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**Vintage** INTRIGUE

**Someone To  
Watch Over Her**

**MARGARET WATSON**

Mills & Boon Vintage Intrigue

Margaret Watson

**Someone To Watch Over Her**

«HarperCollins»

## **Watson M.**

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— (Mills & Boon Vintage Intrigue)

**THE AGENT:** Marcus Waters, loner– but not for long!**THE MISSION:** Keeping innocent beauty Jessica Burke safe until her kidnappers are found.**THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE:** Keeping himself from falling hard and fast for a woman too young– and too innocent– for this world-weary agent. He’s discovered her on a storm-swept beach, bruised, beautiful– and in need of his protection. But sharing close quarters with sweet Jessica soon led to spiraling passion. And Marcus learned too late that this young beauty had entrusted him not only with her life– but with her innocence. Now, as they waited out the danger together, Marcus battled an even greater enemy to his bachelor heart– love!

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## **When a deadly traitor threatens to dishonor a top-secret agency, A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY begins....**

Marcus Waters

Long, lean, with mesmerizing blue eyes

He'd been sent to exotic Cascadilla Island to keep an eye out for Simon, the menacing mystery man SPEAR seemed on the brink of capturing. Finding a beautiful stranger on a sea-swept beach wasn't part of his plans. But he made her his first priority when he learned she was the victim of a kidnapping....

Jessica Burke

A strawberry-blond beauty with big brown eyes

Jessica didn't know who her kidnappers were; she only knew that she'd never felt so safe as she did in the strong arms of Marcus Waters. So much so that she gave him her innocence in the heat of the night....

“Simon”

Still nameless, still faceless—and still just as deadly

He was on his way to Cascadilla, not knowing what lay in wait for him. Could this trip to the Caribbean be Simon's undoing?

Dear Reader,

Valentine's Day is here this month, and what better way to celebrate the spirit of romance than with six fabulous novels from Silhouette Intimate Moments? Kathleen Creighton's *The Awakening of Dr. Brown* is one of those emotional tours de force that will stay in your mind and your heart long after you've turned the last page. With talent like this, it's no wonder Kathleen has won so many awards for her writing. Join Ethan Brown and Joanna Dunn on their journey into the heart. You'll be glad you did.

A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY continues with *Someone To Watch Over Her*, a suspenseful and sensuous Caribbean adventure by Margaret Watson. Award winner Marie Ferrarella adds another installment to her *CHILDFINDERS, INC.* miniseries with *A Hero in Her Eyes*, a real page-turner of a romance. Meet the second of bestselling author Ruth Langan's *THE SULLIVAN SISTERS* in *Loving Lizbeth*—and look forward to third sister Celeste's appearance next month. Reader favorite Rebecca Daniels is finally back with *Rain Dance*, a gripping amnesia story. And finally, check out *Renegade Father* by RaeAnne Thayne, the stirring tale of an irresistible Native American hero and a lady rancher.

All six of this month's books are guaranteed to keep you turning pages long into the night, so don't miss a single one. And be sure to come back next month for more of the best and most exciting romantic reading around—right here in Silhouette Intimate Moments.

Enjoy!



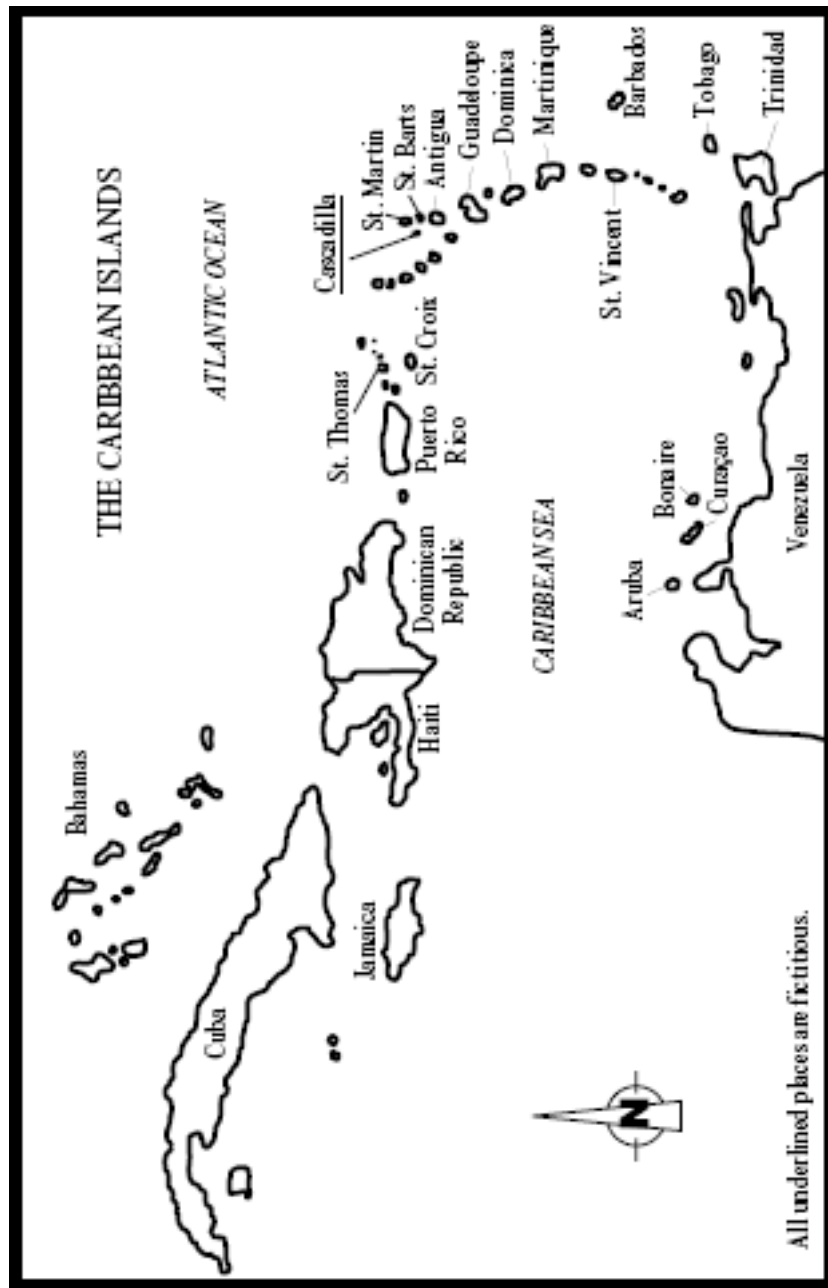
Leslie J. Wainger  
Executive Senior Editor

# Someone to Watch Over Her

## Margaret Watson



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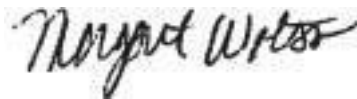
A note from talented writer Margaret Watson, author of over ten novels for Silhouette Books:  
Dear Reader,

I hope you are enjoying Intimate Moments' fabulous A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY series as much as I am! I certainly had a wonderful time writing Marcus and Jessica's story. Someone To Watch Over Her and all the books in the A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY series bring you everything that Intimate Moments is famous for—adventure, danger, mystery and, of course, passionate romance. I'm waiting just as anxiously as all of you for each book in the series. I can't wait to read every one of them!

I've been reading Intimate Moments books since the line started almost twenty years ago, and they've always been my favorite romances. That's probably why, when I decided to pursue my lifelong dream of writing, I wanted to write Intimate Moments. I still have to pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming when I see my name printed on an Intimate Moments cover, my book on the shelf next to all of my favorite romance authors.

Writing romances is a big change from my other profession. I'm also a veterinarian, which is why you'll find an animal or two in almost all of my books. A lot of people ask me how I could give up a wonderful career as a veterinarian to write books. My answer is that veterinary medicine is my job, but writing is my passion. And being a romantic through and through, I always follow my heart.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Margaret Watson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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## Chapter 1

Marcus Waters kicked at a shell on the sand and watched it somersault into the frothy blue waters of the Caribbean. It reminded him of his heart, he thought sourly, tumbled and tossed by his futile passion for Margarita Alfonsa de las Fuentes.

Shoving his hands into his pockets as the shell disappeared into the sea, Marcus continued walking down the deserted beach. It was just as well, he told himself, that Margarita had chosen Carlos Caballero. He wasn't interested in a long-term relationship. Hell, he wasn't interested in any kind of a relationship, except for the ones that ended with a goodbye kiss in the morning.

Sure, he'd been half in love with Margarita. But then, who wouldn't have been? The sexy SPEAR agent was beautiful and bright and had stirred his hormones since the first time he'd met her, years ago, when they had both been starting out with the covert agency. Working with her again had reignited the spark that had lain dormant for so many years.

It was better this way, Marcus told himself as he rounded another curve on the long, lonely beach. Margarita and Carlos belonged together. And he belonged by himself. He'd learned that years ago when he'd chosen his career with SPEAR rather than a woman he'd loved.

He pulled the loneliness around him like a cloak, using it to harden his heart and seal it against any more painful blows. He had his job, and that was all that mattered. That was all he wanted.

And right now, his job was to spend time on this beautiful tropical island, waiting for the elusive Simon to show up. Once he did, Marcus would keep an eye on him and report back to the agency so they could close in on him. Simon had been attacking the SPEAR agency for several months, trying to destroy what had taken over a century to build. The Stealth, Perseverance, Endeavor, Attack and Rescue agency had been started by Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, and had been handling the government's most dangerous and covert problems ever since.

Marcus was just one of a dozen agents dedicated to catching Simon and stopping his ruthless campaign. And their intelligence had told them that Simon was headed here to Cascadilla. But until Simon arrived, Marcus would employ his cover as a tourist on vacation and enjoy all the pleasures this idyllic island had to offer.

As he walked slowly down the beach, avoiding the shells and sea glass, he noticed the gulls and other shorebirds screeching and diving toward a dark bundle on the sand. Wondering if it was something that had washed off a boat, he walked a little faster. After years as an agent, he paid attention to everything. His life could depend on knowing the details.

There were pale tentacles on the bundle, and he frowned as he walked a little faster. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and suddenly he broke into a run. That was no bundle of seaweed. That was a body, lying half in the water and half on the sand.

The gulls wheeled off, shrieking, when he dropped to his knees next to the body, which was facedown in the sand. It was a woman. Her wet reddish-blond hair was tangled and matted with sand and salt. Marcus reached for her neck and felt a pulse, thready but present. Reassured that she was alive, he ran his hands over her quickly, looking for broken bones. Finding nothing, he gently turned her onto her back.

Several small cuts and bruises on her face were dark red against the bright pink of recent sunburn, but the skin beneath the collar of her T-shirt was pasty white. He watched the rise and fall of her chest for a moment, reassured that it was regular and even, then put his ear against her ribs and listened to her breathe. Her lungs were clear, which meant that she hadn't almost drowned.

Marcus rocked on his heels and stared at the unknown woman. She looked very young, and although she was bedraggled and bruised, he could see that she was beautiful.

What had happened to her? How had she ended up on this deserted part of the beach, unconscious and alone?

Once again the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. His instincts were working overtime. Quickly he glanced up and down the beach, but he didn't see another soul. And he hadn't passed anyone on his walk. He wondered if she had swum to the beach, then lost consciousness.

He couldn't leave her lying in the sand. He scooped her into his arms, grunting as he stood up. His left arm was still tender from the bullet he'd taken in Madrileño. But he forced himself to ignore the pain as he headed back to his beachfront cottage at the Westwind Falls Resort.

Her body felt chilled in his arms, and in order to keep her warm he shifted her so that most of her body pressed against his. The weight of her breasts flattened against his chest, and her nipples burned into his skin through the thin, wet material of her shirt. Her thigh brushed against his groin, electrifying him.

His hands tightened on her firm, smooth skin, and instinctively he pulled her closer. His body stirred, shifting and adjusting to touch more of her.

Shocked at his unexpected response, he adjusted her in his arms so that she wasn't pressed so intimately against him. But she groaned softly and moved restlessly against him, and once again they were touching as intimately as lovers.

"Hell, Waters, get a grip," he muttered. He clenched his jaw and walked a little faster. "The woman's been injured, for God's sake."

The lights of the resort twinkled through the gathering darkness, and he exhaled with relief. The sooner he got this woman to his cottage and called an ambulance, the happier he would be. His reaction to her closeness was unsettling and disturbing.

He shifted her again, holding her more firmly, and began to jog. His arm throbbed, but he ignored the pain. He knew his cottage was close. It stood slightly apart from the others, the last in the row before the development surrendered to the beach and the dense tropical foliage that began at the edge of the sand. Since Westwood Falls Resort was owned by SPEAR, this cottage was always available for an agent who needed it.

He hadn't bothered to lock his door, and he used his hip to push it open. He walked through the comfortable living area, then laid the woman in his arms gently on the bed in the large bedroom. Then he took a step back and looked at her as he absently massaged his arm.

Her eyes were still closed, and her mouth had a bluish tint. But her chest was rising and falling regularly, and when he lifted her eyelids and looked into her eyes, her pupils were equal in size and reacted to the light.

She looked small and fragile and vulnerable lying on the huge bed. Once again he realized that she was very young, probably in her early twenties. "What happened to you?" he asked, assessing her. "How did you end up on that beach?"

That would be up to the police to find out, he told himself. She needed to get to a hospital. He picked up the phone that stood on the nightstand next to the bed and began to dial the local emergency number. But before he finished dialing, the woman cried out.

"No!" The single word reverberated with panic. "No, don't."

Quickly he set the telephone receiver into its cradle and knelt next to the bed. "It's all right," he said in a low voice. "No one's going to hurt you."

Her eyes remained closed, but her hands clenched into fists on the bedspread. "Stay away from me! Get out!"

He reached for her hand and cupped her tight fist between his palms. Her hands were small and delicate, the bones tiny and fragile. "Relax," he murmured. "You're safe now."

Her hand gradually released its fist, then she turned her palm to his and gripped him tightly. "No!" she yelled again. Her hand jerked away from him and swung wildly in the air. "Why are you doing this?"

What had happened to her? He stood up slowly, his gut churning with anxiety as he stared at her. Whatever had happened to this woman was more than an accident. Someone had deliberately tried to hurt her. And judging from where and how he had found her, she was probably still in danger.

Warning bells clamored in his head. His gaze lingered on the restless woman on the bed, and he made a split-second decision. He wasn't going to call the police until he'd had a chance to talk to her. He had to make sure that he wasn't putting her in danger all over again by alerting the authorities to her presence. For the time being, she would be safe with him.

She cried out again, and he sat on the bed with her. "You're safe now," he said, taking her hand again. "I'm going to keep you here until you wake up and can tell me what happened to you. Do you understand?"

He spoke in a low, soothing voice. She couldn't hear him, but perhaps that primitive place deep in the brain that judged danger would hear and understand that she was safe. He continued to talk to her, his voice quiet and gentle, until she stopped moving around on the bed. When she was quiet again, he let go of her hand and stood up.

"You can't just let her lie there in those wet clothes," he muttered to himself. "And you have to examine her thoroughly. If you're not going to call an ambulance, you're going to have to take care of her yourself."

Her simple T-shirt and shorts were beginning to dry, and they were stiff with sand and salt. The sport sandals still on her feet were covered with sand and grit. He took those off first, then brushed the sand from her feet.

He unbuttoned the waistband of her shorts and slid the zipper down. But when his hands brushed over her skin at her waist, a sizzle of electricity shot up his arm, and he froze in place, unable to move.

Her skin was as soft as a butterfly's wing and as smooth as cream. His hands were suddenly burning hot against the coolness of her skin, and he clenched his fingers around the waistband of her shorts to stop himself from touching her.

Appalled, he pulled his hands away as if he'd been burned and jumped up. He stared at the unconscious woman, feeling the heat of need rush through him. What the hell was the matter with him?

Shaken, he picked up the phone again to call for an ambulance, but hesitated before he'd punched in the numbers. This woman was in danger, he reminded himself. And he had sworn to protect those in danger. It was part of his code of honor, both professionally and personally. It wasn't her fault that he couldn't control himself.

Just because he was acting like a randy teenager didn't mean he had to throw her to the wolves. He swallowed once and sat on the bed. He could do this. He could think of her as an impersonal object that needed his help.

His resolve lasted just long enough to remove her shorts. Tossing them on the floor, he looked at the tiny scrap of lace that she wore beneath the shorts and swore long and hard. A blond triangle of hair was visible beneath the almost-transparent lace. And although he estimated she was only a few inches taller than five feet, her legs seemed to go on forever. Slim and firm, they were evidence that his mystery woman led an active life.

Scowling, he deliberately looked away from her legs and grabbed the hem of her T-shirt. This was ridiculous. The woman was unconscious. He was the only person who could help her right now, and that's what he would do. He could tame his hormones into submission.

But when he pulled the T-shirt over her head and tossed it on the floor, he closed his eyes and groaned. The bra she wore matched the lacy panties and did about as much to hide her body. He forced his gaze to her face and told himself his job was about her health and safety and nothing else.

"Snap out of it, Waters," he growled to himself. "This woman already has enough problems. She doesn't need you making a fool of yourself."

Steeling himself, knowing he had to check her from head to toe, he forced himself to think of all the things that could be wrong with her. Then he began to examine her, utilizing the basic medical training that was part of every SPEAR agent's education. He tried to ignore how she felt, ignore the softness of her skin and the smoothness of her body. He could block her beauty out of his mind, but it was more difficult to ignore the way her vulnerability touched a soft spot he didn't even realize he still had.

Finally he stood up and draped a blanket over her. His hands were shaking and his mouth was dry. It was best to pretend that she didn't have any effect on him, he told himself.

"You don't seem to be too badly hurt," he said to her, even though she was still unconscious. With an effort of will, he forced himself to ignore his physical reaction to her. "If you can hear me, you need to know that you're safe now. You've got a bunch of scrapes and bruises, especially on your legs, but nothing is broken. And since there are no cuts, bruises or bumps to your head, it doesn't look like you have a head injury, although we'll have to wait until you're awake to know for sure. You're going to be plenty sore when you wake up, but I think that's about all."

Certain that he'd made the right decision about calling for help, he walked into the bathroom and started the water running in the bathtub. Then he walked out and crouched next to her again. "I'm going to give you a bath. You're covered with sand and salt, and I don't want it to irritate your skin."

He stopped, reaching for the control that had never failed him before. She was a stranger who needed his help, he reminded himself. But he swallowed once before he continued. "I know this is pretty personal, but you'll thank me for it in the morning."

Would she? Or would she be horribly embarrassed that someone had undressed her and bathed her while she was unconscious? "Let's get that underwear off of you. It's not doing much good, anyway," he muttered.

Steeling himself, he quickly peeled away the tiny scraps of lace and chiffon that passed for underwear. He tossed them on the floor, then slid his arms around her, trying not to notice how perfectly she fit against him, and carried her into the bathroom. He placed her gently in the tub, where he quickly sponged off the worst of the grit.

"You'll have to do the rest yourself after you wake up," he muttered after a few minutes. The sight of her perfect breasts and lithe young body had made him as hard as granite. "I know it's not your fault, but I can't do this anymore."

He grabbed a towel from the rack and wrapped it around her, then carried her to the bed. Peeling back the bedspread, he laid her on the sheets, leaving the towel wrapped around her.

"I can't leave that on you." He scowled. The large bath towel covered her body, but it was damp and she would be shivering in a few minutes. He rummaged in a drawer and pulled out one of his T-shirts. "This should work."

He eased the towel away from her and quickly pulled the T-shirt over her head. It floated down her body, covering her almost to her knees. He breathed a sigh of relief, which turned into a scowl when he realized that it did nothing to hide the curve of her breasts and the outline of her nipples. His hands ached to weigh her breasts, to feel their weight in his hands, and he jerked the sheet over her body. "I'll be in the other room."

Night had fallen completely, and the sky was dark velvet over the black of the Caribbean. Stars glittered in the sky, reflected in the water like sharp diamonds. The muted sound of voices and the low laughter of women drifted on the breeze from the common areas of the resort.

Marcus ignored the sounds of merriment that wafted from the resort. He stared into the darkness, looking down the beach, probing the foliage near his cabin. Who was out there? Where were they hiding? What predators prowled the night?

Somewhere, someone was looking for the woman who lay on his bed. Someone who meant her harm. The familiar adrenaline of a case rose inside him, making his heart pound, sharpening his senses. No one would hurt her, he vowed. He would make sure of that.

He picked up his cellular telephone and dialed a number he had memorized. After two rings a voice said, “Devane here.”

“This is Waters,” Marcus said. “Have you heard anything about a missing woman?”

“No.” Marcus could hear the interest sharpen in Russell Devane’s voice. “What do you have?”

“I’m not sure. I found a woman washed up on the beach about a half mile from the resort. There wasn’t anyone else around, and she didn’t have any identification. She’s still unconscious.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Wait until she wakes up, then find out what’s going on. I hoped you or one of the others might have heard something.”

“Not a word. But we’ll keep our ears open.”

“Let me know if you hear anything.”

Marcus closed the phone and went into the bedroom to look at the woman once more. She hadn’t moved from the place he’d set her down. But he could see that she was shivering.

Gently he drew the bedspread over her, then reached for the extra blanket. “No one knows a thing about you,” he murmured. “Devane would have heard if there was anything to hear. Who are you, mystery woman? And how did you end up on that beach?”

His only answer was the steady rise and fall of her chest. “I’ll be in the other room if you wake up,” he said. He let his gaze linger on her for another moment, then he turned and walked out of the room. It would be wise not to spend too much time with her, he told himself. The effect she had on him was too intense and too disturbing.

It would be better once she woke up. He was sure the attraction would disappear once she was conscious and talking to him. What could he have in common with such a young woman?

He felt much better as he sat on the sofa. That was the answer, of course. Once she was awake, he would see that she was just another woman, beautiful but very young. Once she was awake, this ridiculous state of arousal would quickly disappear. Hell, he wasn’t interested in relationships, anyway. Hadn’t they just established that he was better off without Margarita or any other woman? Hadn’t he learned his lesson all those years ago when Heather had forced him to choose between her and his career with SPEAR? His mystery woman would tell him what had happened to her, he would help her deal with it, and they would go their separate ways. It was that simple.

Marcus grabbed the book he had started reading earlier, but put it down after only ten minutes. Restlessly he stood and paced around the living room. Finally, unable to stop himself, he stepped into the dimly lit bedroom. The woman on the bed was still unconscious, but she had moved. She lay on her side and looked as if she was sleeping. Her left hand was tucked under her cheek, and her right hand was curled under her chin. He’d apparently managed to get most of the sand out of her hair, because it was drying in a soft golden cloud around her face. She looked innocent and helpless, and another fierce wave of protectiveness flooded through him.

He might not know much about relationships, but he knew how to protect a woman. And that’s what he would do. He’d get her back safely where she belonged and make sure that nothing else happened to her.

He adjusted the blanket around her shoulders, then crouched next to the bed again. “You’re going to be all right,” he said in a low, comforting voice. “You’re safe now, and you’re not badly hurt. Sleep for as long as you like. When you wake up, we’ll figure out how to help you.”

She moaned in her sleep, but it didn’t sound as frantic and fearful as her earlier cries. Her forehead wrinkled as if she was trying to figure something out. Then she was quiet and still again.

“It won’t be long before you’re awake,” Marcus said, familiar enough with injuries to know when someone was regaining consciousness. “I’ll be close by when you do.”

He stood, intending to walk to the living room. But he was oddly reluctant to leave her alone. She would be frightened when she woke up. She wouldn’t know where she was. Maybe he should stay with her.

“She’ll think you’re one of the people who hurt her, you idiot,” he growled to himself. “Get out of here.”

He moved into the other room, but couldn’t sit down to read. He paced the small room, then went and stood on the tiny porch.

The sounds of the tourists’ voices were lower, muted and more intimate. It was the end of the evening, and soon everyone would be returning to their cottages and rooms. The time for shared gaiety and laughter had passed. Now couples would be dancing more slowly, their bodies touching, hands twining together. Men and women would exchange heated glances, allow their hands to linger just a little longer. Soon everyone would steal away and the resort would be silent and still.

Marcus scowled and walked inside, closing the door firmly behind him. He had a job to do, and the woman on his bed had become part of his job. He’d damn well better remember that.

He threw himself onto the couch and picked up his book again. After staring at the same page for too long, he closed the book and leaned back, willing himself to get some rest.

He had just fallen into a restless sleep when he heard a noise from the bedroom. It sounded as if someone was walking around. He leaped to his feet and ran into the other room.

The woman was no longer lying on the bed. She was standing next to it, swaying, gripping the chest of drawers for support.

Panic leaped into her eyes when she saw him. She grabbed a nail file that had been on the dresser. “Stay away,” she said, her voice low and husky. “I have a weapon.”

## Chapter 2

Jessica Burke gripped the chest of drawers with one hand and held the pitifully small nail file tightly in the other. Fear and anger throbbed inside her, and she welcomed it. Her head ached and her legs wobbled, but she wasn't about to give an inch to the man who stood in the doorway.

He hadn't been one of the two men who had grabbed her in her workshop, but that didn't mean a thing. He was probably the one who'd ordered her kidnapping, the Simon that her two kidnappers had talked about.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, his voice deep and quiet. He stood and watched her, making no effort to come any closer.

"You expect me to believe you?" Jessica tried to put as much scorn as possible in her voice.

To her shock, the man smiled at her, and Jessica felt her stomach swoop toward her toes. She scowled and gripped the nail file more tightly. She must have gotten a blow on the head, she told herself. How else could she explain her reaction to a man who had kidnapped her?

The man's smile disappeared. "You have no reason to trust me," he said, his voice still quiet, "but I mean you no harm. My name is Marcus Waters and I found you on the beach just before dusk this evening. You looked as if you'd been washed ashore."

Jessica studied the man in front of her. Ranga and tall, at least a head taller than her own petite five feet four inches, he looked like any other tourist in the Caribbean islands. His blond hair was a little too long. He was dressed casually, in shorts and a T-shirt, and he had sandals on his feet. But his blue eyes burned into her with the intensity of a laser. Those were not the eyes of a casual tourist.

"Are you taking me to Simon?" she demanded.

His face tightened for a moment, and she saw a flare of shock in his eyes. Then it was gone and his face looked no different than it had a moment ago. But there was a new wariness in his eyes.

"Who's Simon?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that."

He shook his head slowly. "I told you, my name is Marcus Waters. I have no idea who Simon is."

"You're lying." He'd reacted to the name, she was certain of it.

He watched her for a moment, then he nodded toward the bed. "Why don't you sit down? I promise not to come any farther into the room. But I'm afraid you're going to fall."

Jessica damned her rubbery legs and spinning head, but she knew he was right. If she didn't sit down, she would fall. And she would lose any advantage she had over him. Gingerly she moved to the bed and perched on the edge, realizing she wore nothing but an unfamiliar T-shirt. Her lack of clothing, and the knowledge that this stranger had undressed her, made her feel even more vulnerable.

"Where am I?" she demanded.

"You're on Cascadilla," he said promptly. "At the Westwind Falls Resort. This is one of their beachfront cottages." He paused, then asked, "Do you know where Cascadilla is?"

"Of course," she began, then stopped abruptly. Until she knew more about this man, she wasn't going to answer any of his questions. "I know where Cascadilla is. But how do I know you're telling me the truth?"

Marcus nodded at the telephone. "Pick it up and dial zero," he said. "The front desk will answer."

Without taking her eyes off him, she reached for the phone and fumbled it out of its cradle. She punched in zero, then held it to her ear. When the operator said, "Westwind Falls Resort, front desk, how may I help you?" she hung up the phone.

"All right, so you're telling the truth about that. That doesn't mean I trust you about anything else. Even a criminal can stay at the Westwind Falls."

“But he would have to be a very wealthy criminal,” he said smoothly. “Since you know about the Westwind Falls Resort, can I assume that you live on Cascadilla?”

She clamped her lips together. “I’m not going to tell you anything. In fact, I’m not going to stay here. I’m going to walk out the door, and you’d better not try and stop me.”

“Or you’ll stab me with the nail file?” His eyes softened, and she saw a glint of admiration in them. “I’m not trying to keep you here against your will. You’re welcome to go. But before you do, maybe you ought to think about how you got here. Who hurt you? And are they still out there, waiting for you?”

Jessica bit her lip as the fear crashed over her again. For the past few minutes, as she was sparring with the man in the doorway, she had forgotten her ordeal. Her eyes slid to the telephone again. “Maybe I’ll just call the police.”

“Go ahead, if that would make you feel better. But how do you know they’re not involved?” His eyes took on a cynical glint. “Money can buy just about anything in the islands.”

She knew that far better than most. And he was right. “Then I’ll call my family.”

“Why don’t you let me help you?” he said softly. “At least tell me your name and what happened to you.” He paused, and his eyes hardened. “And how this man Simon is involved.”

“Why are you concerned?” she retorted. “Why would you want to help me? And what do you know about Simon?”

He shrugged. “I’m in law enforcement. And I’m the one who found you. I’m curious about what happened to you.”

“You recognized the name Simon,” she said, watching him carefully.

She saw the jolt of surprise in his eyes and felt a fierce satisfaction. Then his face was carefully blank again.

“I’ve heard the name,” he finally said. “Someone here at the resort must have been talking about a man named Simon. But I have no idea who he is.”

Could she trust him? She couldn’t trust anyone, she told herself. But he had offered to let her call the police. If he had wanted to hurt her or turn her over to the man named Simon, he’d had plenty of opportunities while she was unconscious. And she needed to know what had happened in those lost hours since she’d jumped off the boat and woken up in this room.

“Why don’t you first tell me how you found me, and where?” she said.

He nodded. “That’s only fair.” He hesitated. “Do you mind if I come in the room and sit down? This may take a while.”

Jessica shook her head slowly. “No.” She watched while he settled his long frame in a chair on the other side of the bed and realized he’d done it deliberately so he wasn’t blocking her escape route. She allowed herself to relax just a little.

He leaned forward, fixing her with his gaze, and a hum of electricity seemed to fill the room and shiver along her nerves. He let his hands dangle between his knees, and she found herself staring at them. What would it feel like if Marcus Waters touched her? When she realized what she was doing, she sat upright with a start. What was the matter with her? What was she thinking? She didn’t even know this man.

When she let her gaze meet his, she was startled at the intensity in his eyes. They bored into her, making her shiver.

“I was walking down the beach,” he began abruptly, holding her gaze but banking the intensity in his eyes. “It was close to dusk and there was no one else around. I saw what I thought was a clump of seaweed on the beach, then I realized it was a body.” He paused and waited, as if gauging her reaction.

“Go ahead,” she said.

“It was you. You were unconscious, and it looked as if you’d been washed ashore. I made sure you didn’t have any broken bones and checked to see if you had any head injuries. When I couldn’t find any, I picked you up and carried you back to my cottage.”

“Did you call the police?” she demanded.

He stared at her for a moment, measuring her, then shook his head. “I had the phone in my hand, but then you cried out. It was obvious you were frightened of someone, that someone had hurt you. So I decided to wait until you woke up before I called anyone. I wanted to talk to you first.”

Jessica narrowed her eyes as she stared at him. “It seems odd that you wouldn’t call the police. Isn’t that the obvious thing to do?”

Marcus stood and moved to the window. He opened the shutters just enough to look outside. While he was staring into the darkness, he said, “I told you, I’m in law enforcement. I had a bad feeling about what happened to you. I wasn’t sure if calling the local police was the smart thing to do. That’s why I wanted to wait until you woke up.”

Slowly he turned to face her. “Do you want to call the police now? Are you sure they can keep you safe? Or would you rather tell me what happened and let me help you figure out what to do?”

God help her, but she wanted to believe him. Appalled, she stared at the man standing across the room from her. What was the matter with her? This man was a total stranger, and she wanted to trust him with her life.

She was a scientist. She needed proof, concrete evidence. She needed facts. But a reckless part of her that had been deeply buried had somehow reappeared. She wanted to believe him without proof. She wanted to tell him what had happened to her. She wanted to believe that he could help her, that he was on her side.

She was drawn to Marcus Waters, and the realization scared her. She was intelligent enough to know that she was reacting to him the way a woman reacts to a man. She didn’t know anything about men, about dealing with them as a woman. Her dating life was practically nonexistent. But she yearned to trust this man in front of her.

She hesitated for a moment, her analytical side struggling to control her emotional need to connect with Marcus. Finally she nodded. “I’ll tell you what happened.”

“Thank you.” He moved to the chair, sat and leaned forward, his arms resting on his legs. “What’s your name?”

She hesitated again. This was the first test. Taking a deep breath, she said, “My name is Jessica Burke.”

“All right, Jessica, what happened to you?”

He didn’t recognize her name, she realized, and relief flooded through her. He didn’t know who she was or who her parents were. Surely that meant he wasn’t involved.

You don’t know this man, she reminded herself. He could merely be a good actor.

But she’d managed to read him easily enough earlier, when she’d been quite certain he was trying to hide his reaction to the name Simon. She had to trust her instincts. They were all she had right now.

“I’m a scientist,” she began slowly. She saw the flicker of surprise in his eyes and ignored it. “My parents live on a private island not too far from Cascadilla. I have an office near my parents’ home that I use when I visit them. My office is a small building near the beach, somewhat isolated and quite a walk away from the main house.”

“You work there by yourself? That doesn’t sound very secure.” His voice was neutral.

“It hasn’t been a problem before now,” she replied.

His eyes gleamed, but he nodded. “Go ahead.”

“I was working this morning, close to noon, when the door opened. I didn’t pay any attention because I thought someone from the house was bringing me lunch. When I finally looked up, there were two men in front of me. I knew right away that I was in trouble. I screamed, but I’m sure no one could hear me. They threw a blanket over my head and wrapped it around me, then picked me up and carried me out the door.”

He leaned forward. “Doesn’t your father have a security system?”

“He does, but one of the men apparently had worked for my father. He bragged to the other man that he knew how the security system worked and was able to get around it.”

“Then what happened?”

“I bit one of them. Badly. It was through the blanket, but I’m sure I drew blood. He cursed and swore and dropped me. I was able to run a few steps, but then the other one caught me again.”

“Good for you.” Jessica saw approval shining in Marcus’s eyes and felt ridiculously happy.

“It didn’t do much good in the end. They still threw me into their boat and sped away. It was all over in a few minutes. And no one in my parents’ house had any idea that I was gone.”

“Then what happened?” He leaned farther forward. “Did they hook up with this man Simon?”

“No. I heard them talking about him. The man I bit was named Steve, and he seemed to be in charge. Tommy was the man who worked for my father, and Steve told him that Simon wouldn’t be happy if they let me get away.”

“Do you know Simon? Is he someone your parents know?”

“I have no idea who he is. I know my parents don’t know anyone named Simon.”

“You sure you’ve never heard the name before?”

“Mr. Waters, those two men were kidnapping me. Don’t you think I would have remembered if I’d ever heard the name Simon before?” she said tartly.

Slowly he leaned back in his chair. “Did you figure out what Steve and Tommy were going to do with you?”

“I assumed they were delivering me to this Simon, but I didn’t stick around to find out.”

Once again admiration gleamed in his eyes. “How did you get away?”

“They didn’t bother to tie me up. I guess they figured there wasn’t anywhere for me to go. I managed to get the blanket untangled enough to see where we were headed, and once we got close to Cascadilla, I recognized it. I guessed that was where we were going, and I knew I couldn’t let them get me wherever they intended to take me.”

She hesitated, unsure how much to reveal. Finally she said, “I’ve always heard that you have to do anything you can during a crime to prevent being taken somewhere else.” She didn’t tell him that her father’s security force had drummed that into her since she was small. “So I knew I had to get out of the boat. When we were close enough that I thought I could swim to shore, I wriggled out of the blanket and slipped over the side of the boat. Steve and Tommy were too busy trying to navigate to notice that I was gone. Then I just dove under the water and stayed there for as long as I could. By the time I surfaced, the boat had almost disappeared over the horizon.”

“How far away from the beach were you?” Marcus asked.

She shrugged. “Maybe a mile.”

His eyebrows rose. “You were able to swim a mile to shore?”

“I’m a strong swimmer. It’s part of my job.” Her mouth twisted. “And I was desperate. It’s amazing what you can do when your life depends on it.”

Marcus’s mouth softened, then he stood up and came around to her side of the bed. He sat down inches away from her and took her hand. “You’re a brave woman, Jessica Burke.”

His hand was warm and strong around hers, and it sent an unexpected wave of sensation jolting up her arm. She held on to his hand and stared at him, and she watched his eyes darken. She might be naive, but she had no trouble identifying the expression she saw in his eyes. It was naked desire.

A curl of answering desire unfurled inside her, and she stared at him with shock. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. She didn’t know Marcus Waters, she reminded herself. And you were supposed to know someone well before you had sexual feelings for him. That’s what all the books said.

She slid her hand away from his, ignoring the shimmer of regret. For a moment he leaned forward, his eyes fixed on hers, and she wondered with a thrill if he would touch her again. She saw the intent in his eyes. Then he leaned away from her, carefully shuttering his gaze.

“So you swam to shore after you jumped off the boat. What happened then?”

“I have no idea.”

His eyebrows came together in a frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I don’t remember much of what happened after I jumped off the boat. I remember swimming for a long time, but the details are fuzzy. I must have passed out once I made it to shore.”

“Did the guys in the boat, Tommy and Steve, notice you were gone?”

“I’m sure they did, eventually,” she said dryly. “But I don’t think they knew right away. They didn’t come after me with the boat, if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t remember seeing it.” She shrugged. “But then, I don’t remember much.”

“Did you hit your head at some point?” he asked, his voice sharp.

“I don’t think so.” She touched her head tentatively. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

Marcus stared at her, an assessing look in his eyes. “So why did Steve and Tommy want to kidnap you? What do you have that they want?”

“I have no idea.”

“You said you’re a scientist. What do you do? Could your work somehow be involved?”

“I doubt it. I study coral reefs. And although I find the subject extremely interesting, I doubt anyone would kidnap me because they had a burning need to know about coral reefs.”

His mouth curled in a tiny smile. “Not only beautiful, but humble, too,” he said in a voice layered with velvet.

Once again she felt the jolt of attraction. This time it shimmered through her whole body, pooling low in her abdomen until she felt like a violin string quivering with tension.

“Just realistic,” she managed to say.

The smile lingered in his eyes as he continued to stare at her. Then slowly the smile faded. “That leaves the other possibility. Money. Would you or your parents be able to pay a ransom?”

She nodded tightly. It was something her father and mother had feared for years. “Yes. My parents would be able to pay a ransom.”

“Even a sizable one?”

“Yes.” Her voice was curt.

“I’m not going to ask them for one,” he said. “I’m just trying to establish a motive here.” He leaned back and watched her. “So you don’t know anyone named Simon, but your parents could pay a ransom. That must mean that they have a lot of money.” He paused. “Have there ever been kidnap attempts before? On you or anyone else in your family?”

“Yes.” She looked away. “Someone tried to kidnap my brother years ago.”

“Did they succeed?”

“No. He managed to get away. But since then, my father has had very elaborate security for both of us.”

“Yet someone managed to get through it and grab you.”

“I told you, one of the kidnapers had worked for my father and had managed to figure out how to get around the security.” She hesitated. “And there isn’t as much security on the island. My family are the only people who live there. We’ve always felt safe on the island.”

Marcus nodded, his eyes unreadable. “Then we have to assume that you were kidnapped for a ransom. Is that what you think?”

“Yes. It’s the only thing that makes any sense.”

“Do your parents have enemies who might try to hurt them by kidnapping you?”

“Anything is possible, I suppose,” she said slowly, weighing the possibility. “But I can’t think of anyone.” She looked at Marcus. “A wealthy man always has enemies. But I don’t know of any that would do this.”

“Do you have any enemies of your own?”

“No.” The very idea was ludicrous. “I’ve lived a very sheltered life, Mr. Waters. All I’ve done is go to school and study.”

“My name is Marcus,” he said, his low voice strumming across her nerves. “And it looks like you have some enemies now.”

“Yes, it does.”

She was caught in his gaze, held like a deer in the headlights of a car. She couldn’t get away, and she wasn’t sure that she wanted to. Her heart stuttered in her chest and sped up, and butterflies danced in her stomach.

What was happening? She had never felt like this around a man before. The realization that she was attracted to Marcus Waters both thrilled and frightened her. She had no experience with men, let alone a virile, sexy man like Marcus. She had no idea what to do.

To change the subject, she plucked at the T-shirt she wore. “What happened to my clothes?”

“They were covered with sand and salt. They would have irritated your skin, so I took them off and gave you a bath.”

She swallowed, her skin burning beneath the thin shirt. “You gave me a bath?”

“I couldn’t let you stay in those clothes.”

She was uncomfortable, knowing that he had seen her naked. Heat flared in his eyes as he watched her, and she knew that he was thinking about the same thing. A flush started at her feet and swept up her body.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, but she could see that he wasn’t sorry at all. And suddenly, shockingly, she wasn’t sorry, either. Blood pounded in her head, and desire swept through her veins. “Don’t be,” she whispered. “It’s all right.”

What was wrong with her? She shuddered, then buried her face in her hands. It must be the shock of what had happened. She had never felt like this before, never ached for a man to kiss her. For God’s sake, he had seen her naked, and rather than being upset, she was thrilled at the thought!

“It’s all right,” Marcus murmured, and he wrapped his arms around her. “You’re safe now.”

His tenderness, and the comfort she drew from his embrace, opened up a hidden place in her heart. “I hated being so helpless,” she said fiercely. “I’ve never been helpless in my life.”

She could feel him smile into her hair. “Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,” he said.

She raised her head to look at him. “You’ve probably never felt that way. I’m sure you’re always in control.”

The smile faded from his face. “You’re wrong,” he said quietly. “That’s how I know how you feel. You’re only in control when you can’t be hurt. And I was hurt once, a long time ago, by someone I loved. I felt just as helpless as you do now. And that’s one of the reasons I didn’t call the police. I wanted you to know that you were in control again.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you.”

For a moment she saw need and vulnerability deep in his eyes. Then they hardened. “Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not a thoughtful person, Jessica.”

But he was. She had seen the careful way he’d moved around her, trying not to alarm her. She’d noticed how he always left her an escape route. From the moment she’d woken up, he’d tried to set her at ease.

She shuddered, remembering her fear, and he wrapped his arms around her. He held her gently, but her skin burned where he touched her. Her stomach lurched and her heart jolted in her chest. Instinctively she stiffened against him, but he smoothed his hand down her back and held her more closely.

“You’re shivering again. It’s all right, Jessica. It’s just the adrenaline. No one can hurt you now.”

He thinks you’re upset about being kidnapped. She told herself to push away from him, to tell him the truth. She was upset about the way she was reacting to him, a total stranger.

But he wasn’t a stranger any longer. He had rescued her and taken care of her. He was willing to help her. No, Marcus Waters wasn’t a total stranger.

And even though she told herself to move away from him, she leaned into his embrace. He stroked her hair and murmured in her ear, and she quivered in his arms. He was trying to comfort her, and she was becoming aroused.

He would be appalled if he knew, she thought. But just as she told herself to move away, to put some distance between them, she felt the tension in his arms, heard the thundering of his heart against his chest. Was it possible that he was feeling what she felt?

She raised her head to look at him and was stunned at what she saw in his face. Need, naked and raw, glittered in his eyes. For her. She drew in a sharp breath, unable to look away.

The look in his eyes changed to one of fierce possession. He held her gaze for a moment, then bent his head to hers.

## Chapter 3

The first brush of his mouth was tentative. She could feel him holding back, hesitant. And she knew that the smart thing to do was lean away from him, murmur thanks for all he'd done, then slip quietly away from Marcus Waters.

But a part of her she didn't recognize, a wild, untamed part that had lain dormant for all of her twenty-one years, pushed aside the rational voice in her head. Instead, Jessica curled her arms around his neck and pressed against him.

He felt solid and tough, his chest and legs hard and unyielding against her softness. It felt as if his heat would consume her until there was nothing left of her but the aching at her core. She felt helpless in his arms, completely overwhelmed. But she trusted him, she realized. She had connected to Marcus on some level, and she didn't want to move away. Instead of frightening her, his heat and desire thrilled her, increasing the throbbing deep inside her. She twisted against him, not sure what she wanted but knowing that she wanted more.

He groaned and crushed her lips beneath his, devouring her mouth. When she gasped with surprise, he plunged into her mouth, tasting and caressing her with his tongue.

She tightened her arms around him, and he groaned again. Pulling her closer, he pressed her more tightly against him until every part of her was touching the hot, hard length of his body. Pressure coiled deep inside her until she squirmed against him, searching for something she couldn't name.

"Jessica," he groaned, tearing his mouth away from hers. "Tell me to stop."

"I don't want you to stop," she whispered. She wanted to be joined to him, to know everything possible about Marcus Waters.

He swept his hand down her back, lingering at her hip, shaping the curve of her buttocks. She could feel his hand tremble against her. "I want you," he muttered. "I don't want to stop, either."

"Then don't," she said recklessly, throwing all caution to the winds. She was lucky to be alive tonight. And suddenly she wanted to know what she had been missing all those years she'd spent in the lab doing nothing but working and studying. Knowing she might have been killed, she wanted to know what it felt like to be fully alive.

He pulled back a little, and she felt him staring at her. She opened her eyes with an effort. The desire that glittered in his blue eyes made her feel drunk with power. She had done that, she thought. She had made this man want her. And holding his gaze, she reached up and kissed him.

He kissed her with his eyes open, watching her, seeing her response to him. And as he kissed her, as his hands roamed over her back, she saw his eyes darken, felt his muscles harden even more. He reached up and brushed the hair out of her eyes, and she realized he was trembling.

Suddenly he picked her up and laid her on the bed. "You're so beautiful," he murmured as he leaned above her. He traced the curve of her cheek to her neck, and his hand lingered at the top of the T-shirt. "I didn't bathe you very well, you know."

"Why not?"

He stared at her, his eyes hot and dark. "Just looking at you made me hard. By the time I put you in this bed, all I wanted to do was touch you."

Jessica swallowed. "You can touch me now," she said, her voice husky and low. She hardly recognized herself. This wasn't Jessica Burke, the woman whose middle name was cautious, who had never had a serious relationship.

The neck of the T-shirt gaped between her breasts, and he let his fingers linger there, sending fire shooting through her veins. "Are you sure, Jessica? It's not too late to say no."

"I don't want to say no." A part of her was appalled, but her body throbbed wherever his fingers slid over her. And the ache inside her was too urgent, too all-consuming to be denied.

He watched her for a moment, then bent his head and pressed his mouth to her collarbone, his hand still between her breasts. His lips and tongue tasted her, teased her, until her hips moved restlessly beneath him.

When he lifted his head his eyes gleamed. “You taste wonderful. But I’ll bet there are other parts of you that taste even better.”

Slowly he pulled the neck of the T-shirt down until her breasts were exposed. She jerked when she felt the cool air brush across them and instinctively reached to cover herself.

He stared at her hand for a moment, then looked at her again. His eyes were almost black, and tension vibrated out of him. He held her gaze as he bent and kissed her, and she felt all her muscles go slack.

“Move your hand,” he whispered. “Wouldn’t you rather have me touching you?”

Her hand fell to the bed beside her, and he kissed her again. Then he raised his head to look at her. She felt her nipples getting hard just from his gaze.

He propped himself on one elbow, and his hot gaze swept her body. Then he lightly traced the curve of her breast with one finger. When she shivered, he cupped her with one hand. “They’re just as beautiful as the rest of you,” he whispered.

The throbbing was almost unbearable. She felt like Marcus was slowly winding a spring tighter and tighter inside her. When she twisted toward him, he closed his eyes briefly, then opened them to stare at her. He drew one finger across her nipple.

The jolt stunned her, and she cried out. She watched his face tighten, then he touched her again. She couldn’t stop the moan that started deep in her throat.

Suddenly he bent and took her nipple in his mouth. She bucked against him, overwhelmed by the sensations. Her body felt completely foreign to her. Nothing mattered except the touch of Marcus’s hands and the feel of his mouth. A sharp need throbbed deep inside her, and she instinctively moved her legs apart.

Marcus slid his hand to her thigh, and his fingers traced circular patterns on her skin. A whirling vortex pressed down on top of her, drawing her inside it. When Marcus slid his hand up her thigh and lingered between her legs, she rose to meet him. The sensations crashing over her were almost unbearable.

Marcus grabbed her shirt with an urgent hand and pulled it over her head. She was naked in front of him, but she didn’t care. She had gone too far into the vortex to think about modesty. Instead, she reached for him, trying to unbutton his shorts.

“Let me,” he whispered. “If you touch me now, it will all be over much too soon.”

He stripped off his T-shirt and tossed it to the floor, and she stared at his chest. Dark blond hair swirled around his nipples, and she ached to touch it. Then he pulled off his shorts, and her eyes widened.

He watched her look at him while he reached into a drawer of the night table and pulled out a foil packet, which he opened quickly. Then he kissed her again, his hand sweeping over her body, sending hot licks of fire down every nerve.

“Shall I show you the other places that taste good?” he murmured.

She was incapable of speaking. Her tongue was thick in her mouth, and her head was spinning. He stared at her for a moment, then let his mouth trail between her breasts and down her abdomen. She jumped when he bit the inside of her thigh.

Then he put his mouth between her legs, and she cried out with shock. His tongue caressed her slowly until she knew she would go out of her mind. Tension coiled inside her, tighter and tighter as he gently suckled her.

The world exploded around her. Spasm after spasm shook her body, and all she could do was cling to Marcus. She felt the hard length of him probing her, and she lifted herself to meet him.

She felt herself stretching and stretching, then suddenly he stopped. When she opened her eyes, he was staring at her.

“You’re a virgin.” His voice and his eyes were full of shock.

“What difference does that make?” she asked, her voice wobbly.

“It makes a hell of a lot of difference,” he retorted. He tried to move away from her, but she wrapped her arms around him and held on tightly.

“Please don’t stop.”

She felt him quivering in her arms, felt the tension that pulsed from him. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Please, I want you to make love to me.”

He groaned and pressed his forehead to hers. “You’re a virgin, Jessica. It’s going to hurt.”

“Only the first time, right?”

He stared at her for a long time, and she could see that he wanted to stop. He was trying to move away from her. So she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him to her. He took her mouth in a deep kiss and pushed into her with one stroke. Then he lay still.

The pain was sharp and stinging, but after a moment it receded. Then he began moving slowly and gently. At first it felt like she was being stretched beyond the limit, but as her body began adjusting to him, she felt sensation stirring all over again.

Wrapping her arms around him, she held him close as the tension built. Then suddenly, she exploded all over again. Marcus tightened his arms around her and shuddered above her, whispering her name.

They lay tangled together, unmoving, for a long time. When the world finally stopped spinning, she shifted her hands so that she could explore his broad, solid back.

He moved to his side and propped himself on one elbow as he stared at her. There was a shadow of sadness in his eyes.

“You should have told me before I touched you,” he said.

“I wanted you to touch me. I wanted you to make love to me.”

“How could you know what you wanted, when you’d never done it before?” He reached over to brush the hair out of her face, a gesture that seemed almost unconscious. “I took something that I had no right to take, Jessica.”

“You didn’t take it. I gave it to you.” Her voice was fierce.

The sadness seemed to fill his face. “Your virginity should have been a gift to the man you love.”

“I didn’t feel like waiting around for him,” she said tartly. She reached up and touched his face. “I wanted to make love with you, Marcus. I’m old enough to make my own decisions.”

“Just how old are you, Jessica?”

“I’m twenty-one, almost twenty-two.”

“And I’m a very old thirty-five.” He stared at her for a moment, then he lay down and pulled her close. “God help me, I know I shouldn’t have done that. But I can’t regret it if you don’t.”

“Not for a minute,” she said. She turned so that she was cuddled against him. “Stay with me, Marcus,” she said, and she heard the weariness in her voice. She was already half-asleep.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Marcus looked at the woman wrapped around him and cursed himself long and silently. He was a real bastard. He should have stopped the moment he realized she was a virgin. Hell, he told himself, he shouldn’t have started in the first place.

He’d known she was upset, known that she needed to be comforted. But what had started out as an innocent embrace had become anything but innocent. And it had happened very quickly.

He’d been too aroused, too hot for her, to be able to think rationally. And she hadn’t done anything to stop him.

It wasn’t up to her to do the stopping, he reminded himself. Once he realized she was a virgin, that had been his responsibility.

She murmured in her sleep and moved closer to him, and he tightened his arm around her. She was only twenty-one years old, for God's sake. She was far too young for him.

But he had never responded to any woman the way he'd responded to Jessica. The heat of their lovemaking still lingered, and he was becoming aroused all over again just thinking about it.

It was the circumstances, he told himself. That would explain this intense, uncontrollable attraction. It was a well-known fact that danger and excitement were potent aphrodisiacs. Satisfied with his explanation, he closed his eyes and allowed himself to pull Jessica closer against him.

The hushed stillness of the deepest part of the night surrounded him when he woke suddenly. He could feel that Jessica was awake, too. She was tense and silent beside him.

"What's wrong?" he whispered.

She turned to him, and he saw the fear fading from her eyes. "I'm all right now," she whispered. "I woke up and didn't recognize the room, then I remembered being kidnapped. It just took me a moment to figure out where I was."

"You're safe, Jessica."

"I know." She stared at him in the darkness, a pale sliver of moonlight falling on her face from the window, and he wanted her all over again. She must have seen the need in his face, because she reached up and put her arms around his neck. "Kiss me, Marcus."

He knew he should untangle himself and tell her to go back to sleep, but he couldn't look away. Desire raged inside him, and her dark eyes were luminous with need. Slowly he bent his head until he was kissing her, and as her mouth opened beneath his, he felt a rush of need fill him.

She must have felt the same thing, because she turned so she lay pressed against him from her chest to her toes. Almost as if they had a will of their own, his arms came around her and pulled her tightly against him.

He gave in to the need coursing through him and covered her body with his. This time, he tried to be gentle and careful, as he should have the first time. This time, he tried to go slowly. But she arched her back and cried out for him, urging him inside her, and he lost control.

And when she lay clasped around him, her fingers digging into his shoulders, her mouth fused to his, he poured himself into her, feeling the ripples of her release clamping around him. He drank in her cries and clasped their hands together, holding on to her tightly.

They fell asleep still bound together, holding hands. Marcus's last thought was that nothing had felt this right in a long time.

The sun was shining through the window when he woke up again. He stretched, then went still as he realized that he wasn't alone in the bed. He looked at Jessica's blond hair and knew that the night before hadn't been a dream. It had been very real.

He couldn't remember ever wanting another woman the way he had wanted Jessica. The way he still wanted her, he admitted. And he couldn't remember lovemaking ever being so powerful or moving him so deeply.

And how was he going to deal with that in the light of day?

He eased away from the sleeping Jessica and slid out of the bed. But instead of moving away, getting dressed, he stood staring at her. She was so beautiful in the morning light, and so young. A wisp of guilt fluttered through him. He had taken advantage of her. It was as simple as that.

He couldn't give her back her virginity, but he could protect her from whoever was trying to kidnap her. His jaw hardened. Not only was it his responsibility, it was part of his job. Simon was behind the kidnapping, he was sure of it. The traitor must be getting desperate for money if he was willing to take such a chance.

By keeping Jessica safe, he would force Simon out into the open. And further into the net. Yes, he would keep her with him until Simon was caught and all danger to her had passed.

He ignored the flare of pleasure at the prospect of having Jessica close by for an indefinite length of time. He was just doing his job. And his job was what mattered to him. No woman could compete with that.

He glanced at Jessica once more, then deliberately walked out of the room. He made coffee and put on some clothes, trying to put the magic of the night out of his head. He needed to concentrate on his job, but it was impossible to forget how Jessica had tasted and felt, how she'd responded in his arms.

Scowling, he walked into the bedroom with two cups of coffee, stopping in the doorway when he saw Jessica sitting up in the bed. She had pulled the sheet over her breasts as she leaned back against the head-board, and he felt himself getting hard all over again.

"Good morning," he finally said. What was he supposed to say to her? I'm sorry I took your virginity last night and could we make love all over again?

"Good morning." He saw a faint blush of pink on her cheeks and realized that this was a first for her, too. She'd never faced a lover after a night of passion.

Setting the coffee on the night table, he sat on the bed. Her cheeks became pinker. "About last night," he began, but she cut him off.

"Please don't apologize again. You'll make me feel very...inadequate." She plucked at the sheet and pulled it higher over her breasts. He could see the pink of her nipples through the light sheet, and he wanted to touch them again, feel them get hard and tight in his hand.

Then her words registered. "Inadequate?" He stared at her. "Believe me, Jessica, if I'm apologizing, it's not because you were inadequate." He took her hand and pressed it against his arousal, closing his eyes as need rocketed through him. "That's what you do just by looking at me."

He opened his eyes to see an answering need in hers. He dropped her hand and stood abruptly. "I brought you some coffee."

"Thank you."

She reached for the coffee cup, not meeting his eyes. And suddenly he understood. She didn't know the rules. Hell, she didn't even know how the game was played.

"Jessica, if I had stayed in bed with you this morning, we would have made love all over again. More than once. And I couldn't do that to you." He took her hand. "I don't want to hurt you. And I would have if we'd made love again." Pressing his lips to her palm, he said, "You're going to be stiff and sore this morning. I'm trying to be a gentleman here."

Finally she looked at him. "Thank you for explaining. I was afraid that..." She swallowed but continued to meet his eyes. "I was afraid that you were disappointed in me because I don't have any experience."

He groaned and pulled her against him. "Jessica, I can barely think of anything else when I'm near you. And neither of us can afford that right now. We need to concentrate on your problem."

"You're right. I should take a shower and get dressed."

He nodded. "Your clothes are dry, but they probably need to be washed. I'll give you some of my clothes to wear in the meantime." He looked at her again, at the faint outline of her curves beneath the sheet, then stood. "I'll get out of here so you can take a shower. I won't be responsible for my actions if I watch you get out of that bed."

Finally her face relaxed into a small smile. "I'll see you in a few minutes."

As he walked out of the room, he wanted to turn around and stay, wanted to step into the shower with her. But he forced himself to keep walking, to shut the bedroom door behind her.

He'd picked a hell of a time for his hormones to rage out of control. If his suspicions were correct and Simon had orchestrated Jessica's kidnapping, the SPEAR traitor must be very close. He might even be on Cascadilla already. Marcus couldn't afford to be distracted.

But he couldn't turn Jessica loose, either. He'd promised to protect her, and he always kept his promises. Marcus downed a gulp of scalding coffee and stared moodily out the window. He should

never have touched her last night. Now that he knew what they were like together, it was going to be almost impossible to keep his mind on his work.

The bedroom door opened behind him, and he turned to see Jessica standing hesitantly in the doorway. Her hair was wet, and she wore another of his T-shirts and a pair of his cutoffs that hung to her knees. He'd deliberately picked a dark blue shirt for her to wear, but he could still see the points of her nipples pressing into the fabric.

He scowled at her, shoving his hands into his pockets to stop himself from reaching for her. "You look like something the cat dragged home."

She lifted her chin. "I thought you were the one who dragged me home."

He felt his mouth curving into a reluctant smile. "Touché. Come into the kitchen and have some breakfast. You must be hungry."

"I guess I am." She slid into a chair at the tiny table and looked at the fruit and muffins he'd set out. "I've almost forgotten when I had my last meal."

They ate in silence for a while, but it wasn't a comfortable silence. Memories of the night before danced between them. The silence grew louder and louder, and the tension stretched and swelled. Finally Marcus pushed away from the table.

"I'll throw your clothes into the washing machine." He was tormented by the sight of her wearing his clothes. Every time her shirt brushed against her breasts, desire clawed at him. Every time the neck of the shirt gaped wide, he had to stop himself from staring.

At that she looked quickly at him. "I can do that."

"Go ahead and finish eating. I wasn't very hungry," he said gruffly. He felt her gaze on his back as he hurried out of the room.

After he tossed her stiff, wrinkled clothing into the wash, he leaned against the machine for a few moments to compose himself. He could do this, he told himself. He could walk out there and have a normal conversation with her.

When he walked into the kitchen, she was standing at the sink, rinsing the dishes. Sunlight streamed through her blond hair, turning the red highlights to fire. Her legs were strong and tanned, and he noticed that she had painted her toenails a bright red.

"We need to figure out what to do next, Jessica," he said.

She carefully set a dish into the dishwasher, then turned to face him. "The first thing I need to do is call my parents. They must be frantic with worry."

He shook his head. "You can't tell anyone where you are."

Her eyes narrowed and she glared at him. "You may have rescued me, but that doesn't mean you own me. I'm going to call my parents, and you're not going to stop me."

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