sundress, never taking her eyes off the ring of rippling water where the girl had landed. Jumping in feetfirst to avoid hitting her head on any hidden debris, Delia rotated her arms to pull herself deeper.

Salt water stung her eyes when she tried to open them. Her hair tangled in her face as she whipped her head from side to side. Scanning. Searching.

Fear robbed her of breath too fast. Her lungs burned as she grew light-headed. Had anyone else even seen the girl fall? What if Delia was the only one looking for her, and what would happen now that even she'd lost sight of her?

Breaking the surface, she hauled in a giant gulp of air, then forced herself to dive deeper. Legs kicking fast, she felt something tickle her outstretched hand. Forcing her body deeper, she couldn't quite catch the blur of white she spotted in the water through burning eyes.

And then another swimmer streaked past her as if powered by scuba fins. There was a rush of water as strong limbs sluiced by. Though her vision was distorted by the sting of salt, she could tell the new arrival was on target for the flash of white she'd spotted. Even as her chest threatened to explode from lack of air, she remained underwater long enough to be sure the diver retrieved the child.

Thank you, God.

The fear fueling her strokes leaked away. Relief kicked in along with a wave of weariness. By the time she got to the surface, she could barely drag in air, she was so woozy and exhausted, yet she could see through painful eyes as the victim was pulled to safety on the dock.

But now it seemed that Delia was the one in trouble. Gagging, gasping, her arms flailing, she reached blindly for the side of the boat or anything, clawing for support...

"Whoa!" A deep, masculine voice sounded in her ear at the same moment two arms wrapped around her midsection. "I've got you."

Only then did she realize she'd somehow clawed him too. The arm that held her was bleeding from three shallow scratches. Sense slowly returned as oxygen fed her brain again.

The house music had been silenced. The only sound now was the murmur of voices drifting from the marina. She glimpsed the drenched little girl on the dock, already surrounded by family. A woman—a local with a houseboat who happened to be a retired RN—was on her knees at the victim's side, lifting her gently as she coughed up water. The relief in the crowd was palpable. Delia felt the same overwhelming gratitude throughout her body. Her shoulders sagged.

Bringing her breasts into intimate contact with the arm around her. She collapsed like a wet noodle against the slick, hot body of a man built like iron. Her dress floated like seaweed around her thighs, making her suddenly aware of the way her soaked bikini panties were all that separated her from him.

"Are you okay, Delia?" The voice in her ear was familiar; she'd heard it nearly every day for the past year, even if she hadn't seen the man in person for weeks on end.

Her boss. Jager McNeill.

"Fine," she spluttered, the word ending in a cough.

Of course, it was foolish to be embarrassed since she had dived in the water to save a child. And yet, it still felt terribly awkward to be caught with her dress up around her waist today of all days when she'd wanted to make the perfect professional impression.

Also, she'd scratched him.

Coughed all over him.

If she hadn't had a crush on him once upon a time, maybe she wouldn't be tingling from head to toe right now in spite of everything. But she feared if she tried to swim away from him to escape all the feelings, she just might drown. She was surprised to notice how far she'd drifted from the dock in her search. Behind them, she noticed the transport skiff that Cyril had sent out to meet Jager's seaplane. Jager must have been arriving at the same time she'd jumped into the water.

"Hold on to my shoulders," he told her, shifting their positions in the water so he faced her. "I'll tow you to the dock."

Nose to nose with him, Delia stared up into his steel-blue eyes. She thought she'd gotten used to his good looks in the past two years that they'd known each other. His dark hair and sharp, shadowed

jaw made for enticing contrasts to those incredibly blue eyes. His hair had grown longer in the past months, as if barber visits were the last thing on his mind. But the way the damp strands curled along the strong column of his neck only added to the appeal.

This close, she had the benefit of sensing the wealth of muscle in his athletic body where he held her. Feeling the flush of heat course through her, she ducked deeper into the cold water to hide her reaction to him.

"I can make it." Shaking her head, she scattered droplets from her wet hair. "I just needed to catch my breath."

She attempted to paddle away, but Jager only gripped her tighter.

Oh. My.

Feeling the warmth of his chest through their clingy clothes roused an ache she should not be feeling for her boss. Adding to the problem, the strapless bra she'd been wearing had shifted lower on her rib cage, where it did absolutely no good.

"Humor me," he ordered her, his voice as controlled as his movements. "You're exhausted and dry land is farther away than it looks." He took one of her hands and placed it on his right shoulder. Then, turning away from her, he very deliberately set her other hand on his left shoulder.

He began to swim toward the dock with measured strokes, towing her along behind him. Water lapped over them in light waves. She felt every ripple of his muscles under her palms as the light waves swished over them. She debated fishing one hand down her dress to haul up her bra before they reached land, but decided the potential scolding from Jager if she let go of him wasn't worth it. So she clung to him and gritted her teeth against the friction of her pebbled breasts rubbing against his back. By now he had to be as keenly aware of her as she was of him.

The only positive of this awkward reunion?

Any anxiety she had about talking business with him was utterly eclipsed by physical awareness. So when they reached land, she clamped onto the dock, evenly met his blue gaze and said, "I definitely deserve a raise."

* * *

Two hours later, when they were safely back at the McNeill family estate in Le François, Jager still couldn't erase Delia Rickard from his mind. After pouring himself an aged whiskey from the cut crystal decanter on his desk and taking a sip, he stared out his office window through the slats of the open plantation shutters. His gaze kept returning to the guest cottage lit by white landscape lights. He was waiting for Delia to emerge. When he'd first asked her to manage the Martinique household for him, he'd offered her the cottage on the British Colonial style property for expediency's sake.

Not only could she keep track of the staff better on-site, but at the time, she had also been trying to put some distance between herself and her past. Her former fiancé, Brandon Nelson, was a particular kind of son of a bitch Jager had run into often in business—always looking for a way to cheat the system. In this case, the guy had attempted to scam Delia out of her rightful inheritance—a plot of land belonging to her father that was in the way of a proposed landing strip for private aircrafts serving a luxury hotel development. The investors had offered Brandon a cash payment if he could convince her to sign over the rights. He'd decided to simply marry her and obtain the rights for himself.

Unethically.

Jager leaned a hip on the dark hardwood desk, remembering how Delia had discovered the truth on the morning of her wedding. She'd fled the seaside venue on a Jet Ski and run it aground on a small island where Jager had been fishing. It had been the start of a friendship that had benefitted them both.

He'd been in a relationship at the time, and Delia had been running from an awful one, so he'd tamped down the attraction for both of their sakes. Instead, he'd offered her a job. Very quickly, she'd proven an excellent assistant, invaluable in helping him repurpose a portion of the family estate for

private parties and occasional corporate retreats as a way to support local businesses—in particular, his marina. After Delia trimmed the household budget the first year and made a local farm-to-table initiative on McNeill lands a success, Jager had asked her to expand her role to review the operations at the marina as well.

Leaving things in her capable hands, he'd moved to California with his brother to take Damon's start-up to the next level. Just thinking about the hell that move had caused for all of them made his shoulders sag with grief for Damon and the loss of his vibrant and beautiful wife.

Now Damon had disappeared too. He'd left to travel two months ago and at the time, Jager had agreed it would be wise for him to get away. But days after his departure, Damon had shut off his phone and hadn't been in contact since.

To make it worse, around that time Jager had been contacted by their father, who'd barely acknowledged him as a child and whom Jager hadn't seen in fifteen years. Now, suddenly, he was offering the help of his wealthy family.

Too little. Too late.

As if Jager had any desire to spend time with the dirtbag who'd walked out on their mom. Apparently Jager's paternal grandfather—whom he'd never met—was determined to reunite all his grandsons. Bastard offspring and otherwise. Jager had told them hell no.

He finished off the whiskey and set aside his glass.

His world was a giant mess. The one moment of clarity in it all?

When Delia had been in his arms in the water just two hours ago. The dark churn of thoughts that had plagued him for nearly a year suddenly quieted, burned away by an attraction grown more intense since that first day when she'd washed up on his island. Nothing prohibited them from being together now. He was so distant from the Martinique-based businesses that he could make a move without worrying about the impact on their working relationship. Or he'd simply transfer her to another part of the company where Gabe could monitor her job performance, eliminating the conflict of interest. Gabe could make the decision about that raise she wanted.

His conscience clear, Jager watched her step from the cottage, her fair hair glowing golden under the porch light as she locked the dead bolt with a key. Now he could allow himself to think about the possibilities of being alone with her. Of forgetting the hell of the past year for a night in her arms.

Backing away from the window, Jager watched as Delia strode toward the main house. She wore a rose-colored tank dress, with a thin white sweater thrown over her shoulders. A simple gold bangle wrapped around one wrist. She worried her lip with her teeth as she stared down at the dusky gold pavers that led to the stone steps up to the house.

If he could have a taste of that soft pink mouth, he would indulge as often as possible. Was she nervous about spending the evening with him? Or was she looking forward to it as much as he? She had to have known she was getting to him today in the water. Soaking wet and hard as hell for her, he'd been unable to hide his fast reaction to feeling her breasts pressed to his chest. He'd felt her reaction too though. The attraction wasn't one-sided.

"Hello, Jager." He couldn't believe how long he'd allowed himself to ruminate over her body. She'd entered the house and his office while he was preoccupied.

Of course, she had domain over the whole place while he was gone. And he'd left the double doors to his office open. He was more than ready to let her in.

"I trust you're feeling better after the impromptu swim?" He turned to greet her but did not approach, hoping to put her at ease. She'd pinned her golden-blond hair up, leaving only a few stray pieces around her face. The rest bounced in a loose knot as she walked.

He gestured toward the seating arrangement near the fireplace. A wrought iron candelabra with fat white pillar candles had been laid in the cold hearth at some point in his absence. A homey touch. Delia perched on the edge of a wide gray twill armchair near the rattan chest that served as a coffee table, her posture stiff even though she gave him a smile.

"I'm almost warm again, thank you." She tugged the shawl sweater more tightly around her while he took a seat on the couch adjacent to her chair. "Tourists may swim in November, but I don't usually go in the water this time of year."

"Yet you didn't even hesitate." He'd been watching her from the deck of the skiff carrying him from the seaplane to the marina. "I saw how fast you jumped in after Emily fell." He'd spoken to the girl's family briefly after reaching the dock, to make sure she was going to be fine and that they would focus more on parenting and less on partying.

"You were in the water almost as quickly as me." She shook her head and briefly closed her hazel eyes as a delicate shudder passed through her. "I don't even want to think about what might have happened if you hadn't arrived when you did. I was never so panicked as those few seconds when I couldn't find her."

"I only spotted her because you were just above her in the water." He'd swum faster than he'd known he was capable of. "Although I would have searched the whole damn marina for her if I had to. I've had enough sleepless nights thinking about how different our lives might be if someone had been there to haul Caroline out of the water."

He hadn't meant to share that, but the loss of his sister-in-law had overshadowed everything else for their family. Delia's hand on his forearm cut through some of the darkness though, providing an unexpected comfort.

"I'm sorry," she said simply, her eyes filled with genuine empathy.

Empathy that didn't even rightfully belong to him. It was Damon who'd been through hell. Suddenly Jager was reminded that he needed to focus on his family and not whatever he was feeling for his assistant right now. At least until they'd cleared up some business.

"Thank you." He acknowledged her kindness before redirecting the conversation. "Which reminds me that I won't be staying in town long, so I'd like to come up with a plan to review any new business over the next week."

"You're leaving again? Why?" Delia's touch fell away from his arm. Her lips parted in surprise.

"I need to find Damon." He'd never imagined his brother as the kind of man who might do himself harm, but Damon had been through more than any man should have to bear.

"I understand." Delia nodded, but her expression remained troubled. She spun the gold bangle around her wrist.

"I won't leave until we address any concerns you may have about the business." Or Gabe did. But there was enough time to share his plan with her. He still hoped to put her at ease first.

"Of course." She quit spinning the bracelet and glanced up at him. "I know how committed you are to this place. You're always quick to respond to any of my questions about the business."

Leaving him to wonder if she'd ever had questions of a more personal nature that he'd overlooked? He studied her features, trying to read the woman who'd become so adept at managing his affairs. A woman who had become a professional force to be reckoned with despite a lack of formal training.

She deftly changed the subject.

"Have you eaten?" she asked, straightening in her seat. "Dinner is ready. Chef texted me half an hour ago to say he'd prepared something—"

"Will you join me?" he asked, wanting her with him.

"I don't want to monopolize your time on your first day home." She scooted to the edge of her seat as if looking for the closest exit. Cautious. Professional. "I can bring you up to speed on the house and marina in the morning so you can enjoy your meal."

"My brother Gabe is in Los Altos Hills for another week," he reminded her. "There's no one else in Le François waiting to spend time with me, I'm afraid."

Still, she hesitated. No doubt about it, those chilly moments wrapped around one another in the Atlantic today had shifted the dynamic between them. She'd never been uneasy around him before.

“We can make it a working dinner, if you wish.” He reached for his phone and began to type out a text. “I’m requesting that the meal be served in here.”

“That’s not necessary,” she protested.

“I insist.” He needed them to clear away an important piece of business. To remove any barrier there was to being together. “Besides, I’ve been meaning to discuss something you brought up in the water today.”

“I...” Her eyes went wide. She swallowed visibly. If she were any other woman, he wouldn’t hesitate to end the suspense and kiss her.

But he wouldn’t rush this.

“You mentioned needing a raise?” he reminded her, clearing a place for their plates on the rattan chest by moving aside a fresh flower arrangement of spiky red blooms he recognized as native to the island.

Already, a uniformed server hesitated at the office door, a tray in hand. He waved the young woman in.

“Sir?” The woman’s starched gray uniform was cinched tight by apron strings. She carefully set the tray down where he indicated. “Chef said to tell you there is a visitor at the gate.”

“There is?” Delia tugged her phone out of a long brown leather wallet that she’d deposited on the chair beside her. The call button at the gate on the main road was hooked up to an app Delia and Jager could access. “I’m sorry I didn’t hear the bell. I turned off notifications for our meeting.”

Curious, Jager spun his own phone toward him and clicked on the icon for the security system while the server went to retrieve another tray from a rolling cart in the hallway.

Before Jager pulled up the video feed from the front gate, Delia gasped.

“What is it?” Jager asked.

She lost color in her face, her fingers hovering above her lips as if to hold in the rest of her reaction.

“It’s not your ex, is it?” Jager shot to his feet, moving behind her chair to view her screen.

“No.” Delia lifted the phone to show him. “It’s your brother. Damon.”

Two

Steel-blue eyes stared up into the security camera. McNeill eyes. Delia had seen the three brothers together often enough to appreciate the family resemblance. The striking blue eyes and dark hair. The strong jaw and athletic build. Damon was the tallest of the three. He looked a bit thinner than she recalled, which was no surprise given the year he’d had.

“That’s not Damon.” The cold harshness of Jager’s voice stunned her as he tugged her phone from her grip, his strong hands brushing over her fingers. “Let me speak to him.”

Confused, she let go of the device while Jager pressed the talk button. Her skin was still humming from his touch as he straightened.

“I’ve made it clear I don’t want to see anyone from your family,” he barked into the speaker while he gently closed the office doors to keep their conversation private from the staff. “If you need accommodations in town, I can send someone out to the gate with a list of recommendations.”

“Jager!” Appalled, Delia leaped from her seat and reached to take her phone back. “What are you doing?”

The voice of the man at the gate rumbled through the speaker. “You’re not getting rid of us, dude. Now that my grandfather knows about you, the old man is insistent that you and your brothers join the fold.”

Delia froze as she absorbed the words. After hearing him speak, she questioned her own eyes. The man didn’t have Damon’s voice. Or his reserved, deliberate manner. The voice was bolder, more casual, even a bit brash.

Her gaze found Jager’s, searching for answers. The air sparked between them, making her realize how close she was standing to her boss. She was painfully aware of how handsome he was in

a pair of khakis and a long-sleeved dark tee that showed off his toned body. She caught a hint of his aftershave: pine and musk. Her heartbeat quickened before she stepped back fast.

“Not going to happen, Cam.” Jager spoke softly, but there was an edge to his voice she couldn’t recall hearing before. Clearly, he knew the man. “You can tell your grandfather that your father made the best possible decision when he walked out on my mother. We’re better off without him.”

Delia backed up another step, processing. The men looked so much alike. The man at the gate wanted Jager and his brothers to join the fold and said his grandfather knew about them now.

The man was Jager’s brother. Just not the brother that Delia had assumed he was. This was a relation she’d never known about—a half brother.

“We have a lead on Damon,” the visitor countered in a more guarded tone. “My brother Ian knows an excellent private investigator—”

“Damon is not your concern,” Jager told him shortly, still studying Delia with that watchful gaze. “Goodbye.”

He lowered the phone and pressed the button to end the connection and shut down the security app. Sudden silence echoed in Jager’s office.

“You have more family than just Damon and Gabriel,” she observed, feeling shaken from the encounter. From the whole day that had left her exposed in more ways than one.

It seemed as if Jager had whole facets of his life that she knew nothing about. If he didn’t trust her with that information, how well did she even know him? Her former fiancé had left her more than a little wary of men who kept secrets.

“My father was a sporadic part of my childhood at best, and I haven’t seen him once since my thirteenth birthday.” Jager set her phone on the sofa table next to a platter of food covered with a silver dome.

She’d forgotten about the dinner, but the spices of island cooking—French Creole dishes that were Jager’s favorite—scented the air.

“He had other children?” She felt she was owed an answer because of their friendship but she also needed to know about this to do her job. “This can have an impact on all your businesses. You’ll want to protect yourself from outside legal claims.”

“And so we will.” His lips twisted in a wry expression. “But the Manhattan branch of the McNeill family is far wealthier than we can imagine thanks to their global resort empire, so they certainly don’t need to alienate their own relatives by forcing their way into our businesses.” He gestured to the sofa. “Please sit. We should eat before the meal is cold.”

“McNeill Resorts? Oh, wow.” The name was as familiar as Hilton. Ritz-Carlton. It was too much to process. She sank down onto the soft twill chair cushion.

Jager took the opportunity to lift the domes from the serving platters and pass her a plate and silverware. The scent of accras, the delectable fritters the McNeills’ chef made so well, tempted her, rousing an appetite after all.

“Yes. Wow.” His tone was biting. “I believe my half brothers expected Gabe and me to swoon when they informed us we were now welcome into the family.” He dished out a sampling of the gourmet offerings onto her plate—spiced chatrou, the small octopus that was a local delicacy, plus some grilled chicken in an aromatic coconut sauce.

His arm brushed hers. The intimacy of this private meal reminded her she needed to be careful around him. She needed this job desperately. Her father relied on her and good opportunities were difficult to come by locally for a woman with no college degree. She couldn’t afford to leave the island to find more options. Balancing her plate carefully, she shifted deeper against the seat cushion to try to insert some space between her and her tempting dining companion.

“Damon doesn’t know about them?” she asked, trying to focus her scattered thoughts on his last comment.

“Only in a peripheral way. We were aware of their existence for years, but they didn’t contact us until recently.” Jager filled his plate as well. “Cameron McNeill and his brother Ian flew out to Los Altos Hills last month to introduce themselves and make it clear their grandfather wants to unite the whole family. Including the bastard Martinique branch.”

Delia took her time responding, biting into the tender chicken and taking a sip from the water glass Jager passed her. She knew that he had no love for his father after the man disappeared from their lives—refusing to leave his wife for Jager’s mother—when Gabe, the youngest son, was just ten years old. Their father had only visited the boys a few times a year before that, making it impossible to build a relationship. They’d lived in California back then. But after the father quit coming to visit, their mother sold the house and used the proceeds to buy an old plantation home in Martinique, purposely making it difficult for the boys’ father to find them even if he’d wanted to. As far as Jager was concerned, however, his father had abandoned their family long before that time.

Jager had shared all that with Delia in the past, but the latest developments were news to her.

“It’s the right thing for your grandfather to do,” she said finally. “You, Damon and Gabe have as much claim to the McNeill empire as your father’s legitimate sons.”

“Not in the eyes of the law.” Jager scowled down at his plate.

“The business belongs to your grandfather.” She knew the rudimentary facts about the hotel giant. They owned enough properties throughout the Caribbean to warrant regular coverage in regional news publications. “Malcolm McNeill gets to choose how he wants to divide his legacy.” She waited a moment, and when he didn’t argue, she continued, “Have you met him?”

“Absolutely not. That’s what they want—for me to get on a plane and go to New York to meet the old man.” He speared a piece of white fish with his fork. “They claim Malcolm McNeill is in declining health, but if it’s true, they’re keeping a tight lock on the news since I haven’t seen a whisper of it in the business pages.”

Her jaw dropped. How could he be so stubborn?

“Jager, what if something happened to him and you never got to meet him?” She only had her father for family, so she couldn’t imagine what it might be like to have more siblings and family who wanted to be a part of her life. “They’re family.”

“By blood, maybe. But not by any definition that matters in my book.” Reaching for a bottle of chilled Viognier the server had left for them, Jager poured two glasses, passing her one before taking a sip of his own.

“And does Gabe feel the same way?” She had a hard time imagining the youngest McNeill digging his heels in so completely. Whereas Jager resolutely watched over his siblings like a de facto father, Gabe went his own way more often than not. He’d only invested in Transparent—Damon’s tech company—after considerable urging from his siblings. Gabe preferred to stick close to the hotel he owned on Martinique and was renovating the place by hand.

His older brothers had scoffed at the manual labor, but Delia noticed that Gabe was having a hard time finishing the hotel work because his craftsmanship skills had developed a following, making him in demand for other restoration projects around the Caribbean, all the way to Miami.

“Gabe is outvoted by Damon and me.” He took two more bites before he noticed she hadn’t responded. When he turned toward her, she glared at him.

“Meaning he disagrees?” she asked.

“Meaning Damon would feel the same way I do, so if Gabe chooses to disagree, he’s still outnumbered.”

Delia set her plate aside on the rattan chest, then put her wineglass beside it.

“Damon might have a very different opinion about family after losing someone,” she observed quietly.

Jager went still.

“You have a lot to say about something that doesn’t concern you, Delia.” He set aside his half-eaten meal as well, and turned to face her.

“Doesn’t it?” She shifted toward him, their knees almost brushing. “I could give you an update on my plans for next year’s community garden or how to increase profits at the marina, but it’s hard to ignore the fact that you just turned your back on a family member who looks eerily like your missing brother.”

“It’s not eerie.” His tone softened. “It’s simple genetics. And I find you a whole lot tougher to ignore than my half brother.”

She opened her mouth to deliver a retort and found herself speechless. The air in the room changed—as if the molecules had swollen up with heat and weight, pressing down on her. Making her far too aware of scents, sounds and him.

“That’s good,” she said finally, recovering herself—barely. She needed to tackle his comment head-on, address whatever simmered between them before they both got burned. “Because I don’t want to be ignored. I would have hoped you’d listen to my opinion the way I once listened to yours when I was having some rough times.”

She hoped that it was safe to remind him of the start to their relationship. She’d felt a flare of attraction for him that day too, but she’d been too shredded by her former fiancé and too mistrusting of her own judgment to act on it. For his part, Jager had seemed oblivious to her eyes wandering over his muscled chest and lean hips covered by a sea-washed pair of swim trunks. He’d quietly assessed the situation despite her tearful outburst about her thwarted marriage, and he’d given her direction, plus a face-saving way out of her dilemma at the time.

She hadn’t been able to pay the taxes on the family’s land that year either. Her dad had been injured in a fishing accident three years ago and couldn’t earn half the living he used to selling fresh catch to local restaurants. But Jager had given her a job and the income had staved off foreclosure. Plus, Jager had given her a place to stay far away from her ex, and time to find herself.

Now, he looked at her with warmth in his blue eyes. A heat that might stem from something more than friendship.

“Maybe I liked to flatter myself that I was the one doling out all the advice in this relationship.” His self-deprecating smile slid past her defenses faster than any heated touch.

“I don’t think any of us exercise our best judgment when our world is flipped upside down.” She’d been a wreck when they’d met. Literally. She’d almost plowed right into him on a Jet Ski she’d taken from the dock near where she’d planned to say her vows.

“Is that what’s happening here?” he asked, shifting on the sofa cushions in a way that squared them up somehow. Put him fractionally closer. “The world is off-kilter today?”

The low rasp of his voice, a subtle intimacy of tone that she hadn’t heard from him before, brought heat raining down over her skin. Her gaze lowered to his mouth before she thought the better of it.

“That’s not what I meant.” She felt breathless. Her words were a light whisper of air, but she couldn’t draw a deep breath without inhaling the scent of him.

Without wanting him.

“It’s true though.” He skimmed a touch just below her chin, drawing her eyes up to his. “Something happened in the water today. Something changed between us.”

No, she wanted to protest. To call it out for a lie.

Yet he was right and they both knew it.

His touch lingered, the barest brush of his knuckles beneath her jaw. She wanted to dip her cheek toward his hand to increase the pressure, to really feel him.

Madness. Total madness to think it, let alone act on it.

“We can’t let that happen.” She needed to maintain the balance of power. Rebuild some guise of professionalism before it was too late. “This job is too important to me.”

Shakily, she shot to her feet. She stalked to the window on legs that felt like liquid, forcing herself to focus. To get this conversation back on track. Why hadn't she simply spoken to him about the community garden?

"And your professional skills are valuable to me as well. But we can work around that." Behind her, his voice was controlled. Far more level than she felt. "Besides, do you really believe ignoring it will make it go away, Delia?"

She felt him approach, his step quiet but certain. He stood beside her at the window, giving her personal space, yet not conceding her point. The soft glow of a nearby sconce cast his face in partial shadow.

"If we both make an effort, yes. Of course." She nodded, hoping she sounded more sure of herself than she felt. "We're both adults with professional agendas. We can keep those work goals front and center when we're together."

"Like we did today." His gaze fixed on some point outside the window, but his eyebrows rose in question.

"Today was an aberration." It had to be. "Emotions ran high. We were both scared for Emily." She wanted it to be as simple as that. "Just an adrenaline moment."

Her heart fluttered oddly as he turned toward her again, taking her measure. Seeing right through her.

"So what about this moment, right now?" he asked. "Adrenaline?"

She licked her suddenly-dry lips. Willed herself to come up with a logical explanation for the way the air simmered all around them. The way her skin sensed his every movement.

Any answer she might have given was a moot point, however, since Jager chose that moment to lower his lips to hers.

* * *

Jager couldn't walk away from her tonight. Not after the hellish year he'd had. He needed this. Needed her.

Her lips were softer than any woman's he'd ever tasted. She kissed with a tentative hunger—gentle and curious, questing and cautious at the same time. She swayed near him for a moment, her slender body as pliable as it had been in the water today, moving where he guided her. So he slid his hands around her waist, dipping them beneath the lightweight cotton sweater to rest on the indent just above her hips.

She felt as good as she tasted. Something buzzed loudly in his brain—a warning, maybe, telling him to take it slower. But he couldn't do a damned thing to stop it.

Instead, he gripped the fabric of her dress in his hands, a tactic to keep from gripping her too hard. He tugged the knit material toward him, drawing her more fully against him.

Yes.

Her breasts were as delectable as he remembered from in the water today. High. Firm. Perfect. And Delia seemed to lose herself in the contact as much as he. She looped her arms around his neck, pressing her whole body to his in a way that made flames leap inside him. Heat licked over his skin, singeing him. Making him realize how cold he'd been inside for months.

Delia's kiss burned all that away. Torched everything else but this incredible connection. The warning buzz in his brain short-circuited and finally shut the hell up.

Letting go of her dress, he splayed his fingers on the curve of her ass, drawing her hips fully to his. The soft moan in her throat sounded like approval, but he was so hungry for her he didn't trust what he heard.

"Delia." He broke the kiss and angled back to see her better, trying to blink through the fog of desire. "I want you. Here. Now."

“Yes. Yes.” She said it over and over, a whispered chant as if to hurry him along, her hands restlessly trolling his chest, slipping beneath his shirt. “Definitely now. If you lock the doors,” she suggested right before she lowered a kiss to his shoulder, “I can get the blinds.”

“I’m not letting you go for even a second.” He walked her backward toward the door, kissing her most of the way until he needed to focus on the bolt. Even then, he kept one palm on her lower back, at the base of her dress’s zipper.

“And the blinds?” she reminded him, her hair starting to fall from the topknot she was wearing. “The switch on your desk is closest.”

“Right. Of course. Lady, you do mess with my brain.” His brain—and other parts of him.

Jager moved with her in that direction, but he used his free hand to sift through her silky hair, pulling out pins and one jeweled comb, letting them fall to the dark bamboo floor. He’d been wanting to do this forever, he realized. Ever since he’d held her that first day when she wore that wet wedding gown and cried her eyes out against his bare chest.

She reached to find the switch, lowering the blinds electronically, shutting the room off from the well-lit grounds. Now just a few low lamps illuminated his office, casting appealing shadows on her creamy pale skin. With her tousled hair falling over one eye and the shadows slanting over her, she looked decidedly wanton. Altogether appealing.

He wanted her so much his teeth ached. He tugged the zipper down on her dress, peeling the cotton knit away from her body, sliding it right off her shoulders to pool at narrow hips. One quick shimmy and she kicked free of the dress; now she was clad only in ice-blue satin panties and a matching strapless bra. She was even more beautiful than he’d imagined, and he’d had some dreams where he’d thoroughly fantasized about her over the past two years.

Before he could contemplate how best to savor her, she slid a finger between her breasts and loosened the tiny clasp of her bra, baring herself. He froze for an instant to take in the sight of her—then his body unleashed into motion. His arms were already moving as he hauled off his shirt so he could feel her against him.

Kissing her, he cupped her breasts in his hands, teased one taut peak and then the other. Licking, nipping, drawing her deep into his mouth. He backed her into the desk and then lifted her, settling her there. She wrapped her legs around his waist, hooking her ankles and keeping him close.

“Do you have...protection?” she asked, her breath a warm huff of air against his shoulder.

Hell, yes. He might not have been with anyone in months, but he always kept a supply of condoms here. Pulling away, he opened the middle desk drawer. Thumbed past the last file. Emerged with a packet.

Their eyes met over the condom before she plucked it from his fingers and kissed him. No hesitation. No reservations.

He tunneled his hands through her hair, tilting her head back to taste his way along her jaw and behind one ear. She shivered sweetly against him, deliciously responsive. She smelled sweet there, like vanilla. He lingered, inhaling her, relishing the way her breath caught.

Too soon, her touch along his belt, the backs of her knuckles grazing his erection through his fly, called his attention from her delicate neck. Later, he would return to her neck, he promised himself. He wanted to linger over every part of her, but right now, the need was too fierce to ignore. While he unfastened the belt and carefully freed himself from the zipper, Delia was already tearing open the condom packet, her fingers unsteady as she rolled it into place. Her palm stroking over him there sent a fire roaring inside. He touched her through the blue satin panties she still wore, and he found the hidden dampness just inside and teased a throaty moan from her, stilling her questing hands long enough to let him catch his breath.

He wanted her ready for him. Really ready. Sinking a finger inside her, he felt the deep shudders of her release and kissed her moans quiet as she rode out the storm of sensation.

Damn, but she was beautiful. Her cheeks were flushed and eyes dazed, her hair a golden banner in the low lamplight.

When she was still again, he eased inside her slowly, gripping her thighs with his hands to guide himself home. She wound her arms around him again, nipping his lower lip before drawing it between hers. She arched against him, her breasts flattening to his chest. He knew he wouldn't last long this time. The day had stolen his restraint long before he started peeling her clothes off.

So he let himself just feel the slick heat of her body around his, her warm vanilla scent making his mouth water for a fuller taste. He cupped one breast and feasted on the taut nipple, finding a rhythm that pleased them both and riding it to...

Heaven.

His release crashed through him, trampling his body like a rogue wave until he could only hold on to Delia. He buried his face in her hair, the shudders moving up his back again and again. Her nails bit pleasantly into his shoulders and he welcomed the sweet hurt to bring him back to earth. Back to reality.

A reality that felt...off, somehow.

Straightening with Delia still in his arms, his body tensed.

"What is it?" The sultry note in her voice told him she hadn't realized what happened yet.

His satiated body was only beginning to get the message too, but his brain had already figured out what was wrong.

"It broke."

Three

Delia's brain didn't compute.

Her limbs still tingled pleasantly from the first orgasm a man had ever given her. Her whole body hummed with sensual fulfillment. And yet...panic was just starting to flood through her nervous system, rattling her from the inside out.

"What do you mean, it broke?" She knew what he meant, of course. But she didn't understand how it had happened. How she could have let herself be so carried away by the man and the moment. Even if the man in question was Jager McNeill.

"I don't suppose you're on the pill?" he asked, instead of answering her question, as he gently extricated himself from her arms and legs.

"No." She shook her head while reality slowly chilled the residual heat right out of her veins.

"You should stand up," he urged her, lifting her off the desk and settling her on her feet. "Do you mind if I carry you into the shower?"

His matter-of-fact response to a potential grenade in both their lives only rattled her further, making the possible consequences feel all the more real. And frightening.

"I'll walk there," she assured him, wondering what the rest of his staff—her coworkers, for crying out loud—were going to think of her walk of shame through his house into the nearest bathroom.

She would headline local gossip for weeks. Or, quite possibly, nine months.

Oh, God. What had she done?

"We could try emergency contraception," Jager suggested carefully. "If you're amenable to taking the medication."

Would that work? She'd never had a need to investigate the option. "I can call my doctor."

Jager was putting a blanket around her. The throw from the back of the couch, she realized. Gratefully, she sank into the gray cashmere, veiling her tender body from the cool calculation she now saw in her lover's eyes. He'd pulled on his pants and shrugged into his long-sleeved black shirt. Only his dark hair, disheveled from her fingers, gave away the less guarded man who'd made passionate love to her just moments ago.

Not that it was love, she reminded herself sharply.

“I’m sure I can find a pharmacy with the over-the-counter variety.” Jager was all efficiency. “I’ll get you settled and make a trip to the store.”

“Thank you.” She would still want to talk to her doctor. Double-check the side effects given her medical history. But she wasn’t sure how much to disclose about that right now with her thoughts churning.

“The guest room is closest,” he told her, tucking her under one strong arm as he opened the double doors of his office and steered her into the hallway.

Of course she knew the guest room was closest. She’d been in this house every day for two years. Would she lose her job now if she was carrying his child? Or even if she wasn’t? Only pride kept her from blurting out how much she needed this job.

When they arrived in the downstairs guest suite, Jager locked the door behind him and she scurried toward the bathroom.

“Delia.” His voice halted her just before she shut the door behind her.

Peeking out through a crack—not that it mattered since he’d already seen her very naked—she waited to see what he wanted. And wished she saw some hint of warmth in his eyes to reassure her.

“I believe emergency contraception has a high rate of effectiveness. But based on where you are in your cycle, how strong of a chance would there be that this would have—” He hesitated, and she wondered if this was rattling him more than he let on. But he blinked, and any hint of uncertainty vanished. “Resulted in pregnancy?”

“Based solely on my cycle?” She had no idea if she was a fertile woman. But if so? “We would want to come up with a contingency plan when I get out of the shower.”

* * *

Delia felt marginally calmer when she emerged from the bathroom in a pair of navy cotton shorts and a tee with McNeill Meadows printed on one pocket—promotional items given away to school groups who visited the community garden. She’d found a stack of clean items still in the packaging in the back of the guest bathroom’s linen closet. Indulging herself, she’d helped herself to two tees to make up for the fact that her bra still lay on the floor of Jager’s office.

She used a hand towel to dry her hair a bit more as she padded across the thick Persian carpet toward the king-size bed with its pristine white duvet. This bedroom overlooked the gardens, its deep balcony almost as large as the room itself. The sliding glass pocket doors were open now, and she followed the floral-scented breeze to where Jager sat on a padded chaise longue, looking out at the lit paths of the rock garden. The table nearby was set for two, a hurricane lamp glowing between the place settings of all white dishes. New serving platters undoubtedly held an entirely new meal. Sandwiches, maybe. Or fruit and cheese. Not even the McNeills’ talented chef could turn out five-star cuisine on an hourly basis.

The travertine tiles were cold on her bare feet as she padded outside to join Jager. He turned when she’d almost reached him, then stood.

“Would you be more comfortable in your own clothes?” he asked. “I brought them from the office and put your things in the closet.”

She winced to think of her wrinkled dress neatly hung in one of the gargantuan closets. “No, thank you. I’ve always liked these McNeill Meadows tees. I chose them last year for when school groups visit. At long last, I’ll have my own.”

“You wear it well.” His blue gaze slid over her and she felt it as keenly as any touch. “I had some food brought up in case you’re hungry. I wasn’t much of a host the first time around.”

Her stomach rumbled an answer at the same time she nodded. Needing to stay cool and levelheaded, she focused on slow, calming breaths. She draped the damp hand towel over one of the stone railings surrounding the balcony, then let him lead her to the table. The outdoor carpet was warm against her bare toes. He held out a chair for her and she sank into the wide seat. Once he tucked her chair in, he opened the platters, offering her each so she could help herself to a selection

of fruits, cheeses and warm baguettes. Jager poured them both glasses of sparkling water over ice and lemons, then sat in the seat beside her. The hurricane lamp sent gold light flickering over the table while night birds called in the trees just off the balcony.

To a bystander, it would look like the perfect romantic setting. She guessed romance couldn't be further from either of their minds.

"Based on your comment going into the shower earlier, I thought it would be wise to discuss a plan for the future. Just in case." He slid a paper bag across the table. "Although I was able to obtain the contraception option we discussed."

She eyed the bag dubiously, but took it after a moment. "I'd like to check with my own doctor in the morning, but if he gives me the okay, I'll take it then."

"That sounds fair." He nodded.

"Thank you." She congratulated herself on her calm tone that belied the wild knot of fears in her belly. She focused on her wedge of brie, spreading the cheese on a thin slice of baguette.

Jager laid a hand on her knee, an intimacy she hadn't expected after how quickly he'd pulled away following the encounter in his office. It felt good. Too good. She couldn't allow herself to fall for him. One moment of passionate madness was one too many when she needed this job and the good will of the McNeills to help keep the Rickard home and land.

"Let me begin by assuring you that I would never abandon my child." Jager spoke with a fierceness that gave her pause. "My father taught me well the damage a parent inflicts with his absence."

The candle flame leaped and the glow was reflected in his eyes. She wasn't sure how to interpret his words, however.

"Neither would I," she told him evenly. Family loyalty meant everything to her. Her father had raised her by himself, on the most meager means, after losing his wife in childbirth.

Some of the intensity faded from Jager's expression. He lifted his hand from her knee and sipped his water before replacing the glass on the white linen tablecloth.

"Then we'll have to stick together if tonight has consequences," Jager observed. "In the meantime, I think I should fly out as soon as possible to begin the search for my brother. I want to find Damon so I can return here next month or in six weeks, whenever you think we might learn one way or another about a possible pregnancy."

Her knife clattered to her plate as she lost her grip. She fumbled to retrieve it, but couldn't hide her dismay at his quick abandonment. "I have set a new record for chasing a man out of my bed." Resentment stirred. "I can email you the test results, if it comes down to that."

"Delia." He set down his own cutlery to reach across the table, his hand circling one of her wrists. "It never occurred to me you might want to travel with me, but I can arrange for that. Our chemistry is undeniable."

Defensiveness prickled. She wasn't planning to be his mistress.

"What about my job? I need the work, Jager. My father relies on my income. That's why I asked about the raise before things got...complicated."

"I had already planned to ask Gabe to supervise your work from now on. To eliminate any conflict of interest for me. But in light of what's happened—"

"You already had a plan in place to have an affair and didn't tell me?" She wondered when he'd decided that. Or when he would have clued her in to the fact. It might have put her more at ease about being with him.

Then again, what did it say about the beginnings of a relationship between them when he made all the decisions?

"I wanted to be with you, Delia." His jaw flexed as he spoke and she had a memory of kissing him there. "I knew it in the water today that we weren't going to be able to continue a productive working relationship with so much tension between us."

She worried her lip, unsure how she felt about that. What if she didn't like working with Gabe? More to the point, what if Gabe didn't need her? If she was pregnant as a result of this night, how could she possibly maintain any independence when she worked for the family of her child's father?

Most important of all? She wasn't sure how she felt about an affair with Jager. Of course she was tempted. She couldn't deny their time together had been incredible. One touch from him and she'd been lost, swamped by a desire so heated she'd forgotten her common sense. But she had a few obvious reservations straight out of the gate.

"I'm not sure we can have a productive personal relationship either if we're not equal partners. I'd like to be a part of the decision-making." She nibbled a strawberry, hungry despite the anxiety.

"I agree," he surprised her by saying. But then, was he just trying to pacify her? "If there's any chance we need to parent together, we'll have to figure out how to share that responsibility in a healthy way."

Determined to at least appear calm and in control, Delia lifted her glass in a silent toast. "We're making progress then. I appreciate you hearing my opinions."

"I value your input. Would you really want to travel with me for the next few weeks? The last I knew, Damon was in Marrakesh."

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for a conversation he wouldn't want to have. But he said he'd share the decision-making power. She didn't plan on accepting his offer to extend this affair if he didn't mean it.

"Your half brother said he knows where Damon is," she reminded him. "On the off chance that it's true, shouldn't you find him as quickly as possible in case he needs you?"

Jager's shoulders tensed. "You're going to make this about my family?"

"Isn't this whole conversation about the possibility of more family? A McNeill child?" Straightening in her seat, she tried to maintain some composure, but she could see him pulling away fast. It was in his shuttered expression.

"I know Damon. That means I can locate him faster than anyone else." He'd sidestepped her question, she noticed. "The only thing left to decide now is if you want to join me in my search, or if you prefer to wait in Le François until we find out for certain if there will be another McNeill in our future?"

Four

Pacing the floor of the cottage bedroom, Delia paused to check her desk calendar for the third time, making sure her dates were right while she waited for the results of the at-home pregnancy test.

The calendar told her the same thing it had before. It was now two weeks until Christmas, and almost six weeks after that fateful night when she'd let her attraction to Jager run wild.

Nearly six weeks since she'd had unprotected sex with her boss, and no sign of her period. She'd ended up taking the morning-after contraception Jager had purchased for her after speaking to her physician, so she'd honestly thought they'd be in the clear, even though she hadn't been able to take the pill within the first twenty-four hours as would have been ideal. But it was still supposed to be highly effective within the first seventy-two hours, so she hadn't panicked when her doctor hadn't gotten back to her personally until the next day.

Still, she'd delayed this test, fearing a false negative result. Better to wait longer and be certain, even if Jager had been texting her daily from Morocco, asking her for updates, tactfully suggesting a blood test at an appointment he'd helpfully arranged. She'd been ducking his calls, which was totally unprofessional given that he still had some sway over her job, despite Gabriel McNeill now technically being the one signing her paycheck. But the longer she went missing her expected period, the more her anxiety spiked.

Because honestly, she was scared to know the truth.

In Jager's last text, he'd informed her he would fly home tonight, insisting they find out for certain one way or another. Knowing she couldn't handle discovering the result in front of him, she'd surrendered and pulled out one of the pregnancy tests she'd purchased two weeks before.

Now she just had to wait three minutes.

Thirty more seconds, she corrected herself after checking her watch. Skin still damp from her bath, Delia tightened the bathrobe tie around her waist and returned to the steamy bathroom where the garden tub was draining. The clove-and-cinnamon-scented bubble bath, which she made from her own recipe during the holidays, was a small decadence she allowed herself at times like this.

The pregnancy test lay facedown on the white tile countertop beside the sink. She'd left it there while she reread the instructions to be sure she understood. One line meant not pregnant. Two lines—however faint—meant she was going to have a child with Jager McNeill.

She'd read online that high tension and stress could delay a period. That had to be why she was late. So, holding her breath, she closed her eyes. Flipped over the stick on the cool tile.

Two. Lines.

One bright pink. One paler pink.

There was no denying it. And according to the package, this was the most reliable at-home pregnancy detection kit.

"Oh, no. No." Her legs turned to jelly beneath her. She felt so dizzy she clutched the narrow countertop with both hands to steady herself. The stack of rolled yellow hand towels swayed against the wall as she stared at it.

No, wait. That was her swaying.

She stumbled back to sit on the edge of the garden tub, the last of her bubble bath gurgling down the drain with a sucking swish. Kind of like all the plans she'd had for independence once she had her father more securely settled. Plans to get a college degree one day. To travel somewhere beyond this tiny island where she'd been born.

Plans for a future where she called the shots and dictated her own life. She must not have taken the morning-after medicine soon enough, but at the time, she'd really wanted her doctor's advice about the pill considering her health history.

Wasn't it enough that she'd screwed up by nearly marrying a guy who didn't care about her? Nope. She had to compound her foolishness by succumbing to a moment of passion with a man who would never see her as more than...what? A company employee? A former friend turned sometime lover?

Her child deserved better than that.

That simple truth helped her emotions to level out. Made the dizzy feeling subside a bit. She couldn't afford to wallow in a pity party for what she'd wanted in life. She was going to be a mother, and that was something tremendously significant.

She might have messed up plenty of times on her own behalf, but Delia Rickard was not going to be the kind of woman who made mistakes where her baby was concerned. That didn't mean she had a clue what to do next, but she sure planned to take her time and figure it out.

Deep breath in.

Deep breath out.

Before she even finished the exhale, however, a swift, hard knock sounded on the front door of the cottage.

"Delia?" The deep rumble of the familiar voice caused panic to stab through her.

Jager McNeill had come home.

* * *

Jager stood under the cottage porch light, waiting. He knew Delia was here. His housekeeper had seen her enter the carriage house an hour ago and Delia's lights were all on. Soft holiday music played inside.

She'd been avoiding any real conversations with him for weeks. He'd tried to give her some space, knowing she was even more rattled about the possibility of being pregnant than he was. Besides, the search for his brother had been intense, leading him on a circuitous path around the globe. Now he was certain, at least, that Damon was alive. But he'd seen signs that his brother was hell-bent on revenge and that scared him.

Still, Jager should have made Delia his first priority before now. Either she was delaying taking the pregnancy test for reasons he didn't understand or—worse—she'd been hiding the news from him. Whatever the truth, he needed to earn her trust. He couldn't afford to alienate her when their futures might be irrevocably bound.

He lifted his hand to knock again, only to hear the deadbolt slide free on the other side. The doorknob turned and there she was.

Delia.

Wearing a white terry-cloth robe and a pair of red-and-green-striped knee socks, she was scrubbed clean, her wet hair falling in dark gold waves onto her shoulders. Worry filled her hazel eyes. The rosy color he'd grown used to seeing was missing in her cheeks.

Hell.

He hadn't seen her look so upset since that first day they'd met. And that comparison put his own behavior into perspective. He wasn't a loser like her former fiancé. He should have come home before now. Been there for her.

"May I come in?" He hadn't even changed his clothes when he stepped off the plane. He'd flown eight hours to be here today, the six-week anniversary of the passionate encounter in his office.

Six weeks hadn't dimmed how much he wanted her. Not even when they were both stressed and worried about the future. If he had his way, she'd be in his arms already, but he didn't want to pressure her.

"That would be wise." Nodding, Delia retreated while he stepped over the threshold, closing the door behind him.

He hadn't been inside the cottage for over a year. He'd overseen the delivery of a few basic pieces of furniture when she'd first taken up residence in the renovated carriage house. But it bore no resemblance to what he remembered.

To say she painted flowers on the walls didn't come close to describing the way she'd made the interior look like an enchanted garden. Yes, there were flowers of all colors and varieties—some not found in nature—growing from a painted grass border along the floor. On one wall, a full moon glowed in white phosphorescent paint, shining down on a garden path full of rabbits and hedgehogs, all following a girl in a dark blue dress. On another wall, there was a painted mouse hole on the baseboard, with a mouse with a broom and apron beside it, as if the tiny creature had just swept her front mat. Above the couch, framing a window overlooking the garden, someone had painted an elaborate stained-glass frame, as if the window view itself was a painting. The white curtains were drawn and a holiday wreath hung from the curtain rod on a bright red ribbon. He could only imagine the effect in the daytime.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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