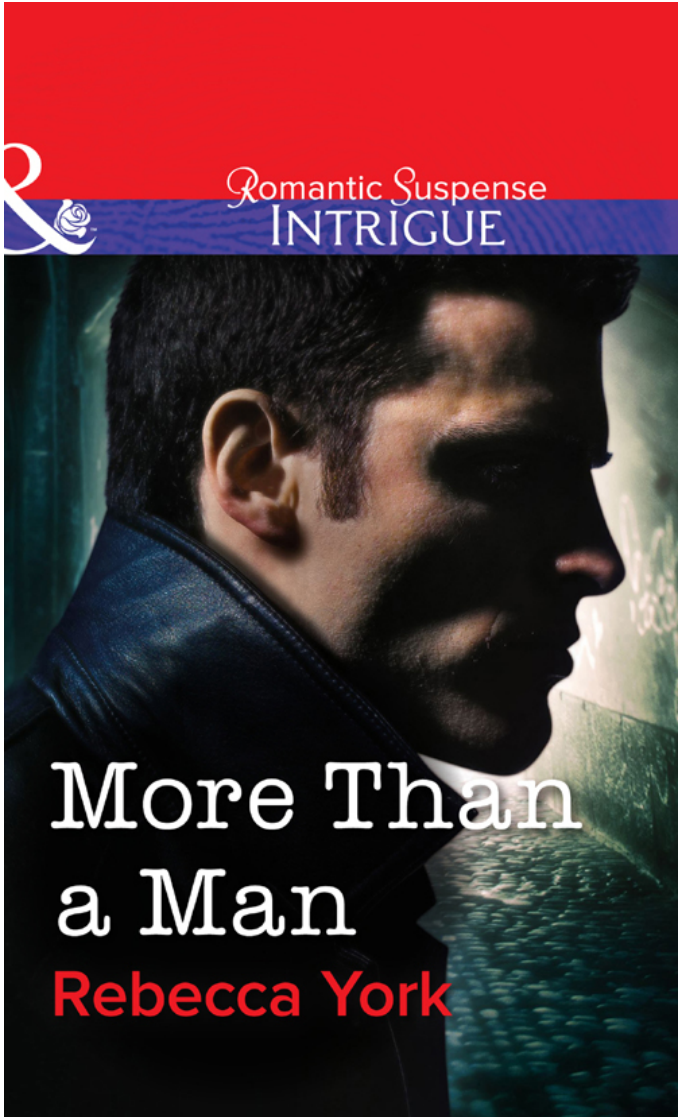
Romantic Suspense
INTRIGUE
More Than a Man
Rebecca York

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Содержание

More Than a Man	5
Table of Contents	6
Chapter One	8
Chapter Two	25
Chapter Three	47
Chapter Four	62
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	66

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Table of Contents

Cover Page
Title Page
About the Author
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Copyright

Award-winning, bestselling novelist Ruth Glick, who writes as **Rebecca York,** is the author of more than one hundred books, including her popular 43 LIGHT STREET series for Intrigue.

Ruth says she has the best job in the world. Not only does she get paid for telling stories; she's also the author of twelve cookbooks. Ruth and her husband, Norman, travel frequently, researching locales for her novels and searching out new dishes for her cookbooks.

Chapter One

"We're too late. They're all dead."

The words drifted toward Noah Fielding as though they were part of a dream. Or a nightmare.

An all-too-familiar nightmare.

Other people spoke around him, the sounds reaching him in a confused babble.

As he hovered in a twilight zone between life and death, paralysis held him in a viselike grip. He couldn't move. Not even twitch a finger. He knew he wasn't breathing because a terrible weight pressed against his chest holding his lungs immobile. His limbs might have been sunk into cement.

Don't panic. You know you can get through this. Don't panic. He repeated the words over and over in his mind, fighting to ground himself.

A commanding voice cut through the shock and confusion around him.

"Get them out of there."

The order came from…

Noah should know the man's name. He tried to call it up, but his mind had turned into a pool of treacle.

He felt hands on his body tug him. Someone grabbed him under the arms and pulled him from the experimental submarine, then laid him on the metal deck of the…

Again, he drew a blank.

He could feel hot sun on his face and the boat rocking under his body. More sensations.

"Get the doc."

"It's too late for that."

His mind struggled to make connections. What language were the men speaking?

Farsi? Eighteenth-century French? Russian?

As they spoke, the words fell into a recognizable pattern. The men were speaking English. Late twentieth century. Or maybe twenty-first.

Twenty-first century. Yes. That was the time period. He remembered that now. And he clutched at the fact.

Were they speaking of a doc or a dock?

A sudden coughing fit shattered his concentration.

All around him he heard excited exclamations.

"Fielding's alive."

Noah's eyes blinked open and he stared up into the face of… Ken Dupont. The doctor. The doc.

When Noah struggled to sit up, the man put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't move."

He tried to speak and was caught in another coughing fit as his lungs struggled to function again.

Someone else spoke. "When we lost communication, we thought you were all dead. How did you get the sub out of there?" Captain Sampson was asking the question, his voice sharp. He

was the one who had given the orders before.

Noah focused on him. "I…" Again he started coughing, cutting off his explanation. But the whole picture was coming back to him now.

He was ninety miles off the coast of Grand Cayman Island, on a scientific exploration ship—*Neptune's Promise.* The mission was to test an experimental submarine called *The Fortune.*

This was the second day of diving. He and three other men had gone down into the 25,000-foot trench off the island. Everything had been fine, until Eddie Carlson had gotten over-enthusiastic and maneuvered them into a passage between two rock formations—where the sub had gotten stuck. They'd tried everything they could to get out. But the craft wouldn't budge and they were running out of air.

There was no other submarine in the area that could dive so deeply. Nobody who could rescue them.

When the rest of the crew had passed out from lack of oxygen, Noah had willed himself to stay conscious. He'd staggered to the controls and made one last desperate attempt to free the machine. He remembered silently saying a prayer to any god who would listen as he backed up and rammed forward, like the driver of a car stuck in snow. Apparently the maneuver had freed them.

After that, everything was pretty fuzzy. But he must have set a course for the surface, because the sub had made it up here. Only it sounded like it had been too late for the rest of the crew.

Damn. They were all good men. Dead because he'd dragged

them down there with him.

He caught himself up short in the middle of the accusation. They'd jumped at the chance to crew the sub. They simply ignored the risks.

In the background Noah heard people talking. Talking about *him.*

"Something I didn't like about that guy."

"He thinks he can do anything he wants 'cause he's got the big bucks."

"Probably hogged the oxygen."

He understood the need to assign blame. And understood that the rich, handsome adventurer, Noah Fielding, was a convenient target.

Still, he heard himself protesting, "No."

The captain's voice cut through the muttering of the crew, telling them to cool it until they had the full story.

Two men brought a stretcher and lifted Noah onto it. He knew it wasn't easy maneuvering his one hundred seventy pound, six-foot frame down the companionway, but they managed to do it without dropping him.

Below deck, he lay on the exam table in the infirmary, letting Dr. Dupont poke and prod him.

"You're in good shape. It looks like you were damn lucky," the medic said.

Noah pushed himself to a sitting position. "I've got an iron constitution. And that rebreather thing kept me going." His voice

caught. “I’m just sorry it didn’t save the others.”

“Yeah.” Dupont walked to the door and stuck out his head. “You can talk to him now.”

Captain Sampson came in, his gaze hard. “Do you remember what happened?”

Noah struggled not to tense up. He had nothing to hide. Well, nothing that mattered to Sampson or the rest of the crew of *Neptune’s Promise.*

“It got pretty fuzzy at the end. I was functioning on hardly any oxygen, so I don’t know if I can be perfectly accurate. *The Fortune* wedged into a rock formation. After Eddie passed out, I was able to shake us free.”

“I thought you were just financing the expedition. I didn’t realize you could operate the sub.”

“I’ve picked up a lot of skills over the years,” he clipped out, hoping that was enough of an explanation—and hoping he wasn’t going to have to fight his way out of here. He knew it was natural for the men to resent his miraculous escape and his money. He was alive. The crew who had gone down with him in the sub were dead. But that wasn’t his fault. All he’d done was survive.

NEPTUNE’S Promise returned to George Town. As soon as the craft docked, Noah left the ship and headed for the luxury B and B where he was staying.

He knew the captain had already informed the men’s families of their deaths. After closing the door to his room, he made condolence calls to the widows.

The deaths were like a raw wound in his gut. He couldn't bring the men back, but he could arrange to transfer a million dollars to each of the wives. At least that would make the next few years easier for them and their children.

Guilt gnawed at him. He and the crew had carefully gone over procedures, and the craft should have been safe. Maybe if he'd used another pilot, they would have avoided disaster.

Noah had liked Eddie Carlson, most especially his sense of humor and sense of adventure. Now Noah was second-guessing himself and thinking that the guy was too reckless to have been at the controls. If he'd stayed in open water, everybody would have come back alive.

Live and learn, he told himself.

Twenty minutes after he'd closed the door to his room, a two-man team from the local constabulary showed up. One was a brisk little dark-skinned cop named Inspector Dangerford. In his fifties and balding, he was accompanied by a younger, taller assistant named Sergeant Wilkins, who mostly let his boss do the talking.

Noah knew the inspector's type. Nice and polite—until he thought he had something on you. Then he'd get his sidekick to whip out the handcuffs and march you off to an interrogation room where you might or might not undergo some physical persuasion.

Noah had a lot of practice answering questions—hostile and otherwise. Dangerford asked a lot of them in his soft island

accent, approaching each point from several different angles, but he couldn't shake Noah's story that he'd strapped on the rebreather and hoped for the best.

From the first, it was clear the cops were just on a fishing expedition, hoping Noah would make some kind of mistake and incriminate himself in the deaths of the other men.

But he stuck to his guns, repeating the same story over and over. He hadn't done anything illegal or immoral. He didn't know why he was alive and the other men were dead.

Strictly speaking, that was the absolute truth.

At the end of the interview, Dangerford asked him to stay in town until the investigation of the incident was completed.

Noah politely declined, and because he wasn't under arrest for anything, they had to back off.

When they asked for his address, he gave them the condo he owned in San Francisco. He wasn't there often, but he paid the security staff to maintain his privacy.

Although he'd planned to stay on the island for a couple of weeks, he felt a sudden urge to get out of the sun. Picking up the phone, he booked a flight to the West Coast with High Fliers, a company that sold shares in private jet planes to rich passengers who wanted to travel in comfort to various destinations around the world.

AS NOAH'S PLANE flew over Las Vegas, an interesting conversation was taking place in a studio apartment in a run-down part of the desert gambling oasis.

"You must be crazy." Olivia Stapler gave her brother a hard stare, struggling not to spit in his face after the hateful suggestion he'd made.

Pearson's response was a nasty smile. "If you don't do this, I'll tell Dad that you're working as a prostitute."

"That's a bald-faced lie!"

"What would you call it?"

"I'm working for an escort service."

His laugh was even nastier than the smile. "You expect him to believe that? An escort service in Las Vegas. He hated the idea of your coming here in the first place. Now he's going to *know* you're wallowing in sin."

A sick feeling rose in her throat. Her dad was in a nursing home back in Paterson, New Jersey. After two strokes he was paralyzed on one side and barely functional, and he'd always favored her brother.

If Pearson said Olivia was a prostitute, her dad would believe it, and it would kill him.

After delivering his threat, Pearson softened his approach.

"And there's money in it for you, too. A lot more than you ever saw."

"I earned good money dancing," she shot back.

He made a snorting sound. "In a chorus line?"

"Yes! And I had a featured part."

"Well, you had to kiss all that goodbye. So you might as well get used to being a gimp."

The cruel gibe made her want to rush her brother and beat him with her fists. But he'd only start slapping her around, and she'd be in worse shape than she was now. From where she sat, it was too bad she'd focused all her energy on her dance career, but she'd been young and sure that she had what it took to make it.

While she was still in high school, she'd saved money from her after-school job at Macy's. As soon as she'd graduated, she'd bought a bus ticket to Las Vegas.

With her long legs and years of dance training, she'd been instantly hired by one of the smaller reviews on the strip. Six months later, she'd applied to one of the top shows and gotten in. Her boss had told her she was on the fast track to being offered a starring role.

That was then. Her reality was a lot different now, after a drunk driver had plowed into her in the casino parking lot.

She was still trying to pay off her hospital bills and her physical therapy bills. She'd even reached the point where she knew she should apply for food stamps. Then, at least, she could be sure of eating regular meals.

Pearson must have seen the defeated look on her face, because he visibly relaxed. "It's going to be easy. I got the idea from that guy who ran for president. The one who got caught in a hotel room in L.A. with his mistress."

"That was a longtime affair."

Pearson waved her to silence. "Whatever. The point is, some men have a lot to lose if they get nailed in the wrong bed with a

blond looker like you. Let me tell you how we're going to work it."

As she listened, she clenched her fists, her mind scrambling for a way to thwart her brother's plans.

NOAH LANDED at LAX and collected his luggage from the flight crew, then picked up his Lexus hybrid in the private lot. Once he was on the highway, he pulled his cell phone from the glove compartment, plugged it into the cigarette lighter and called home.

His man, Thomas Northrop, answered.

"I've landed. I'm in the car and I'll be there in two or three hours, depending on the traffic."

"We're glad to have you back." Thomas paused. His voice was sober when he began to speak again. "I'm sorry about what happened on *The Fortune.* I know you have to be grieving for those men."

"Yes, thanks," Noah answered. He and Thomas were old friends. Or at least as friendly as a man like Noah could get with *anyone.* "Anything I should know about?" he asked.

"You have four e-mails from that doctor—Sidney Hemmings."

"Is something wrong?"

"He's inviting you to a medical research conference in Las Vegas. He says that would be the perfect opportunity for the two of you to meet. He's holding a complimentary place for you."

"Yeah, he mentioned it a couple of months ago. I'm still

thinking about it," Noah answered. He'd been corresponding with Hemmings for fifteen years—first by mail and then by e-mail. The doctor was doing some of the most interesting work in the field of longevity and he was a presenter as well as an organizer of the international conference.

Noah was caught between his innate caution and his desire to meet the brilliant researcher face-to-face.

"I'll think about it," he said. He'd detected a subtle note of disquiet in Thomas's tone. "Anything else?"

His chief of staff cleared his throat, then spoke in a halting voice. "Simon is home."

Noah sucked in a breath. Simon was Thomas's older son. And in following long-standing tradition, he should have been the one to take over from his father. But Simon had never been an easy child to deal with, and in his teen years, he'd exhibited some mental instability that had evolved into paranoid schizophrenic episodes.

Noah had paid for his treatment at a very expensive private mental hospital in the Bay Area. With medication, he'd been able to leave the hospital and had been living in Half Moon Bay, working at one of the many garden centers in the town.

"He quit his job and came home," Thomas said. "I think he might be off his meds."

"Thanks for the heads-up."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. We'll deal with it."

"He's been asking questions about you," Thomas continued. "Questions I won't answer."

"I'm sorry to put you in that position."

"As you said, it's not your fault."

They talked for a few more minutes about the young man as Noah drove north, looking with disgust at the brown haze hanging over the coastline.

By the time he reached Santa Barbara, the sky looked better. Continuing north of town, he turned off on a two-lane road that wound through stands of sycamores, live oaks and mounds of pampas grass.

It was a landscape he liked, a landscape he hoped he wouldn't have to abandon anytime soon.

He had a good chance of realizing that ambition, because the location of his home was secret. When he'd changed his name twenty years ago, he'd made sure that nobody knew where the man named Noah Fielding really lived. His mail came to a post office box. His bank was out of state. And he could handle transactions over the Internet. In fact, there were no clues leading to his current location, and he meant to keep it that way.

GARY Carlson arrived on Grand Cayman just after Noah had checked out of his bed-and-breakfast. Gary was the brother of Eddie Carlson, the man who had been piloting *The Fortune* when it had gone down.

Eddie and Gary had been close, and he was having trouble coping with his brother's death. He was also wondering why

Noah Fielding felt compelled to transfer a million dollars to the widows of the men who had been in the submarine with him.

As soon as his plane landed, Gary went directly to the police station and tried to get the straight scoop on what had happened below the turquoise waters of the Caribbean.

The cops were sympathetic, but they wouldn't give him anything beyond basic information because the incident was still under investigation.

Next he talked to the captain and crew of *Neptune's Promise,* which was docked in George Town.

There were mixed reactions from the crew. Some thought the rich man who had backed the expedition, Noah Fielding, had sacrificed the other men to save himself. Others thought Fielding was just a lucky son of a bitch.

Whichever it was, Gary wanted to talk to him. But nobody seemed to have his address and nobody knew how to get in touch with him.

After thirty-six hours on the island, his anger and frustration building, he knew he wasn't going to get any information on his own. He wasn't a patient man under the best of circumstances, and he suspected his grief was affecting his judgment.

But he wasn't willing to drop the inquiry into his brother's death. Once back in Baltimore he looked up a local outfit he'd heard about—the Light Street Detective Agency—and hired them to tell him where to find Fielding.

PULLING up at the entrance to his walled estate, Noah used

his remote control. The gate swung open, then closed behind him as he drove toward the sprawling house.

The landscaping along the winding driveway took advantage of the dry climate, interspersing huge boulders with yuccas, cacti and native plants like manzanita. Rounding a curve, he caught sight of the house which was mostly one story but jutted up to a second floor in several locations.

Home.

It was based on the design of an ancient pueblo village that he'd seen long ago and admired for the simplicity of its lines. He'd drawn up plans and started building the house himself, on acreage he'd acquired years earlier while using a different name. It was the site of an old ranch that the family had never been able to make a go of. They'd been glad to unload it to the eccentric gentleman from San Francisco. Noah had found it the perfect solution to his need for privacy. An estate out in the dry, brown hills.

The first dwelling had consisted of five rooms, but he'd added on to it over the years, hiring local workmen to help him with the construction. The house wasn't the only building on the grounds. He had a workshop, a lab, a stable, a number of storage buildings and a fully equipped gym spread out around the property.

Thomas must have been waiting for a signal from the gate because he stepped outside the front door and waited for the car to pull to a stop.

Noah slowed, studying the man as he walked toward the

Lexus. He'd been with Noah for a long time, and now he was in his sixties. He still stood straight and tall, and his mind was as sharp as ever. But there were little signs that he was getting on in years, like his receding hairline and the sagging skin under his chin. He wouldn't be here forever, and Noah would have to face that sad truth sooner or later.

He pulled to a stop, put the vehicle in park and pressed the button to open the trunk.

Thomas stepped forward. "Let me help you."

"No need."

As Noah walked around to the trunk, he caught a flash of movement and looked up to see Simon appear in the doorway.

Moving slowly and deliberately, he approached Noah and his father.

"I've been waiting for you."

"It's good to see you," Noah answered evenly, as he studied the son of his old friend, trying to figure out how this would go. One thing he knew: he didn't like the look in the young man's eyes or the tone of his voice.

Simon answered with a laugh that made the hair on Noah's scalp prickle. "You can't fool me. You hate me."

"Of course not."

"You and my father. You've always been against me."

"Let's go inside and talk."

And I'll contact the hospital and have them pick you up.

"You're hiding something from me."

"No. Let's go in and I'll tell you everything."

Hope bloomed in Simon's eyes, and Noah thought he had broken through.

But the moment passed. "It's too late for that."

Simon pulled a gun from under his jacket.

Thomas's eyes widened. "Put that away."

The young man aimed the weapon at his father.

"You don't want to hurt him," Noah called out.

The weapon swung toward Noah who was calculating his chances of disarming the kid before something bad happened.

As the three of them confronted each other, Simon focused on his father again.

"If you won't tell me what I want to know, then you're going to die."

As Simon raised the gun, Noah acted on instinct. Leaping forward, he pushed Thomas out of the way.

He heard an explosion, felt the impact of a bullet slamming into his chest. He crashed to the ground and as he lay in the driveway, another bullet made him jerk.

"Stop. For God's sake, stop." That was Thomas shouting at his son. Then he called out, "Help. Somebody help."

Noah's gaze swung toward his friend's voice, but it was too much effort to keep his eyes focused. Everything around him was dimming.

He heard running footsteps, then scuffling sounds.

"Get the hell off me." That was Simon. He started babbling

threats, his voice fading as someone dragged him away from the bloody scene.

Thomas knelt over Noah. “I’m sorry. So sorry.”

Chapter Two

Noah felt hands on his body and heard a babble of voices.

"Careful. Get him to his bed."

"He needs a doctor."

"Forget it! He's done for."

"It's not as bad as it looks." That was Thomas, calm and sure as always.

They laid him down.

"Leave me with him. I can take care of this."

The chaos faded into the background. Gently Thomas unbuttoned Noah's shirt. Now that they were alone, his old friend drew in a sharp breath.

Noah could imagine the horrible wounds the man was seeing. He had seen many like them over the years.

His lips moved, but no sound came out. He tried to cling to consciousness, but staying awake was beyond his ability, and he drifted away to another reality. To a time long ago.

He was an eleven- or twelve-year-old boy named Edmond George, crying and wandering through a squalid little village. Everyone else was dead from the great pestilence. That's what they called it then. Not the black death.

He was weak from starvation when a group of friars came through the area, praying for the victims.

"A miracle. It's a miracle that God spared this boy's life," the

leader of the group proclaimed as he laid his hands on Edmond's head.

They took him to their monastery and nursed him back to health.

His memories leaped twenty-five years ahead in time. He was a lean-bodied, dark-haired man who never caught the passing illnesses that plagued the rest of the brothers. And he was no longer an uneducated lout. He was a well-read man, versed in all the important disciplines of his time, highly respected by many in the monastery. Except for the ones who whispered that his health and good fortune came from the devil.

Those were violent times, even in the church. He was in line to be the abbot when a rival poisoned him. When he didn't die, the devil whispers became a chorus.

One night he fought off a savage attack and fled, bleeding from a host of stab wounds.

Staggering into an abandoned hut, he prayed to God for a favorable reception into heaven and waited to die. Instead, he awakened in the morning, amazed that he was still breathing and that the holes in his flesh had closed themselves. Another miracle.

He was alive. He didn't know why, but he felt a burning desire to stay that way. The monks had taught him scruples, but they had tried to kill him, too.

Quickly he realized that his situation called for desperate measures. With no money and no place in the world, he stole a

horse from the stable at a nearby inn, then robbed the occupants of a coach that was making a rest stop along the road.

While the Earl of Bradford was relieving himself behind a tree, Edmond acquired the man's trunk full of clothing and also enough money to live on while he figured out his next move, which was to one of the Italian city-states.

With his classical education, his dark good looks and the political savvy he'd acquired at the monastery, he set himself up as an expert on religious artifacts, which he exported to England at very advantageous prices. He'd also acquired his first mistress and discovered the pleasures of the flesh.

His mind took another leap—this time skipping a hundred years.

He was Miguel Santana who had made a fortune in the wine trade and was one of the backers of a Spanish expedition to the new world. He'd funded three ships and a crew with the proviso that he traveled with the explorers across the Atlantic and then inland across a vast continent, looking for gold and trading with the natives they met.

The party found no gold and turned around, but Miguel Santana slipped away from the explorers and stayed in the new world, where he eventually set himself up as an apprentice to an Indian shaman.

His mind bridged another wide gap.

He was Justin Glasgow, a rich San Francisco settler who had moved south and bought a piece of backcountry property

in the hills north of Santa Barbara, where he'd built himself a comfortable estate. Then Justin had "died" and left the property to "his nephew," William Emerson, who had eventually passed it on to his own nephew, Noah Fielding, the man he was now.

He should have another twenty or thirty years before he had to change his name again.

As that thought settled in his mind, he opened his eyes. When he turned his head, he saw Thomas sitting in a chair beside the bed.

"How are you?" his chief of staff asked.

"I'll live," he answered, then barked out a laugh. "I always live."

"Is that so bad?" Thomas asked in a low voice.

"What's worse, do you think? Dying with everyone else when global warming or some man-made plague kills the population of the planet or still being here?"

Of course, there was no answer to the riddle. Just as there was no answer to the riddle of Edmond George or Miguel Santana or Justin Glasgow.

After seven hundred years on earth and millions of dollars spent on research, he still didn't know why he never got sick and his body was blessed—or cursed—with the ability to heal any injury.

He stopped thinking about himself as he took in Thomas's weary countenance.

"You look like you've been up for days."

"I'm fine."

"What did you tell the gawkers?" he asked. "That Simon was using blanks. That the wounds looked worse than they really were."

"Did they buy it?"

"If not, they're keeping quiet about it."

Noah thought for a moment. "Maybe it might be a good idea for me to take up Dr. Hemmings on his offer to attend that New Frontiers in Longevity conference in Las Vegas. Getting away from the estate for a week or so might be prudent."

"Yes." Thomas cleared his throat. "Simon is back at Grayfield Sanatorium."

Noah blew out a breath.

Thomas continued with his explanation. "I, uh, bound him and confined him to his room before they got here to pick him up."

"That must have been…difficult for you."

"Yes, but it was necessary. When they got here, I told them the story about the blanks. They have him back in the locked wing and back on medication. He was sounding pretty confused. If we're lucky, maybe *he* will even buy the story that he didn't really want to kill anyone."

Thomas made a frustrated sound. "He's been obsessed with you for a long time. I used to catch him sneaking into the warehouses you have on the estate, looking through your memorabilia."

Noah laughed. "Warehouses packed with stuff I should have

thrown out long ago."

"I understand why you want to keep things from your past. They're your continuity."

"Yeah, but someone may get the idea that I've been doing a brisk business in stolen Anasazi pots and Maya stelae. Maybe it's time for some housecleaning and some discreet donations to a couple of deserving museums."

Thomas shrugged. "Do you want some help?"

"I'll leave it until after the conference."

Thomas turned the conversation back to his son. "Simon was always jealous of our relationship. He always knew there was something special about you."

Noah nodded. "I'm sorry you have to go through this."

"Not your fault. The bad genes are just surfacing after all these years."

Noah pushed himself to a sitting position and winced as a healing scar pulled. "Stop. You don't have bad genes. Or at least no worse than anyone else. You've read the articles on what's happening to American kids. Simon's probably just a victim of pesticides or air pollution or heavy metals in the water."

Thomas nodded.

"You've proved you're my friend over and over."

"And you mine," Thomas said. "You've done so much for my family over the years."

The Northrop family had worked for Noah since the seventeenth century. Thomas's ancestor had arrived in the New

World as an indentured servant, worked for a time on a plantation in Virginia, then escaped a cruel master. Noah had been on a trip east to find out how civilization was progressing on the coast. He'd been posing as a trapper when he'd saved Wade Northrop from a slit throat after the master had caught up with him, and he'd had the loyalty of the family ever since.

Thomas had been born right here on the estate. Noah had known him from birth, watched him toddle around the family quarters, tutored him at home until he was ten, then sent him to a top prep school, where he was already ahead of the other pupils. He'd earned a place at Stanford and graduated with honors. And he'd been in charge of Noah's estate ever since his father, Philip, had turned over the reins to him.

"Maybe Jason can take on the responsibility," Noah murmured.

Jason was Thomas's second son. He was still a little young to be trusted with the family secret. They'd have to watch him and see how he shaped up.

Noah reached to adjust the pillows more comfortably behind himself and winced again.

"You should rest," Thomas said.

"I should get out of bed and go down to the lab to prove that story about the blanks."

When he heaved himself up and grabbed the bedpost to keep from falling over, he saw Thomas's lips firm. He knew the man wanted him back in bed. But he had far more experience with his

recuperative abilities than his chief of staff. Hundreds of years of experience, and he knew that whether he rested or went back to work, the outcome would be the same. The only difference was in the level of discomfort. Maybe he was after discomfort—as payment for the miracle of his life.

JARRED Bainbridge clenched his fist and waited for the spasm in his rib cage to pass. He had always had a high pain tolerance, which was why he was able to get through most days without a heavy dose of medication. At night, he let himself drift away in a narcotic fog and dream of a cure for the very nasty disease that had its hooks into him.

Multiple myeloma. A cancer of the bone marrow where malignant cells replaced healthy plasma-producing cells and left the patient weak and susceptible to infection.

Thirty years ago, Jarred had inherited the Bainbridge manufacturing fortune and had diversified into a host of other business ventures—from computer software to upscale dog food—to ensure the growth of that wealth.

Unfortunately, money hadn't kept him healthy. He'd done extensive research and he knew there was no cure for multiple myeloma—only stopgap measures, the most drastic of which was bone marrow transplant. Jarred wasn't willing to take that risk yet. He'd be letting himself in for more pain, with no guarantee he'd prolong his life.

He wanted a cure. He wanted to be healthy and vital again—like the eight children he'd fathered. None of them was worth a

bucket of warm spit, as far as he was concerned. He was leaving each of them a million dollars, which they'd probably squander away in a couple of years. But he certainly wasn't leaving any of them control of his investments. That was going to various animal organizations, because animals made no claim to intelligence and they were at the mercy of their owners.

But he didn't plan to let his fortune go to the dogs until absolutely necessary and he figured his best hope was some new medical research—or some life-giving secret that only a few people on earth possessed.

When the pain gripping his ribs let him function again, he reached for the folder on his desk. It held worldwide newspaper articles and wire service reports that his clipping service sent him on a regular basis.

Most of it was routine stuff. A boy had been trapped in a storm sewer in Suzhou, China, and suffered hypothermia before rescuers reached him. He was expected to make a full recovery. A sailing ship had gone down in the Pacific, and the two-man crew had been rescued from a rubber raft after drifting for almost a month at sea.

But two articles were of particular interest. A man in Nairobi, Kenya, had been caught in a factory fire and been overcome by smoke. While being prepared for burial, he'd awakened and started asking for his wife and children. That incident was worth investigating.

And so was a story about an experimental submarine that had

gotten fouled up in a rock formation at the edge of the Atlantic trough near Grand Cayman.

The research foundation running the operation had kept it as quiet as possible, but a small article had appeared in the local George Town paper.

The sub had been down long enough for everyone to die from lack of oxygen, but when the craft was brought up, one of the expedition members had miraculously revived. A guy named Noah Fielding.

According to the article in the local paper, Fielding had apparently financed the development of the sub, but he'd left the expensive craft on Grand Cayman and headed back to the States. Address unknown.

Jarred reached for his laptop and sent an e-mail to one of his special assistants, asking the man to find out everything he could about Noah Fielding.

Was the guy hiding some secret? A secret that could cure Jarred of his deadly disease.

Jarred had to know. He'd try charm and persuasion first, but if Fielding didn't want to talk to him, there were ways of getting the information out of him.

A man might escape death, but he couldn't escape pain—not at the hands of the right practitioner.

LAS VEGAS REMINDED Noah of the Middle Ages. Of course it smelled a lot better; you didn't have to worry about someone dumping garbage onto your head as you walked down

the street, and penicillin was a reliable cure for the surge of syphilis. But life in this desert playground was reduced to basic human emotions. Desperate people risked a fortune on the roll of the dice or the turn of a card. And other people waited to pounce on their vulnerability.

He had encountered every one of these types before and he had experienced all the emotions they displayed. From love and triumph to desperation and despair. He'd tried to kill himself more than once. It had never worked, of course, and finally a French woman named Ramona had made him see the light. Maybe that was too strong a way to put it, but he knew she had changed him. When he'd met her, he'd lived too long and seen too much to feel anything but contempt for the human beings who thought they were better than slugs and worms.

Ramona had convinced him that humans had a core of goodness, and if he helped them expand that core, his generous spirit would be rewarded.

He wasn't sure how well he'd done in changing the equation for humanity. The world was simply too big and too complex for one man to make an enormous difference. At least where good was concerned. Evil was another matter.

Still, over the last two centuries, Noah had poured money into various charities and had reached out to many individuals on a personal level.

He wandered through the casino of the Calvanio Hotel, watching old women with dyed hair, cups of quarters and glazed

eyes trained on the spinning symbols of slot machines. He knew the odds on the machines, so he bought five hundred dollars worth of chips and won a thousand at blackjack, then quit while he was ahead.

He strolled toward the bar in the front of the building, where he could watch the dancing waters of a fountain in the artificial lake that fronted the strip.

As soon as he walked into the bar, he spotted a curvy blonde wearing a shimmery gold dress that dipped low over her cleavage. The short skirt revealed long, tanned legs. Her wavy hair brushed her shoulders, and her makeup enhanced her natural attributes.

She was well-proportioned and attractive but not beautiful. Yet something about her features drew him. Her eyes were light and set wide apart. Her face was rectangular, with a jaw that spoke of strength. But the haunted look in her eyes and something about the way she held her full lips told him she was in a world of trouble.

Could he help her? Did she want his help? And would starting something with her count as giving back to Ramona?

He'd loved Ramona and lost her two hundred years ago. She hadn't even lived into old age in normal human terms. She'd died of what he later found out was breast cancer before she reached her fiftieth year.

Her last days had been full of pain. Hers and his, as well. He'd wanted to flee the inevitable, but he'd stayed by her bedside, giving her what comfort he could and taking comfort, too. Since

her death, he hadn't gotten close enough to anyone to fall in love.

The blonde sitting at the table looked nothing like Ramona, who had been a striking brunette. Yet some indefinable quality of this woman called to him.

The sudden attraction he felt toward her reminded him that he hadn't taken anyone to bed in a long time. If he got emotionally involved with a woman, leaving her would be painful, and if his emotions weren't engaged, then the sex was meaningless.

Sometimes he was lucky enough to find a middle ground.

While he was debating whether to cross the room, she glanced up and their eyes met. A smile flickered on her lips, only to vanish almost as soon as it appeared, the bleak veil descending again.

Even more intrigued, he started toward her, but the sound of someone calling his name interrupted him.

"Noah Fielding?"

He stopped and turned to find himself facing a portly man with wiry salt-and-pepper hair. He was wearing chinos and a slightly rumpled Hawaiian shirt.

The man's face registered confusion. "Sorry," he said, "I must be mistaken. The concierge said you were Noah Fielding, but you can't be."

"I am," Noah answered.

The other man shook his head. "You're sure?" He laughed and slapped his palm against the side of his head. "What kind of question is that? I'm Sidney Hemmings."

Ah. Hemmings. Actually, the man looked older than the

picture he had on his Web site. Apparently vanity had frozen his image.

"We've been corresponding for years," the doctor continued. "I expected you to be my age."

Noah shrugged and called up his most innocent and open look. "I was pretty young when I became interested in your field. And I guess I age well."

"You certainly do. How old are you?"

Noah had a lot of practice in sidestepping that question. "Old enough to know better," he answered lightly.

Hemmings shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Well, it's wonderful to finally meet you. Can I buy you a drink?"

Noah glanced toward the blonde. He'd come here to meet Hemmings, but at the moment, he would rather have a drink with her, which said something about the pull he was feeling. Still, he had no intention of being rude to a man he'd corresponded with for years.

"Of course," he said, leading the way to a table in the corner of the room.

OLIVIA watched the man who had been standing in the doorway looking at her. He was tall like her, with dark hair and eyes and a trim athletic build. As she'd pretended not to study him, she'd fought off a zing of awareness. That attraction was unnerving, because she hadn't planned on being interested in anyone here.

It wasn't just a sexual pull, although that was certainly part

of it. Strange as it might seem, when their eyes had briefly met, she'd thought maybe the guy was going to offer to help her.

Could he? Could anybody get her out of the mess that her brother had cooked up?

What if she went to the police? She sighed. They might believe her, but Pearson's scheme was hardly a big deal in a place like Las Vegas. The cops weren't going to protect her from him.

Her gaze flicked toward her brother, who was as far away from her as he could get in the room, watching the action.

For the hundredth time, she wondered what had turned him into the kind of man he was. They'd been raised by the same parents, yet somehow he hadn't absorbed their middle-class values. Instead, he was completely selfish. Unfortunately, he also knew how to be charming, which fooled a lot of people, including Mom and Dad.

The only ray of hope in her present situation was that since his initial ultimatum, she'd been able to make him alter his plans slightly. When she'd pointed out that getting the escort service involved meant a written record of the men she was meeting, he'd seen the wisdom of working freelance.

So here she was, hating herself as she sat in the Calvanio Fountain Bar dangling herself like a tempting worm in front of a pool full of fish.

A sporty-looking man came in, spotted her and crossed the floor to her table, striking up a conversation.

She decided he didn't appear to be rich enough for Pearson's

scheme. Or look like he had enough to lose by having his relationship with her exposed.

Maybe that was what she was going to tell her brother when he demanded to know why she hadn't gotten "friendly" with anyone this evening.

When the guy started chatting her up, she told him she was waiting for someone else and sent him on his way.

As soon as his back was turned, her gaze flicked to the man who had attracted her. He was still talking to the tubby guy in the rumpled shirt. Her man was dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt.

As far as she could see, he wasn't wearing a gold chain around his neck. Or an expensive watch. He didn't seem like the type for jewelry. But something about the way he held himself gave the impression that he was well-off enough to fit in with Pearson's plans.

NOAH struggled to focus on the conversation with Hemmings, when he really wanted to talk to the woman sitting half a dozen yards away.

"From what you've said, you're not a trained researcher. What got you interested in longevity research in the first place?" the doctor asked.

Noah went into one of his long-standing explanations. "I was in love with a woman who died very young."

"Oh, sorry."

"It was a tragedy, but she got me wondering about why some

people have long lives and others don't. I thought if I got active in the field, that would be a kind of memorial to her."

"Admirable."

"How about you?"

Hemmings spread his hands. "I went to medical school, but I found out I didn't really like working with patients. So I took a job at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda. And I found out I *did* like research." He tipped his head to the side. "So what do you do when you're not increasing the life span of rats?"

Although Noah had no formal education in the field, he'd had the time to do a lot of reading and experimentation on his own. In a lab building on his estate, he had rats that had outlived their life expectancy by fifty percent. While the experiment was interesting, it had brought him no closer to any answers about what made him different from the rest of humanity.

"I've got a number of businesses scattered around the country. Nothing very interesting," he said. "I'd much rather hear about what you've been doing lately."

It wasn't difficult to keep the researcher talking about himself and his work. Noah already knew most of it, but he sat and listened to Hemmings's stories, anyway.

When the doctor occasionally asked questions about Noah's background, he gave brief answers from the life story he'd written for himself.

According to his fictional biography, he'd lived in San Francisco with his parents who had both been killed in a boating

accident. He'd inherited an estate from his uncle and had lived there for the past few years.

He'd situated himself so that he could keep an eye on the blonde. During the course of his conversation with the doctor, several men had come up to her, but she must have discouraged them because they ended up going away.

Noah could see that someone else was watching her, too. A man who'd been sitting along the far wall. He came over and spoke to her in a low tone, his face angry. What was that all about?

The doctor must have noticed he wasn't commanding Noah's rapt attention. Annoyance flashed across his face.

But he quickly recovered. Glancing at his watch, he said, "It's late. I should let you go to bed."

"Sorry," Noah apologized. "I put in a long day in the lab before I came here and I'm a little wiped."

They both stood. Hemmings reached out to shake his hand again. Noah automatically did the same, then felt a slight prick at the base of his thumb. "What was that?" he asked.

Hemmings looked embarrassed. "Sorry. This damn ring of mine has a rough edge. It must have slipped around to the inside. Did I hurt you?"

"It's fine," Noah said, looking down at his hand where it was slightly scraped.

Of course, it would be good as new in the next few hours.

"Sorry," the doctor apologized again, then excused himself

and hurried out of the bar. Noah stayed in the room, watching the woman still sitting at the table. Before he could stop himself, he picked up his sparkling water and walked across the room.

OLIVIA'S breath caught as the man she'd been watching walked over to her table. This was it, and she wished she knew what "it" was.

"I've noticed you sitting here," he said.

"I was waiting for a friend, but I guess he stood me up," she lied.

The guy looked like he didn't buy it, and she thought he was going to walk away.

Instead, he said, "May I join you?"

"Yes."

"My name's Noah Fielding."

"Olivia…" She hesitated for a moment before adding, "Stapler." She knew he caught the hesitation.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked as he sat down.

Up close he was very handsome and younger than she'd thought. He carried himself with a confidence that usually came from maturity, but his face was unlined and there wasn't any gray in his dark hair. She doubted that a man like him would go to the trouble of dyeing it, although one never knew how much a guy was stuck on himself.

A man like him? She wasn't exactly sure what that meant. When she realized she was waiting a long time to answer his question, she said, "You're drinking soda water?"

He looked at his glass and back at her before nodding.

"That sounds good."

"You don't want champagne?" he asked.

"It's not worth what they charge by the glass here."

He grinned. "I guess you know the ropes better than I do."

"Did you come here to gamble?"

"Everybody comes here to gamble. It's the standard vice. But my excuse is a medical convention in town."

"You're a doctor?" she asked.

"Just a hanger-on."

She tipped her head to the side. "What does that mean?"

"I'm an independent researcher. I like to keep up with the field."

Maybe he was also independently wealthy. She canceled that thought immediately. It didn't matter if he made big bucks, because she wasn't going to play Pearson's game.

"Which field?"

"Longevity."

"Oh," she answered, thinking how easy it would be to fall into the trap Pearson had laid for her and this man.

Suddenly, she felt like the room was closing in around her. "I need some air," she blurted.

"The hotel has a very nice garden out back."

She'd been thinking that she'd go outside alone and incur her brother's wrath later. But when she stood, Noah Fielding did, too, and she didn't protest as he walked beside her toward the

back of the hotel.

Outside, the air was hot and dry, and the night sky was filled with a million stars. But no casino relied on nature for outdoor effects. The hedges and flower beds were illuminated by cunningly placed floodlights.

The garden was designed to please the senses. Annual and perennial flowers filled well-tended beds that bordered stone paths. Each plot held a pleasing mix of colors and textures, many of the blooms perfuming the air.

She inhaled deeply, glad to be out of the stale casino atmosphere. Trying to come up with something to say, she murmured, "I love the way they laid out the garden in a pattern. I guess they hired a fancy landscape architect."

"Maybe. But whoever did the design copied it from Versailles."

She tipped her head toward him. "Have you been there?"

"Several times."

No one else was outside, she noticed. The garden apparently wasn't as much of an attraction as the casino.

When she pressed her hands against her sides, he said, "What's bothering you?"

The direct question startled her. In her experience, guys didn't care about an attractive woman's personal problems.

"How do you know something is bothering me?"

"The way you hold your shoulders."

"Really?"

“Maybe I can help.”

Could he?

Before she could reply, a man rushed from the shadows. He was holding a gun, which he pointed directly at Noah Fielding.

“I finally found you, you bastard,” he growled. “Hold it right there.”

Chapter Three

Noah cursed under his breath, and Olivia thought she heard him mumble, “Not again.”

At the same time, he thrust her behind himself, putting his body squarely between her and the gunman.

“Move,” the attacker said. “Both of you.”

“Leave the lady out of this,” Noah replied, his voice low and even.

In the part of her mind that still functioned rationally, she marveled at his calm. She had to stiffen her legs to keep from falling over.

“I’m giving the orders,” the gunman said. “Hands up. Move to your right.”

Somehow, she did what he demanded, but as she raised her hands, she was thinking there must be guards out here and security cameras. If guards came running, though, would they just get her and Noah shot?

“Take it easy,” Noah said.

He was talking to the gunman, but his calm, even voice helped steady her as she moved to her right, into a rectangular space formed by a hedge and a wall that enclosed one of the luxury villas for the high rollers.

Noah tried to keep his body between her and the gunman as they stood facing each other in the little courtyard, but the man

maneuvered them so that she was terribly exposed.

She glanced sideways at Noah. He wasn't even breaking a sweat. The other man was breathing heavily. Maybe he'd have a heart attack and drop the gun so they could escape.

"If you do anything to hurt this woman, you will be very sorry," Noah said, punching out the words.

"Her bad luck that she was with a scum like you."

She saw Noah clench the fists held above his head. He looked like he wanted to lunge at the gunman, and to hell with the consequences. Maybe he would have if he'd been alone. Instead, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Are you after my winnings?" he asked.

The man gave a harsh, nervous laugh that scared her as much as the gun. This guy was on the edge of doing something very foolish.

"You wish. You're going to pay a lot more than any winnings. You're going to pay for what you did to my brother," the attacker bit out.

"Who is your brother?"

"You damn well know."

"Just tell me," Noah said, sounding weary.

"Eddie Carlson."

Noah sighed. "I'm sorry for what happened."

The man snorted. "Oh sure. You killed him."

"No."

"Then why is he dead and you're alive?"

Noah's jaw tightened, and she waited for him to say something devastating to the man. Something that would let him know for all time that his brother's death had been his own fault.

As she watched, Noah's expression changed. When he began to speak, his tone was regretful. "There's always risk with an experimental venture. It was damn bad luck that the sub got stuck in that crevice. I've had a lot of deep-sea training and I've done a lot of exercises that make me able to survive on much less oxygen than normal. It's the same kind of technique that a magician relies on when he's locked in a box underwater. The rest of the crew didn't have that training."

Apparently Carlson still wasn't convinced. "So you say. But if you're not guilty of anything, why did you give each of the widows a million bucks? That's three million dollars you gave away."

Olivia goggled. Three million dollars?

Noah spread his raised hands. "I didn't have to give them the money. But I felt a moral obligation because I funded the expedition and I felt responsible for the safety of the men who went down in the sub with me. Now you have your own moral obligation—to Eddie's children. Their father was taken from them in a tragic accident. You have to be the father he would have been. You have to do that, because he can't. And if you end up in jail for murder, what will happen to them?"

Long, tense seconds passed, then Carlson's expression changed, softened. Moments ago, the guy had been roaring mad,

ready to avenge his brother's death. Now, apparently something Noah had said got to him.

When he lowered the gun, Olivia let out the breath she'd been holding.

"Thank you," Noah said.

Carlson answered with a tight nod.

Lowering his hands, Noah said, "Give me the gun."

Carlson hesitated, then handed over the weapon.

Noah took it and shoved it into his pocket. "I know you're grieving, and a grieving man sometimes does things he might regret later."

Carlson nodded again.

"I'm truly sorry. When I was asked to finance the expedition, I thought it was a good idea. I guess I should have planned better."

Carlson looked down at his hands. "I feel like a jerk coming after you. It won't bring Eddie back."

"I understand. You're hurting and you wanted to lash out at me because I'm still alive. I'm curious, how did you find me?" Noah asked.

The man sighed. "The Light Street Detective Agency. They're in Baltimore, my hometown. I couldn't find where you lived, but they saw that you'd registered at this hotel." Carlson swallowed hard. "Eddie always was reckless. Did he do something…that got you in trouble down there?"

Noah answered quickly. "No."

From the way he voiced the word, Olivia thought he was

probably lying.

Carlson stepped back. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

"Go back home to Baltimore and stay out of trouble."

"I will. Thanks for keeping me from doing something really stupid." Carlson turned and hurried off, leaving Olivia trembling.

"What just happened?" she asked.

"A man was upset, and I made him realize that if he hurt me, he'd be going against his fundamental values." Noah put a hand on her arm. "I'm sorry you had to get involved in that. Are you okay?"

"I…" She couldn't hold her voice steady.

"Come here." When he pulled her against his body and wrapped his arms around her, she leaned into him as he stroked his hands up and down her bare arms, feeling the goose bumps that had sprung up on her skin. "You're shaking."

"I'll be okay." She was thinking that she'd just witnessed something extraordinary—with an extraordinary man, she silently added, as she closed her eyes and nestled against him.

Twenty minutes ago she'd barely known Noah Fielding, but they'd just been through the fire together and that was a shortcut to intimacy.

She was still trying to work her way through the terrifying experience. "He was mad as hell, but you talked him down. You've got a knack for reading people."

"Like I said, he was grieving. He just needed someone to point out that he has responsibilities back home."

"But you didn't say that the accident in the sub was his brother's fault."

Noah stiffened. "What makes you think it was?"

"I saw the way you reacted. You were itching to tell him what really happened, but you didn't."

He sighed. "What Eddie Carlson did isn't important now. The fundamental point is that I provided the money that got three guys killed."

"You were taking your chances underwater with them."

His hand on her arm tightened. "I really did have an advantage over them."

"So it was true—about that special training."

"Why do you think it wasn't?"

"Something…"

He looked around, as though he'd just realized they were standing in a public space, embracing and discussing a very private incident from his life.

After a few seconds' hesitation, he said, "Here's an interesting choice. Do you want to come to my room—or get as far away from me as you can get?"

"Why would I do that?"

"This is the second time somebody's attacked me in the past few days."

She caught her breath. "You're kidding."

"I wish I were."

"Do you attract trouble?"

He answered with a harsh laugh. “Not usually with such alarming regularity. I hope the planets aren’t in some horrible alignment.”

“You believe in astrology?”

“I’ve studied it. It’s interesting. A way for men—” He stopped and shook his head. “A way for people to make some sense of their lives before modern science offered better explanations.”

“A lot of times, modern science wars with superstition. I still cringe when I break a mirror.”

He laughed. “You and most other people. Because we’re still tied to our roots—to the prehistoric cave dwellers huddled around their fires, warding off the monsters in the darkness.”

“Are you an anthropologist?”

“No, it’s just another one of my hobbies.”

She nodded, fascinated with him and at the same time thinking that walking away from him would be the smart thing to do. But she knew she wasn’t going to be smart. Not tonight.

Instead, she walked with him to his room.

It was actually a luxury suite with a plush living room, a well-stocked bar and a bedroom beyond.

When he closed the door, she saw him let out a deep sigh, and she was pretty sure he was more shaken by his encounter with Mr. Carlson than he’d let on. As she looked at him, she wanted to make the hurt go away.

Reaching around him, she snapped the security lock and set down her purse on the long table beside the door. The purse

contained a cell phone she was supposed to use to call Pearson just by pressing a button. However, if she didn't use it, he wouldn't even know where she was.

Yet her nerves were still jumping.

Noah Fielding had held her just a few minutes earlier, but that had been outside after the attack. This was in his private suite, where everything was different. Intimate.

Or had the feeling of intimacy come from the shared danger?

He must have understood that she needed a little time to sort out her emotions because he walked to the entertainment unit at the side of the room, put the gun in a drawer and turned on an audio channel of soft, slow music.

The sophisticated arrangement appealed to her. So did the man. When he turned, she gave him a small smile, then walked back into his arms.

They were almost the same height, which made him the perfect dance partner for her.

For just a moment, that made her sad. She would never dance again professionally because her leg no longer had the stamina. But she could dance for fun and she would get through her trouble and make her life over again.

He didn't pull her tightly against his body as he led her around the room in time to the music. His rhythm was flawless. He must be a natural dancer, she thought.

They didn't speak. She just let herself enjoy being with him. Enjoy his subtle scent. His firm touch. His masculinity.

And enjoy the dancing. She hadn't done it in a long time and she knew she'd have trouble with a complicated routine—even in ballroom dancing. But this was relaxed.

By degrees, both of them moved closer together until finally he held her tightly against his body, pressing her breasts against his chest.

Until then she'd felt a slow buildup of sensations. Now they gathered into a jolt of arousal.

She hadn't expected it. No, that was a lie. Noah Fielding was a very sexy man. She would have been surprised if she hadn't reacted so strongly.

With one of his large hands, he pushed back her hair and stroked his lips against her cheek, waiting for her to make the next move. All she had to do was turn her head and her lips would meet his.

It was her choice.

If she kissed him, nothing in her life would ever be the same. But how could that be? She didn't even know if she would see him again after tonight.

Still, something real had flared between them. Something more than sexual.

She sensed that he held his breath, silently waiting for her to make a decision about the two of them. She stayed where she was, her lips slightly parted.

Finally, because it was what she wanted, she turned her face, cupped the back of his head and brought his lips to hers.

The first mouth-to-mouth contact was undemanding, yet it was electric and rich with promise.

She heard herself make a small needy sound. Accepting her invitation, he increased the pressure of his lips on hers, then tipped his head first one way and then the other, changing the angle, changing the pressure and charging the moment with his powerful sexuality.

As the heat of the kiss flared hotter, he slid one hand down her body, pulling her hips against his erection.

The potency she sensed made her moan. When she found it impossible to hold still, she moved against him.

It had been a long time since she'd been with a man this way. A man who turned on every one of her senses. Long before her accident, actually. When she'd first come to Vegas, she'd enjoyed the attention men gave a woman they'd seen up on stage. Then she'd realized it was nothing personal. They wanted to seduce one of the glittering women who were hired for their looks and talent.

The woman would stay in Vegas, and they'd come home feeling like a conquering hero.

This was different. This man didn't see her as a trophy. His focus on her was very personal. She knew it from the delicate way his hands stroked her hips and from the way his mouth moved over hers.

As her insides turned liquid, she pictured the two of them naked on the bed in the next room. Him on top of her, their

bodies intimately joined in the age-old dance of love.

The explicit image shocked her. She had met this man less than an hour earlier, yet she was ready to make love with him.

Breaking the kiss, she looked at him, seeing the dazed look in his eyes, and knowing he was affected as deeply as she was herself.

The knowledge should have been reassuring. Instead, to her utter horror, she burst into tears.

Olivia felt Noah stiffen. Leaning back, he stared down at her.

"Sorry. I'm so sorry," she managed to get out between sobs.

She wasn't any kind of delicate little doll a man could easily pick up, but he scooped her into his arms and carried her to the sofa, where he sat down, still cradling her against him.

"I thought…"

"My fault," she said between sobs.

Cradling her tenderly in his arms, he let her cry.

JARRED Bainbridge had learned to trust his hunches. Still, the first report on Noah Fielding startled him.

As far as he could tell, the man didn't exist.

Well, he'd been on that experimental sub. A whole bunch of people had seen him, interacted with him. He'd financed the expedition, and he'd been staying at a bed-and-breakfast in George Town.

But within hours of being pulled from the sub, he'd left the island on a small, private jet. The plane had refueled in Chicago, then gone on to L.A. And that was the last anyone knew of Noah

Fielding.

He'd vanished into thin air.

Had he gotten off in Chicago? Or had he gone on to the West Coast? Nobody knew.

Which meant the man had gone to considerable trouble to hide his whereabouts in a day and age when most people's movements were a matter of record.

If Fielding had his methods, so did Jarred Bainbridge. He picked up the phone and made a call to the security service he used. "I want to know where to find Noah Fielding. And I want to know it now."

NOAH cradled Olivia in his arms, rocking her gently. He'd been right; she was in some kind of trouble. He could tell she'd been holding herself together by strength of will. But she'd been through too much tonight to maintain her composure. That encounter with Carlson had scared her spitless. And her roiling emotions had sent her crashing into Noah's arms.

Well, maybe that wasn't fair. He had felt the powerful attraction between them right from the first, and he'd worried that he was taking advantage of her after the attack. Then he'd let his pleasure of holding her and kissing her take over.

The taste of her had been sweet and heady. So had her response to him. That was the most powerful aphrodisiac of all. He'd thought they were headed for a very stimulating session in the bedroom, until her emotions had taken another wild swing.

He bent to stroke his lips against her beautiful golden hair.

He'd been intimate with thousands of women, yet this one stirred him as few of them had.

Once again he thought of how much she reminded him of Ramona, although the two of them looked nothing alike. But there was some innate facet of her personality that was the perfect foil for his own dark view of life. She might be in trouble now, but she would always try to find the good in every situation and every person.

He and Olivia Stapler could mean something important to each other—if he dared to let it happen. And if they did, he would lose her and it would take him years to recover from the loss. That was the risk he faced at this moment.

'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

Alfred Lord Tennyson had said that in 1850, in a poem called "In Memoriam." Noah wasn't sure it was true. Tennyson had lived a normal life span. How many times had the poet known the pain of lost love?

OLIVIA struggled to conquer the flood of emotions that had swooped down on her without warning. Finally she was able to stifle the tears.

Noah shifted her weight so that he could reach into his pocket and bring out a handkerchief, which he handed to her.

She stared at the folded square of white linen. "What kind of man carries a handkerchief?"

He laughed softly. "It's an old habit."

She blew her nose. "I guess chivalry isn't dead."

He shook his head. “One man can’t keep it alive.”

“But you try.”

“It’s too much of a responsibility.” The way he said it made her wonder if he wasn’t half serious. Before she could work her way through that, he asked, “Better?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

She tipped her head to the side, studying him. “You’re not like anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“You know it’s good.”

He shrugged. “Few people have the insight to see the impact they make on others.”

She laughed. “I did. When I was working as a dancer. I was talented, but it was pretty obvious men saw me as a sex object.”

“They didn’t look very far. There’s a hell of a lot more to you than a pretty face and a great body.”

“Thanks. But how do you know?”

“I’m a good judge of people. Where did you dance?”

“At one of the big hotels on the Strip.”

“Why did you stop dancing? Did you get caught in the economic downturn?”

“No. I was on the fast track for a big featured role. Then a drunk driver in the parking lot ended my career.”

“Ouch.”

“In more ways than one.”

“Did they catch him?”

She shook her head.

Noah gave her a considering look. “How do you know he was drunk?”

The question took her by surprise. “I just assumed…you know.”

“I’ve learned not to make assumptions,” he said, the words hard-edged.

The way he said it sent a little chill skittering over her skin. Could somebody have hit her on purpose?

But who? And why?

Who would gain from that?

Her brother’s smirking face leaped into her mind. But she simply couldn’t deal with thoughts of him deliberately setting her up. She shook them away and focused on Noah. “I’m finally back on my feet, but I won’t be dancing professionally again. It’s just too much strain for someone who injured a leg.”

“You got workers’ compensation?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “Yes. But it’s run out.”

He kept his gaze on her. “Before we were so rudely interrupted in the garden, you were going to tell me what’s bothering you. I guess it was losing your job?”

She heard the question in his voice. And wondered how she was going to answer.

Chapter Four

Olivia struggled with a surge of emotion. The offer was so tempting. It would be such a relief to tell Noah Fielding the whole truth. Pearson had gotten her into bad trouble. Well, not as bad as it could have been, but bad enough.

She'd seen how Noah handled Eddie Carlson's brother. Maybe he could handle *her* brother, too. Make him back off from his dirty little plot aimed at rich guys who wanted to make sure that what happened in Vegas stayed in Vegas.

But the idea of admitting to Noah that she was involved in a shameful scheme to blackmail men made her chest tighten painfully.

She liked Noah and he liked her. What would he think if she told him that desperation and coercion had driven her to the edge of doing something criminal?

She took a breath and exhaled. Before she could give in to temptation, she said, "It's personal."

"All right."

The flat way he said it made her half wish she had the guts to trust him. But she simply couldn't do it. Maybe because it was too important for him to think well of her.

"I'd better go," she said.

He'd scooped her up as if she was light as a cloud. Now it was awkward climbing out of his lap and she felt even more awkward

as she reached to pull down her tight dress and twist the skirt back into place.

He gave her a long look that made her insides quiver. Before she could change her mind, she turned and fled.

NOAH waited until Olivia was out the door. He didn't know why she had become important to him, but she had, in a very short time. Hurrying to the door, he opened it a crack and watched her waiting for the elevator. When it arrived and she stepped inside, he hurried down the hall and pressed the button, hoping the next car would arrive quickly.

As he shifted his weight from foot to foot, he thought about running down the stairs. He was fast, but he wasn't a superhero. From the seventeenth floor, he would never make it before she walked out of the elevator lobby. Then he'd lose her in the crowded casino.

When the next car came, he leaped inside, startling a couple who looked like they'd gotten into something kinky on the rooftop observation deck.

By the time they'd exited on the eighth floor and he'd reached the lobby, Olivia was nowhere in sight.

So where would she go?

He thought about the guy who had been watching her in the Fountain Bar. Maybe he expected her to report in. Maybe she'd oblige him and maybe she wouldn't.

He headed toward the bar, which was also near the hotel's entrance onto the Strip. When he spotted her, he breathed out

a sigh of relief. Then he saw that she was talking to the guy in question, who wasn't exactly acting like her best buddy.

Noah's first impulse was to rush over to them and get into the middle of the conversation. He could make sure the man understood it would be dangerous to hurt Olivia. Anybody who did that would have to deal with Noah Fielding.

As his logical mind considered the consequences of such impulsive behavior, he wasn't sure the threat would have the desired effect. Olivia and the guy both presumably lived in Las Vegas, and Noah was only in town for a few days. He might frighten the man in the short-run, but that left a whole lot of time afterward when Olivia would have to deal with any local problems on her own.

Noah had had centuries of practice reading body language. He might have said his life had depended on it, but of course, death was not an option for him.

As he studied the pair, he was sure they knew each other well. Husband and wife? He clenched his fist, hoping that wasn't true. Not when she'd been so responsive in his arms.

Taking a deep breath to settle himself, he studied both their faces and noticed a similarity about their features. There was a definite family resemblance. The guy's face was a masculine version of Olivia's, but while Noah sensed an underlying honesty in her, the man came across as a slime.

It wasn't just his features. From the guy's posture, Noah would bet he wanted to get rough with Olivia, but he couldn't do it in

a public place.

Confirming Noah's suspicion, the man looked around the hotel lobby. When nobody appeared to be watching the little drama, he made a grab for her arm. His fingers touched down on her skin, but her reflexes were excellent, and before he could latch on to her, she pulled from his grasp.

The attacker made a low sound as they stood confronting each other.

She raised her chin and met his gaze, although Noah could see she was making an effort to keep her lips from trembling. "Leave me alone."

From where he stood inside the casino, Noah was too far away to actually hear the words, but over the years he'd learned how to read lips.

"Remember what I said about Dad," the guy answered. "The wrong news about you could kill him."

The rejoinder confirmed that they were brother and sister.

She took a step back. "Would you really do that to a sick old man?"

"If I have to. Anything that happens will be on your head."

"You've got that wrong."

Ignoring her, he asked, "What about that guy you left with? Where did you go?"

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