

Chapter 2

The museum was a large, two-story farmhouse sitting on a hill. Anne parked her car and glanced around as she approached the building. Through the trees she caught glimpses of another house nearby, similar in style but gray and neglected.

An open sign hung on the museum's door. She stepped into a roomy foyer and drew a relieved breath as cool air moved over her. A muted chime announced her arrival, and within moments a woman appeared through a door to the right. She had pale blond hair pinned in a roll at the nape of her neck and wore a tailored dress of gray and white. Her green eyes were round and lent her a slightly owlish look.

She gave Anne a professional smile and said, "Hello, welcome to Beeling House. I'm Phoebe Edison. Are you interested in a tour?"

Anne hadn't expected a guide, but since she wanted to ask some questions it seemed a good idea. She introduced herself and asked, "Are you free to show me around?"

Nothing to Hide

"I will be in about ten minutes. Have you time to wait?" Anne asked. Miss Edison showed her into a room and then withdrew, leaving Anne to explore at her leisure.

She moved among glass cases containing the usual cannon, buttons and bullets. The post-Civil War artifacts may have been placed there by her father.

Then she shifted her attention to the ornate moldings and door frames, trying to remember everything, even the faded floral wallpaper. It had a vague familiarity, but nothing really triggered a response in her. She had been in so many such places as a child—like the hotel rooms and boarding houses, they all tended to meld into one.

Phoebe Edison returned with a man at her side. He was of average height and build, his forehead high and marked by a number of slight creases. What hair remained was brown, and his eyes behind wire-framed glasses were of an indeterminate, almost-muddy color. He smiled as he approached.

"Ms. Goodwin, this is Edmund Chambers," Miss Edison said. "He has a question for you before we get started."

"Oh?" Anne offered her hand and found his soft, and, despite the refrigerated air, slightly damp. She was glad he didn't seem given to prolonged handshakes.

"Yes," he explained. "It could be coincidence, of course, but I was wondering if you're related to the Professor Oliver Goodwin who made order out of chaos for this museum's opening some years ago. I recall that he had a daughter who'd be about your age."

Surprised, Anne replied, "Yes, Professor Goodwin was my father. It is remarkable that you'd remember me, Mr. Chambers. Did you work with my father?"

"No, not directly. But we spoke on the phone a time or two. I'm a C.P.A., and your father provided me with lists of the exhibits and their monetary values for the museum's

insurance records. I never saw either of you, but in a small town word gets around."

The accountant accompanied them as they began the tour and asked Anne, "Just what brings you back here, Ms. Goodwin? Business or sentiment?"

"Business, mainly," she replied, and again explained about the loose ends on the book.

"I'm certainly sorry to hear about your father," Chambers said sympathetically when Anne spoke of his death, and Phoebe Edison turned and murmured something appropriate, as well.

Chambers left them a few minutes later to keep a lunch date, saying, "Enjoy your visit, Ms. Goodwin. And good luck with the book."

It was easier than Anne had dared dream. With the accountant's departure, Miss Edison got down to business. At Anne's questioning she elaborated far beyond the practiced monologue that was part of her job. Her knowledge on the history of community land disputes undoubtedly saved Anne hours of tedious digging through old records.

As they moved through the old house Anne kept probing her own reactions, hoping to see something that would trigger a genuine memory. But the place still seemed a composite of every small-town museum she'd ever visited.

"The land that comprises our civic center was donated by three families—the Nobles, the Potters and the Schaeffers, collectively the biggest landowners in the county," Miss Edison was saying as they moved along the upstairs hall.

"I see," Anne murmured. The information tallied with what she already knew from her father's notes.

"There was an intense rivalry among them," the guide continued. "Especially between the Nobles and the Schaeffers over who had given more to the courthouse site. Finally it was established by survey that the Schaeffers had made the larger gift, by something under a quarter acre."

"Tell me," Anne asked when the other woman finally paused, "has the feud survived, or have the Nobles and the Schaeffers buried the hatchet by now?"

"There really aren't enough of them left to feud," Miss Edison smiled. "There are only a few Nobles scattered around the area. And as for the Schaeffers, they're all gone now. Henry had no sons to carry on the name, and both his daughters moved away."

"Then I suppose their land has been parceled out for subdivisions and such," Anne speculated.

"No, surprisingly enough. The Noble land has been divided up among the family, and the Schaeffer land is still intact. It belongs to Blanche, the older daughter. Her sister ran off quite a few years ago, and no one's sure where she went. The old Schaeffer house is right next door, in fact. You'll be able to see it from in here."

She led the way into a small room that housed a collection of Indian artifacts. As Anne's gaze swept over the walls and an alcove on one side of the room, she finally experienced the sense of recognition that had been missing throughout the tour. She knew at once this was the room in which her father had worked. She could remember a desk in the alcove, boxes stacked in corners, and shelves piled with treasures awaiting his attention.

Fighting a wave of grief at the memory, she stepped to the single window and looked across a broad lawn where a strip of thick hedge and trees ran along a depression toward the property next door. Clearly visible from this new vantage point was the old house she had only glimpsed on her first visit. Anne's fingers pressed against the sill while her heart thudded almost painfully and her vision blurred, then yielded entirely to another scene superimposed over it...

She was back in time, to the flash of feelings that cut across the grass, and she felt heat, damp and cloying. A buzzing echoed in her head before she saw the bees, dozens

of them, moving among the blossoms in a large patch of clover. She walked through the screen of trees and along the hedge to get around them.

A couple stood beyond the hedge, their voices raised in anger. They were making too much noise themselves to hear her barefoot approach.

A bird swooped off in a sudden flight, startling her. She stopped walking and peered through the hedge to see a shadowy shape move upward then descend rapidly. There was another smaller shape, a woman. Anne saw the fear on her face. Then the woman began to fall.

The remembered scene took on a surreal aspect, the motions slow and liquid. The dark figure turned and she now saw the suggestion of another face. On it she read rage. Then the figure turned back to the woman lying on the ground. Anne was now certain the second face belonged to a man.

In her memories, she stood frozen to the spot and she saw curtains flutter in the windows of the tall, white house. Branches swayed in the trees but there was no one in sight, no one to help.

Anne turned and fled. Her feet made no sound, but her heart thundered in her ears. She didn't stop running until she was through the door and up the stairs of the Beeling House. Her father was there, bent over his lists. He held a tattered old paper in one hand and a pen poised ready to write in the other. From a small radio on the windowsill came the strains of a Chopin étude....

After the scene faded Anne told Phoebe Edison she wasn't feeling well and would return another day. She barely remembered driving to the boarding house. When she finally shook off the memories' effects, though, she berated herself for cowardice. If I'd stayed at the museum, she thought, I might have remembered more. She knew, despite the childhood terror that accompanied those broken

images, that she would never be rid of them until she let them through in their minds. "But I'm not ready," she admitted in a whisper. "I need more time."

Anne felt unaccountably confident the next morning. The day seemed to have a golden aura. Or at least, as she told herself, the humidity was down, and there was a comfortable breeze. To the north, across the woods, she decided to face the Schaeffer house right after breakfast.

She found the driveway easily enough, although it was badly overgrown. Had her car been wider, overhanging branches would have scratched its paint. Just around the bend a large weed-covered log blocked the way. Anne left the car to complete her approach on foot.

She climbed over the log, hoping belatedly that none of the growth was poison ivy. The sounds of insects and birds on the summer air gave her a sense of serenity, although she wasn't entirely comfortable at the thought of various creatures lurking in the tall grass.

The house finally appeared when the driveway made another turn. The view from the front yard had absolutely no effect on her. The house might have been any old building fallen into disrepair because it had sat empty for a number of years.

There was a lock on the door, but it was rusted open. She couldn't resist taking a peek inside, but the windows were boarded over and dust and debris littered what she could see of the floor. A few shapeless mounds sat under dark covers, and faint scurrying sounds quickly convinced her that she'd seen enough. In any case, there was no reason to believe that the house itself held any answers.

She made her way around to the south side, where she looked down toward the Beeling Museum. The view was limited to bits and pieces visible through the trees. She could see the end of the hedge and the parallel grove, both

following the trenchlike depression that connected the two properties. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, but nothing came to her.

Surprised, she turned to face the Schaffer house. Again, there was no sense of intimidation, not even when she tried to picture the scene she'd grown so to dread.

"Strange," she murmured. "It's only from over on the Beeling side that anything triggered. And it doesn't seem to have anything to do with the house itself. It's that curved hedge—or what I saw through it." She took one more long look around, still felt no reaction, and moved toward the backyard.

Then the edge of the forest, which all through the area, was no more than fifty feet distant. For as far as she could see the trees swept up the slopes of a long, irregular ridge.

Near the wooded boundary sat a low building with aluminum siding. It had no windows, and a padlock in good condition hung on the wide door, securely closed. Undoubtedly used now for storage, Anne thought the building might once have been a garage. She wondered what it held that warranted its being maintained while the house was left to decay.

This is a complete waste of time, she decided and started back to her car. I might as well pay Sylvia Mills another visit and try to decide what to do about that survey.

The thought lifted her spirits. "It was stupid to come here thinking I'd remember anything more," she said under her breath. "Last night I wanted time and today I'm trying to rush it."

She lifted her gaze and walked. Now that she was about to leave behind she was ready to appreciate the sky, the trees, nature in general. "Eenie, Meenie, Miny, Mo!" she said to herself. "You're a city girl, and New York is waiting. Best to finish up here as soon as possible and move."

Still looking upward, she passed a huge, old maple, and then she stepped on a root and fell. Her foot hit hard, and she hurtled to the earth with an involuntary cry at a sudden, sharp pain. When she tried to sit up, she found that her ankle was wedged firmly in place and any effort to move resulted in a twisting motion that only hurt it more. Struggling for self-control, she carefully raised just her head and shoulders until she was propped on her elbows.

She assessed her situation. Her torso was imprisoned in a tree crotch, an or twelve inches above the ground. Apparently the whole branch had shifted when she fell forward, for now it was bowed up in the middle with both ends curving down to disappear into the long grass. It might as well still be attached to the tree, she thought, because it isn't going anywhere and neither am I.

She remained propped on her elbows and pondered her situation. I could yell, she thought, but the nearest people are in the museum, and it's closed tight because of the air-conditioning.

Exasperated, she swore, "Damn! Of all theeeeee—I!" The word, first extended, then cut off, ended on a sharp upward inflection as a lizard moved through the grass just inches in front of her. "Oh, God, what have I gotten myself into?" she gasped.

The longer she lay there, the more aware Anne became of numbingly persistent aches. Her shoulders were tiring, but she wasn't about to lay her head down and have God only knew what crawl into her hair. She twisted around to look at the house. Now she felt the uneasiness she'd expected earlier. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she sternly told herself to stop panicking.

She tried to inch backward, thinking it might give her some slack to work her foot free, but the effort only exag-

gerated every existing pain and created a number of new ones.

"So, that just leaves yelling," she muttered, and tried it. The sound was swallowed by the grass and the trees. Knowing that her voice could possibly hurt her, she decided to, she yelled one last time. "It's no use," she finally admitted out loud, feeling the first stirring of genuine alarm. Her ankle began to feel more constricted and she wondered if it was swelling.

Eventually, Anne stretched her right arm in front of her and laid her head on it, forgetting her vow to keep it off the ground. The grass was making her itch and the sun was baking her skin. The day had definitely lost its charm.

Then she heard something moving toward her, something large from the sound of it. Before she could raise her head to face this newest threat, she felt hot breath on her face. Anne squeezed her eyes shut and screamed.

She heard a male voice command, "Monty, get back!"

For perhaps two seconds, she heard only the echoes of her own scream while she waited to feel teeth sink into her flesh. Then the words registered.

Monty? There was that name again, and that voice. She found it nearly impossible to open her eyes and lift her head. When she did, Rob MacKenzie was squatting beside her, clad in jeans and a chambray shirt open halfway down the front. A look of incredulity flashed across his face before a frown replaced it.

"Having problems again, Ms. Goodwin?"

Since she was in no position to slug him, she did nothing, said nothing, until she could manage some control. "One day surly, the next day droll," she finally observed.

"Wrong," he countered. "Monday I was surly, and yesterday droll. Today has yet to be decided."

Anne let her head drop back to her arm and closed her eyes again. "You will let me know when you've made up your mind, won't you?" she said with a sigh.

She heard him rise and move to her foot, then something damp touched her cheek. She opened her eyes with a new burst of adrenaline. She was nose to nose with the retriever and remained that way for a moment, then he covered half her face with a spring of his tongue.

"Hey!" she protested with a little laugh. "I like you, too, but could you try to restrain yourself? You've got me at a disadvantage. Ouch!" MacKenzie had moved the branch in his examination.

"Sorry. Monty, sit," he commanded. He didn't touch the branch again, but she heard him walking around, presumably to study it from another angle. It was just too much effort to turn and watch, so she looked at the dog, instead.

He sat perfectly still, as commanded, the rise and fall of his chest his only movement. So beautiful, she thought, and beautifully trained. When the golden head turned toward her, she smiled at him and could have sworn he smiled back.

"Well, you've got yourself good and stuck, as usual," Rob reported when he stood beside her again. Anne had to squint against the sun as she craned her neck to look up at him.

"Brilliant deduction," she observed before she could stop herself.

"I'll have to walk over to the Beeling House and see if they've got a saw," he continued, ignoring her sarcasm. "My pocketknife won't cut through that maple."

"Do you suppose you could do it fairly soon?" Anne asked impatiently. "This isn't very comfortable and I've been here quite a while."

"When you go tramping around places you don't belong you're likely to end up uncomfortable," he observed coolly.

~~She made no response to the provocative remark, and after a moment he told the dog to stop and disappeared around the corner of the house.~~

~~MacKenzie was grateful for Monte's company. She invited him to stay, but when he seemed determined to comfort her with that long tongue, she told him instead to lie down. Obediently, he dropped his belly and waited quietly with her for his owner's return.~~

MacKenzie wasn't gone long, but the wait seemed endless. "I'll make this as quick as I can," he promised when he returned carrying a small handsaw. His tone was neither angry nor friendly, and she wasn't sure whether that was progress, or even if she wanted it to be.

As he drew the blade through the hard wood, she felt each stroke and turned her head. It was obvious as she watched that he was trying to move the branch as little as possible.

When he'd cut out the section entrapping her foot, he supported it while she shifted and sat up.

Anne breathed a long sigh of relief, then looked up to find him studying her intently. "Does it hurt much?" he asked.

"No, not at the moment." When he said nothing more, but continued to watch her, Anne said, "It was lucky for me you happened along today."

That's right, it was.

She wondered how words of agreement could sound so disagreeable. As he began to cut through the wood pressing directly against her ankle, he asked, "What in blazes were you doing here, anyway?"

She knew she should have expected the question, but she wasn't ready with an answer. He'd stopped sawing though, and was obviously waiting for one.

Scrambling for something that would sound plausible, she said, "Old houses fascinate me. I saw this one from the museum yesterday and wanted to take a closer look." The essential truth of the statement allowed her to meet his gaze

squarely, and after a moment he resumed work. As he made his way closer to her, he sent her brief glances from time to time, but said nothing.

Anne tried to distract herself by taking a survey of the man, something she had been unable to do before. There was strength in the shape of his jaw and the set of his mouth. His eyes were intelligent, expressive, and undoubtedly capable of a large range of emotions, although anger usually seemed foremost. She told herself she was probably better off not knowing the reason for that. His hair had fallen over his brow again, and he wore a look of concentration as he worked. It's strange, she mused, my first impression had been based solely on looks, I'd probably like him.

The saw drew her attention to his hands. They were strong and unfaltering, yet his fingers were long and sensitive, and she remembered how they'd felt on her skin. As the blade drew nearer she tensed, and he stopped again and looked at her.

An expression of relief flooded her eyes but was at once replaced by an aloofness that both amused and irritated him. If there was a bit of challenge there, as well, she seemed unaware of it.

Rob allowed his attention to wander in a slow study of her face, admiring the fine bone structure beneath her sun-flushed skin. The night of the storm he'd thought that she'd look wonderful dry and had tried to picture it. Then he'd become irritated when he realized what he was doing, and that had taken a definite toll in terms of courtesy.

Some details of the episode were hazy, thanks to that bottle of Albert's, but he clearly remembered thinking that she'd photograph well. Yesterday at Nora's he discovered he really hadn't done her justice. Her wide-spaced eyes were a lovely smoke gray and fringed with dark lashes. Her fine, rich brown hair hung in shoulder-length waves and framed a classically oval face. And her lips—they were soft and full.

Parted in surprise as he'd seen them immediately after she'd bumped into him yesterday, ~~she'd spent the last few days~~ ~~more than she'd ever had~~

Today with her ~~hair~~ pulled back, she was distractingly beautiful. ~~With a~~ ~~difficulty~~ ~~he reminded himself that~~ ~~he~~ ~~either needed nor wanted any complications in his life right~~

Anne watched self-consciously as his gaze wandered to her mouth, an almost hold her breath when he lingered there for a few seconds. Then he turned back to the saw, once more wearing a frown, and she wondered what he'd been thinking and why it seemed to bother him.

When the saw was a fraction of an inch from her flesh, he stopped to lay the tool aside. Then he snapped the remaining wood with his hand and lifted her foot free. But instead of bowing her a little to the ground as she'd expected, he brought it to rest on his thigh and began to carefully examine it.

After a few seconds, he looked at her. Still holding her foot, he said, "I don't think it's broken. There's not much swelling."

Anne swallowed before she spoke, not sure why ~~he had~~ ~~to form the answer from her voice when she said, "Well, I~~ ~~was careful to keep it elevated."~~

A gleam of appreciation appeared in his eyes but all he said was, "Where's your car?" His eyebrows lifted inquiringly as he added, "You did drive here?"

"Yes, it's in the driveway. I couldn't get it all the way to the end."

Without comment he stepped a short distance away and bent to lift a camera from the ground. She hadn't noticed it and was surprised to see that it had what appeared to be a very conspicuous ~~mark~~ ~~He hung the strap over his shoulder,~~ ~~picked up the saw,~~ then reached down to help her stand, supporting her with an arm around her waist.

"Take it easy now," he instructed. "Don't put your weight on it all at once."

Gingerly she touched the foot to the ground and gradually increased the pressure. It hurt, but the pain was bearable. She took a few cautious steps ~~with his arm still at her~~ ~~waist.~~

"Well?" he asked when she stopped.

"Fine. If you move, it'll hurt."

He let go of her and she took a tentative, unsupported step, but her ankle buckled and he caught her as she began to fall. Before she could guess his intention, he swept her up into his arms.

"What are you doing?" she protested. "I can walk."

He made a sound of derision and continued to carry her, with Monty trotting alongside. When they reached the log, Rob stepped over it and closed the remaining distance to her car in three long strides.

Setting her down, he steadied her for a moment and Anne found her breathing had grown uneven at the brief press of bodies. Still supporting her, Rob opened the passenger door to help her slide onto the seat, then lifted her foot and tucked it inside. She leaned back with a long sigh while he walked around the car.

After Monty was installed in the back seat, Rob slipped behind the wheel and said, "I'll need the keys."

They were in her pocket, and to get at them Anne had to lean a little to her left, which brought her head close to his shoulder. She couldn't help remembering his chest and shoulders as she'd seen them the night of the storm, bare and well muscled. Trying to push the memory out of her mind, she handed him the keys.

For the few moments that the top of her head was only a few inches from his nose, the scent of her hair drifted to him. Rob inhaled the fragrance and reached without thinking to remove a blade of grass caught there. Then, inexplicably,

cably annoyed, he turned to look over his shoulder at the narrow overgrown driveway. "Well, you're consistent, I'll give you that," he remarked. "If there's any way to make something difficult, you find it. Whatever possessed you to drive in here in the first place?"

She shot a look at him, to see if he was angry again, but when he started around to look through the back window for herself, she had to admit there was some justification for the question.

"It really didn't look so bad coming in," she finally replied. "Just a fast drive doesn't hurt anybody."

Rob turned to put the key in the ignition, muttering, "Not that fast." But he hadn't looked away in time to hide the quick amusement in his eyes or the smile playing on his lips. Anne had to fight the temptation to smile back as the car began to lurch back and over the uneven ground.

"You know, I might be able to drive," she suggested when he turned onto the road. "Then you wouldn't have to go all the way into town with no way to get home."

"I'll get home okay," he stated without concern. "But if you use that ankle now, you'll only make it worse." He shifted gears before adding, "You might be able to get away with light exercise tomorrow if you wrap it first."

"Now, don't tell me you're a doctor," Anne groaned.

"No. But, if you want one to have a look..."

"No, no doctor," she said firmly.

Seemingly disinclined toward conversation, he only grunted at her answer, so when Anne couldn't stand it any longer, she broke the silence herself. "Mr. MacKenzie, I want to thank you for the rescue this morning—and for the other evening, too. I've got to admit I was pretty surprised when you came out to push my car. I was beginning to think I'd have to sit there all night."

"Were you?" he replied in a dry tone that left her uncertain to which of her situations he referred.

"And I'm curious about something. Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead," he told her, sounding resigned.

Anne refused to be put off by his tone. "Have you always lived in this town?"

"I grew up here," he answered shortly, leaving her free to speculate on the difference in wording. Monty pushed his head between their seats and Anne pet the dog while she pondered his reply.

Then he spoke unexpectedly. "You seem to be curious about a lot of things. Are you planning to stay here, after all, to help me?"

She turned to him and caught a flash of some quickly veiled emotion when he glanced her way. He turned his attention back to the road as she dealt with the resultant confusion.

"After all?" she echoed at last. "I don't understand."

"Nora said you were just visiting."

"That's right, I am," Anne confirmed while she wondered what else Nora had said.

"You haven't said what you were really doing back there," he told her. Something in his tone translated the simple statement into a demand for explanation.

Annoyed, Anne snapped, "Mr. MacKenzie, I can't see that where I go or what I do is really any of your business."

"It is if I have to keep bailing you out of trouble."

She didn't appreciate either his persistence or his dig about her recent misadventures. "I promise you won't be called on again," she told him. "In any case, I'm sure I had as much right to be there as you did. I didn't see any No Trespassing signs."

No, there were no signs, he reflected, but she still had some reason other than curiosity for being there. Who is she and what the devil is she after? he mused.

He slipped back into a thoughtful silence for the rest of the drive, while Anne frowned at him and at the passing scenery. When he pulled up in front of the boarding house, he let the dog out, then went around to help her.

His arm supported her as he walked onto the porch. It bothered her to need MacKenzie's arm around her, bothered her still more to find that against all reason, it felt natural there.

She'd been so distracted by his obvious displeasure at her having been at the scene that she had given no thought to their arrival back at Nora's. Now she hoped the landlady was somewhere safely out of sight and vowed that even if she had to crawl, she'd make it to her room alone.

There was no one at home, but the house was open. Rob helped her inside and started to guide her toward the parlor, but Anne objected.

"There's no reason for me to go in there. What I need is to lie down and put my foot up for a while. Just let me go to my room."

Still supporting her with one arm, he considered for a moment, then Anne found herself lifted again as he headed for the stairs.

"MacKenzie, you don't have to do this," she began, but he was already on his way up the flight. "I can make it up the steps if I use the rail," she insisted and watched the halfway point pass behind them.

"Tell me," she demanded, giving him an exasperated look, "do you ever listen to anyone?"

"Only when they make sense."

He finished the climb with no apparent effort, and at the top he simply asked, "Which is your room?"

Anne told him, and Rob set her carefully back on her feet and reached into his pocket for the keys. He unlocked the door, then pressed the keys into her hand.

She hobbled to the bed with his help, sank gratefully onto it, and pulled her legs out on the floor.

"Take your shoe off," he instructed. "I'll see if I can find an elastic bandage."

Anne obeyed, and dropped her foot on the bed. He came back within two minutes, carrying a small cloth roll. Without a word he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled up the heel of her slacks, then proceeded to wind the bandage from her toes to midcalf. He worked with swift competence, and when he'd finished, he raised his head and asked, "How's that feel?"

Anne gave him audging smile and said, "Much better. Thank you."

"Sure it's not too tight?" He slipped the tip of a finger under the elastic to test its snugness where it curved under her calf. When he cupped his hand under her leg, he ran it down to her ankle, taking his time, sliding his fingers carefully around the injured area where he'd wound extra layers for firm support.

He had drawn a sharp breath at the first touch of his fingers, but he didn't let it show. He set her foot carefully back on the floor, and she finally remembered to exhale. It had been more caress than examination.

Again he reached for the bandage, and this time it was a quiet study. When he spoke his voice held just a hint of hoarseness. "I think an ice pack might help," he told her. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Oh, boy," Anne said in an undertone after he was gone.

"This is all I have," he said, holding up the ice pack. "This is all I have," he said, holding up the ice pack. "This is all I have," he said, holding up the ice pack. Rob fished in his pocket, and while he fished he thought about applying it to himself. He knew he should go back up there, deliver the ice, and get the hell out. He wondered if he could.

She was sitting exactly as he'd left her, and Monty was stretched out on a rug beside her, looking so much at home. Breathing silently, Rob walked over to place the ice on her ankle.

"Can I get you anything else before I leave?" he asked, sounding kinder than he'd meant to.

"No," Anne replied, and her expression swiftly closed. "You've done more than enough already. Thank you."

The damsel in distress was unmistakable. Damn it, I never could resist a challenge, he thought, and sat back down on the edge of the bed. "I know you're dying to ask me to stay," he said, surprising her with a quick grin that gave him an irresistible appeal.

"You've been out in the sun too long, MacKenzie," she retorted, frowning with a hint of reproach. He grinned. "You're hallucinating."

"Think so?" he asked, leaning closer.

"I'm sure of it," Anne insisted, but he was too quick. His hand went to the back of her neck to hold her before her brain could complete the command, and a moment later his lips brushed hers so lightly that it barely qualified as a physical contact. She felt it all the way to her toes.

Hadn't he told himself not to touch her, pointed out exactly how unwise it would be to kiss her the ice and get the heat out, Rob thought again wryly. But what could one kiss hurt? Just a small taste to satisfy his curiosity, then no more. How could he have known that one small contact would rocket through him and have him pulling her closer as he said her name.

It was just her name, but unheard as she'd never heard it, with him so close, her hand on his shoulder. Anne hadn't known a voice could weaken her so, and when she raised her hands to his shoulders to push him away, she was powerless to keep them from creeping around his neck, instead.

He pulled her closer and for a few seconds lost himself to a quick passion that might have come from either of them. His lips moved over hers, hot, hungry, and her flavor, sweeter than he'd even begun to imagine, seeped into him. Anne felt the room tilt when his mouth crushed hers. Her senses spun and she clung to him for support.

Then they both pulled back to fight for balance, struggling to regain control of something as basic as breathing.

"That was... that wasn't..." She groped helplessly for coherence, sought to arrange her features into a smile.

"Yeah, I feel the same way," he told her with a weak smile. "It would help if you had a warm blanket on the end of your bed."

"Oh, Lord, MacKenzie," he said laughing. "Will you please just get out of here and let my ankle heal?"

Rob grinned again and stood up. "I can't promise I won't be back," he said.

"At least promise you'll try."

"Of course, you have my word," he said emphatically, and turned to move to the door.