

Chapter 7

Rob took her to a small, back-street bar. Anne had no idea where they were. She'd looked out the truck window, watching dusk turn to darkness, but had paid no attention to streets or directions. For the moment she'd let him take charge. She felt that he could protect her from a threat she couldn't see, yet knew with certainty was there.

He spoke to Monty, telling him to stay put in the bed of the truck, then led her inside. When he took her to a booth near the back of the room and slid in beside her, Anne turned to him and asked dryly, "A friend I'll run?"

"That, too," he replied without smiling. He asked what she wanted to drink and gave their orders to the waitress.

Rob wasn't touching Anne at all, but she was acutely aware of his closeness. She felt his gaze and knew he was waiting for her to talk about the call. Reluctantly she turned to face him.

His eyes were calm, questioning. "I'm sorry I fell apart," she said, hardly speaking above a whisper.

"You didn't fall apart. But I want to know what he said."

Rob: I have to deal with this myself. I gave it a lot of thought while you were gone this afternoon, and I don't want to involve you or anyone else. I appreciate your offer, but—

"Shut up," she interrupted, looking at her steadily.

"What?" She stared, not sure she'd heard right.

"It's time you began to trust me."

"But, I—I do. Trust has nothing to do with it. It's just not right to expect someone else to solve my problems for me."

She was unaware that she was twisting her hands until he reached over to still them. "I want to know what he said," he repeated, putting his arm around her.

"Please—you mustn't get involved in this." Choking back tears, she tried to say no, but he caught her arm and brought her back to face him.

"What's this?" he asked, then stopped speaking as he saw her distress and the moisture of her back tears. His hand gentled at once, and he said softly, "Oh, God, Anne, don't look at me like that."

Slowly, lightly, he brought his mouth to hers. The kiss was sweet and soothing, with any suggestion of passion carefully banked. He made no demands, only gave, and caressed her cheeks. Then he clipped his fingers into her hair, cradling her head while his lips moved gently over hers.

Finally, he released her and she drew away, though her gaze remained fixed on his. His expression was so concerned that she swallowed involuntarily, then started as she looked up to see the waitress with their drinks. Rob handed the girl five dollars and waved her away with the change.

"Anne, I am involved," he said when the waitress left. "Neither of us can change that. Now tell me what he said."

Oh, God, she thought. What do I do now? I can't let anybody get hurt because of me. "He just said it was my last

warning. The rest was the same as the other call and the letter."

"Damn it, I'm trying to tell you. I've hadn't meant to let his control slip, but he was rapidly reaching the limits of his patience."

Anne sat with her head bowed, struggling to compose herself. She felt Rob's gaze upon her. "This wasn't a good idea," she said. "I think we'd better go back to Nora's."

"We haven't finished our drinks," he said pointedly.

She knew she wasn't enough in control to insist. Instead, she lifted her glass and took a substantial swallow.

"We've got company," she heard Rob mutter.

Anne looked up to see Sylvia and Mike walking toward the booth, and tried to look pleased.

"Well, imagine seeing you here, Anne!" Sylvia exclaimed while Rob stood up to shake Mike's hand.

"I've been quite a while, Rob. I'd heard you were back, though. Just taking a vacation, are you?" Mike asked.

"After a fashion," Rob replied, and because there seemed no way to avoid it, he invited them to sit down.

The waitress came to take the newcomers' orders, and Anne noted from Rob's expression that their earlier conversation was far from finished.

Sylvia chattered animatedly, and Mike asked a series of questions about Rob's work. The drinks arrived, including refills that Mike had ordered for Rob and Anne.

Will this never be over? Anne wondered as she sighed and reached for her glass. She glanced at the others over the rim and thought that of all the couples she could be any two couples out for the evening. How deceiving appearances can be.

The pace picked up as the band swung into a new tune. The jukebox thumped out hard rock and Anne could feel her tension rising. She made a serious effort to down half her drink in one gulp, thinking the sooner she finished, the sooner she could ask Rob to get her out of there.

She was making some headway when she looked up to see another couple approaching the booth. Oh, no, she ground inwardly. This is all I need—another delay. Edmund Chambers had stopped and skimmed the four files with mild surprise. There was no other form of greetings, and Anne could tell that Rob was wondering how she and Chambers had already met.

The accountant pulled over an empty chair from a nearby table and set down the drink he had in his hand. Smiling, he said affably, "Well, this is an unexpected pleasure, Anne. I had no idea I'd be seeing you again so soon. Are you getting those book details wound up okay?"

Although he still wasn't touching her, Anne felt Rob stiffen, but to explain would have been too obvious. So she merely nodded with a smile that she could feel growing brittle, and let Rob think what he wished.

The noise and the thickening atmosphere had her desperate for a breath of fresh air. She only half heard the conversation as it eddied around her, sometimes spinning just on the edge of her awareness, then drawing her into the vortex.

When Rob asked a question, she didn't fully register until she heard Mike's answer. "Yeah, I've been working for Ed for about—what—six, seven months?" He looked from Sylvia to Edmund Chambers, received nods from both, and smiled as he reached for his glass.

Small world, Anne thought, then amended the thought. No, small town.

The waitress reappeared, and Rob asked Anne if she wanted another drink. She said no, hoping he wouldn't order one for himself and was relieved when he simply finished what was left in his glass and turned back to her to say, "Are you ready to go?"

She nodded gratefully, and he caught her hand as she slid out of the booth. While they said good-night, then guided her through the crowd.

But once they were outside, he slipped his hands into his pockets and strode quickly toward his truck. He put his hand under her elbow to help her up, but when he climbed in and started the engine without a word, she knew that something more than physical distance separated them.

As recently as yesterday she might have felt relief. Now regret gripped her, and a new anxiety had her clenching her hands on her lap.

Rob glanced over after he'd pulled out of the parking space. She's still tied up in knots, he thought, forcing himself to concentrate on the phone call. "By the way," after she'd told him all the rest of it, was she clamming up about that call? And when the hell had she had time for so much social life?

It was several minutes before Anne realized that they were heading out of town. Breaking the prolonged silence, she asked, "Where are we going?"

His reply was terse. "Someplace where we can talk." It brought the silence right back down on them.

"Rob, I want to go back to Nora's."

"Later."

They were heading south. Even in the dark, Anne recognized some of the scenery. She was surprised when he drove past his house, then turned off onto a dirt road after they'd gone another mile or so. Eventually he pulled onto the grass edging the road and switched off the headlights.

There was a moon. Broken clouds drifted across its face, providing enough light for them to see each other.

"You might as well tell me whatever it is that's bothering you so I can get home sometime tonight," Anne snapped.

"It's what's bothering *you* that's the issue," he returned shortly.

"Well, what's bothering me right now is you," she flared. "One thing you're bothered about is that you're going to help me whether I want it or not, then the next you're so distant you might as well be on the moon for all the good you'll do me! So either come back to earth, or take me back to Nora's. I want to get some sleep."

He looked at her for a moment, then let out a long, exasperated breath. "It's just so I was surprised at some of the company you've been keeping."

Her eyes narrowed. "I think you'd better be more specific. Just who is it you object to?"

"It's not important," he muttered.

She gave him a stony stare, then folded her arms and turned to glare through the windshield in determined silence while he realized he was talking himself down.

A few minutes passed, and it occurred to Rob that he was awfully tired of arguing with Anne when what he really wanted was to drag her into his arms and make love to her. She shifted restlessly, but kept her gaze aimed unwaveringly ahead, and despite himself the corners of his mouth began to twitch.

Another half minute passed, then Anne, without altering her position, said, "Do you realize how ridiculous, how utterly stupid it is, for two allegedly adult people to sit out here pouting like a couple of children?"

His laughter was totally unexpected, and she turned to him in surprise. "Now what?" she complained, but after a moment her own lips were flirting with a smile, and she didn't protest when he reached for her.

"Damn it, Anne, you know exactly how to get under my skin," he murmured just before his mouth covered hers. The contact brought an instant fire.

When she broke it off, he expected her to pull out of his arms, but she tipped her head back and met his gaze with glowing eyes. "And here I thought you were getting under

mine," she said, and laughed—a silken, throaty ripple of sound that had him catching his breath, then crushing his lips against hers.

As before, his warmth flowed into her, heating her blood. She pressed closer, and her lips parted, white-hot pleasure filled her with a passionate disregard for later.

Murmuring her name against her lips, he changed the angle, took the kiss deeper. His arm tightened and the yielding of her breasts against him, his lips hot and eager beneath his, had him quickly hungering for more. Their hearts pounded together as he pulled his mouth from hers and took it racing on a journey over her face. But his taste drew him back for another kiss, and another, until he uttered a low moan of pleasure and settled into the corner where the back of the seat met the door, taking her with him.

When the voice of reason first intruded to remind him that they had unfinished business to discuss, he tried to ignore it, but in perished. For a few seconds longer he savored her and let his own frustrations begin to ease. Then, surrendering to the inevitable, he straightened and relaxed the embrace enough that he could see her face, warm and flushed.

"I like that much better than sniping at each other," he told her softly. "How about a permanent cease-fire?"

"You mean make love, not war?" she said, breathing unevenly.

"Exactly," he murmured, and unable to resist, he lowered his head once more.

This time it was Anne who pulled back. "Maybe we should just call it an armed truce for the time being," she suggested.

Rob gave her a long look and said, "As long as we keep the channels for negotiation open."

"If we must." She sighed, then flashed him a smile.

He smiled back, but his expression grew grave almost at once. "Anne, we need to do some serious negotiating right now. You've got to level with me about a few things."

"What do you mean? I've told you the truth."

"Yes, but not all of it. For example, who else knows about all this—the survey, and the murder?"

"Who else? No one that you don't know about. Good Lord, you've been with me every time I've talked to anyone."

"Not when you talked to Chambers," he corrected. "How much have you told him?"

"Edmund Chambers?" she choked out. "Why would I tell him anything? I barely know the man."

"He knows about the book, calls you Anne, gives you a hundred-watt smile when he talks to you. Maybe you'd better define 'barely.'"

Anne regarded him for several seconds, then shaking her head she said, "I can't believe this. I'd seen the man exactly twice before tonight for a total of probably twenty minutes. Tonight was the only time he used my first name, and I suppose that was because of the casual atmosphere. He knows about the book because he was at the museum when I was on my fact-finding tour there, and that was the story I told him and the guide."

She glared at him as she finished speaking, but couldn't prevent a little shiver of pleasure at the realization that his annoyance may have sprung from simple jealousy.

He uttered an apology then surprised her by saying, "Let's get out and walk for a while."

"Walk?" she repeated. "Out here—at night?"

"Sure, why not?"

Why not, indeed? Did she dare mention those creatures of the dark that might lurk in the shadows, waiting to pounce and devour anyone foolish enough to stroll by? Better not, she decided. He'd just laugh.

Monty, finally given permission to leap down out of the truck, ran ahead of them along the road stretching between fields of vegetables and ripening grain. Much of the fields appeared black and white and faintly mystical in the shifting light. Ahead of them, an uneven line of trees cut across the landscape. Beyond that Anne caught the sparkle of light on water.

"There's the river," she exclaimed, laughing at her own air of discovery. Rob caught her hand in his and smiled down at her.

As they walked, she realized where they must be, and suddenly breathless, she asked, "Rob, is it here? That land?"

"It should be just ahead, on the left," he replied gently. "Come on, let's have a closer look."

He led her across the road and helped her over a ditch. Taking her hand again, Rob proceeded across a field of weeds and low clumps of brush. They moved slowly as Anne picked her way carefully in her impractical shoes. A chorus of insects and tree toads from the direction of the river gave the night life and breath. When they reached the edge of a plowed field, they stopped.

"This is probably the present boundary," Rob speculated, looking along the plowed line. "And if my sense of direction is any good at all, the correct line runs from about where that bush is, over to a spot in line with that big maple that stands out by itself. See where I mean?"

Anne nodded, then asked, "How do you happen to know all this?"

"I went with Bill to the Land Office this afternoon and looked it up. We also confirmed that Raymond Kincaid is still the other owner, and it looks like he farms it right to the limit." He turned to study the terrain between themselves and the road. "On the other hand, this hasn't felt a plow blade in a long, long time."

Anne looked across the field with the clumps of bush dark against the surrounding land. Then a movement in the weeds a few yards away had her gripping Rob's hand and moving closer to him.

His arm came around her, and he said, "It's just a rabbit, love. There's nothing to be afraid of out here."

Anne laughed self-consciously, both relieved and embarrassed to see the long ears and round, staring eyes when the moon moved from behind a cloud to illuminate the area.

"You forget, MacKenzie, I'm a city girl. You'll have to do some talk to convince me that the great outdoors is safe."

"Whatever it takes," he said under his breath, and hugged her close to his side for a moment.

"What?" she asked.

He only laughed softly and said, "Maybe we'd better head back. There certainly isn't anything special about this land that I can see."

Monty raced back to them from his own explorations, and the rabbit disappeared into a patch of heavier brush. Its tail flashed in the moonlight just before the dark stems and stalks swallowed it up. The dog ran along the edge of the patch, fretting over the loss of his quarry until Rob whistled him back.

Anne shivered with a sudden chill as they moved back across the field, and ~~was~~ ~~nothing~~ ~~dangerous~~ in the quiet countryside. The moon disappeared behind another cloud, then a distant flash and rumble had both of them looking skyward. "Looks like we're getting a little rain," Rob commented, and they increased their pace.

They had almost reached the truck when he asked, "Anne, will you tell me about that call now?"

She stopped walking and another flash flickered across the sky to the west. There was no sign of the moon now, and

she couldn't have seen Rob's face even if she'd dared look. But she knew him well enough by this time to realize he wouldn't give up. Stubborn—or persevering—he had an ample supply of one or the other by any name.

"I'll tell you what," he said, "will you let it alone, Rob? Let me take care of it myself?"

He heard the plea in her voice, but his own was unyielding when he answered, "You know better than that." His fingers clamped around her wrist when she started to move away. "Damn it, Anne, this morning—this afternoon, too—you were willing to let me help, even glad, I think. But since that call came, you've done a complete about-face. What the devil did he say to you?"

She gazed up at him, and when lightning slashed across the sky, much closer now, she saw his face and knew she had lost. Blinking back tears of frustration and fear, she said, "He told me if anything changes about the survey, I won't be around to see the result." Then, in a voice tight with anxiety, she added, "And neither will anyone who helps me."

For a moment he said nothing at all. Then he swore in some of the most colorful language she'd ever heard. Finally, he put his arms around her and pressed her head against his breast. "Oh, God—you were afraid of me?"

His kiss overwhelmed her. It was emotional, charged, like the atmosphere around them. He crushed her against him, bruising her lips when thunder rolled closer, and couldn't quite check something that Anne might have recognized as jubilation if she hadn't been trying so hard to hang on to her own sanity.

She finished the walk to the truck in a daze. Once they were inside, he pulled her close and kissed her again and again. His lips, soft and giving, moved against hers, stirring wonderful fantasies of touching and caressing. Fi-

nally, without a word, he started the engine, turned the truck, and drove quickly back along the deserted road. The tires lifted dust from the pavement, but in the heavy air it resettled quickly to the road.

Anne leaned her head against the back of the seat and closed her eyes when he turned onto the paved road. Now only the hum of the truck and the more frequent rumbles of thunder broke the silence of the night. When he slowed and made a turn she saw, without any real surprise, that they were climbing the driveway to his house.

"Rob, I shouldn't be here," she protested when he'd shut off the engine.

"Why not?" he asked quietly, and his fingers slipped into her hair, moving the back of her neck in slow circles.

"Because..." He had moved his hand, was now kneading her shoulders, first one, then the other, gently, so gently. Anne's eyes drifted closed, and whatever she'd been about to say was forgotten.

Then a bright flash of lightning followed closely by reverberating thunder, startled her back to awareness. "What were you saying?" she asked.

"You were saying," he corrected, while a smile tugged at his mouth.

"I was saying? I was saying—I shouldn't be here."

"Mmm, umm," he agreed. "But you didn't say why."

"Because it's getting late, and—uh—Nora..." His hand had moved around so that his fingers were teasing her earlobe with feather touches. She couldn't get away from the delicious torment, and then he rubbed his lips lightly over hers.

Anne sighed, and for an instant his fingers tightened as desire jolted through him. "Anne," he breathed, "let's go inside."

Somehow she found herself walking to the back with him, his arm at her waist, while Monty bounced ahead of them,

happy to be home. The rain began falling as Rob opened the door.

As soon as they were in the kitchen, he stopped and pulled her close. His lips found hers in the darkness. He took the kiss deep as his hands moved up and down her back and over her bottom, then along the curves of hips and waist.

Anne pressed against him and wound her arms around his neck, her mouth opened and fingers clutched his. When the heels of his hands pressed the sides of her breasts, she felt the bones in her legs begin to dissolve, and she sagged against him, clinging for support. Rob's heart rate doubled.

"Anne, do you know what you do to me?" he asked in a voice rough with emotion. "It takes just a touch, the smallest touch, to make me forget everything I ever knew about restraint. I've never wanted anyone the way I want you." Then his lips crushed back down on hers, and her small whimper at a tiny surge of panic became a moan at a tidal wave of desire. Thunder boomed overhead but she only pressed harder. His arms tightened and held her while her head pounded wildly against his.

"Anne," he whispered after a moment, "I don't want to wait any longer, and I don't believe you do, either. Come to bed with me now, darling, and let me love you."

Lightning, bright and momentary, lit his face through the window. He looked at her, saw no denial in her eyes—only awareness, acknowledgment, then a flare of passion. Thunder answered the flash, rattling the windows, and with a sound of relief and pleasure, he lifted her in his arms and walked across the room into the hall.

In the bedroom he took a moment to light one of the candles that he'd set around the house because of the recent power outages. "I want to see you while I make love to you," he said softly and moved to the side of the bed where

she lay looking at him, her eyes wide and dark in the yellow glow.

While he pulled off his shirt Anne thought, If this is another dream, don't wake me. Every nerve in her body was jumping with anticipation.

Tossing the shirt onto a chair, he lowered himself to the edge of the mattress and slowly, lightly, brought a hand to her face. With his fingertips he traced the delicate arch of an eyebrow and the fine molding of a cheekbone while his thumb followed the contours of her lips. He didn't speak, but Anne's heart continued its wild thudding at the gentleness of his touch and the desire in his eyes.

His hand slid to her cheek, and then down her neck. He lowered his head and her breath shuddered over his lips as they drew near.

"You're so incredibly beautiful," he whispered as his mouth settled over hers.

Once again her eyes drifted shut, but she continued for a few moments to see the intensity, the heat, in his. Her hands rested on his shoulders as he moved his lips slowly against hers, and she forgot everything. On her back his fingers caressed with a leather touch while he continued to kiss her with that same tender promise.

He pressed down against her and buried his fingers in her hair, a surge of passion threatened to send him up in flames and touched off a response that had her matching his sudden demand.

Her arms went around his neck, pulling him closer in willing surrender to his needs, and to her own. Rob knew that she was already his, that he could rush and take her quickly to ease a desire that threatened to consume them both. But he wanted to prolong her pleasure, wanted to make this first time memorable for both of them, so he banked the fire and gentled the kiss.

Lightly, tenderly, he moved his lips across her cheek while he pulled her to pull down the zipper on the back of her dress. As he eased her back onto the pillow, his lips shifted to her ear where he traced its shape with the tip of his tongue before moving on. He nibbled a path along her neck to her shoulder, then inched the dress out of the way as his lips followed it, trailing kisses along her arm until the material blocked his progress.

All thought receded to some distant corner of Anne's mind. She felt electric shocks of sensation. While lightning flashed outside and thunder rolled unnoticed over the valley, she was assaulted by so many sensations that she lay helpless, simply absorbing them. His mouth returned to hers while he lowered the dress to her waist and somehow she found the strength to pull her arms free of the material. She wore a sheer bra almost the color of her skin. His hands went to her breasts to caress them through the silky fabric, and the excitement and desire he saw in her eyes made him ache with wanting her. His voice was choked with passion when he said her name, and hearing it, Anne's heart skipped and fluttered.

Rob bent his head to touch his lips to a straining peak. She drew in a sharp breath and looked toward him as he moved his tongue slowly, caressingly over the thin fabric until it was wet and her nipple was clearly outlined beneath it. Anne moaned softly and thrust upward again, longing for the moist warmth of his mouth.

But he pulled back while he slipped his hands under her to unfasten the bra and pull it free. Her breasts were full and firm, with both nipples dark and erect, and he touched his lips gently to each of them, then raised up to look at her. Her face glowed with desire, and her lips parted as she took rapid, shallow breaths. She trembled as she waited, wanting him desperately.

Rob felt a tremendous surge of power, and of tenderness. "Do you know how much I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "Do you have any idea how exquisite you are? Oh, Anne, love me."

Then, hot and seeking, his mouth roamed over her face, to the scented softness of her throat, and on to the swell of a breast. He pressed kisses around it, circled it with his tongue until at last he drew the nipple into his mouth and suckled, filling himself with her taste.

Again Anne arched, offering more, wanting more, and he moved to the other breast, giving it the same attention. While he lingered there, his hands moved lower, sliding her dress down over her hips, the lacy half-slip she wore going with it. He molded her hips with his palms, delighting in the silkiness of her skin against their roughness, and his mouth grew ravenous. He pulled harder at her breast, dragging a low moan of intense pleasure from her.

She lay there wearing only a thin wisp of silk. He bent to press his face against the softness of her stomach, pushing the scrap of material downward, following his progress with his tongue and lips. Anne twisted and writhed beneath him while he tasted the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs. But he refused to be rushed, drawing the garment down, arousing her more as his hands glided lower, leaving a path of tingling flesh in their wake. She moaned with unbearable excitement as he found secrets she hadn't known she possessed and mercilessly exploited them.

His fingers and lips grew more demanding with each new discovery, and when he finally slipped the undergarment off and raised to look at her, his breathing grew shallow and his heart raced like a trip-hammer. Flanning his gaze from the dark triangle between her legs to her full breasts, he knew he'd burn if he didn't take her soon. But there was still so much to feel, so experience with her.

He bent to her for another long kiss while his hands continued to caress and arouse. She ran her hands over the rippling muscles of his back and shoulders, then clutched at him, desperate for completion. Every place her lips could reach she pressed passionate kisses and was filled with wonder at his shuddering responses.

She wanted to beg him to hurry, but was incapable of anything beyond gasping his name as he persisted in the delicious torture. Torn between wanting to continue and wanting him to satisfy that clawing need, she moved under him in an instinctive invitation and he nearly snapped his thin thread of control.

When the storm continued to assault the land outside, the pace of conquest within quickened, but it was no longer clear who conquered whom. Anne's fingers fumbled with the fastener of his slacks until he caught her hands and lifted them to kiss the racing pulse at her wrists. Then he released her and unfastened the slacks himself.

Moments later he stretched to length beside her on the bed and pulled her close, flesh to heated flesh. Anne thrilled to the feel of him, fully aroused against her. Their legs tangled, bodies moved against each other with a devastating friction, and he found her mouth again, open, eager. His hands seemed to be everywhere at once, and her excited moans and sighs blended with his as their lips met in one deep, desperate kiss after another.

Then his fingers found her and nearly drove her over the brink. She managed a breathless whimper that barely achieved coherence. "Rob—now. Oh, darling, please..."

At her plea his last trace of restraint shattered, and he poured himself above her, barely controlling the force of his entry. She cried out and he uttered another shuddering groan at the rich pleasure in that most intimate of contacts.

They moved together on waves of throbbing sensation, then cooled and hurtled over the peak and beyond, their

names wrenched from each other's lips before they collapsed, drained and gasping.

At first neither made any effort to speak. He could feel tremors deep inside her, like the aftershocks of an earthquake. He doubted if he'd ever have the strength to move, but finally managed to ask, "Anne, darling, can you breathe?"

"Almost," she answered weakly.

With an effort he raised onto his elbows to give her some space. She drew a few deep breaths before he rolled onto his side, taking her with him to prolong their union for another few seconds while he reassured her again, gently, fingeringly.

"You're so beautiful," he said softly. "And warm. And exciting. I should have dragged you up here that first night, dried you out, and had my way with you then. It might have saved both of us a lot of frustration."

Anne laughed in disbelief. "You don't think this was soon enough? Any day you could have been that attracted the first night. I was soaked and scared, and you made me so mad I couldn't see straight."

"I was that attracted," he replied quietly. When Anne met his gaze, she wondered if it could be true and lay for a moment looking into his eyes.

"You did a wonderful job of hiding it," she said with a slow smile. "I never had an inkling."

That him? Rob? "Albert's," Rob explained. "The stuff sneaks up on you. One minute I was a reasonable, clearheaded man, and the next I could hardly form words. The first I heard of it was that I thought was in my head, and Albert said it was the door. And when I got there, I found a nymph with wide eyes, classical bone structure, and a body that wouldn't quit, dripping water on my doorstep." He smiled, but his eyes were serious, and he traced a finger over her cheek and along her jaw. "I wanted you on

the spot, and had just enough sense left to know it wasn't possible. Guess it made me a little crazy."

"Surely," she corrected with a smile, and touched her lips to his.

Rob's arms tightened as the kiss intensified and lingered, until they finally drew apart and smiled at each other. He touched his lips to hers for a moment longer, then held her against his side with her head resting on his chest.

The storm outside had spent itself, leaving only a gentle rain falling in a companionable, passionate quiet aftermath. Anne dozed within minutes. Rob listened to her even breathing while he marveled at what had happened between them.

What he'd told her had been true. Never had he been so unreservedly attracted to a woman from the first time he'd seen her. Even when they'd argued, when there'd seemed to be no chance of their making peace, he'd wanted her with something close to desperation. It was uncharacteristic, it was irrational, and it cost him his time torn between desire and a steadily weakening resolve not to yield.

Now they were lovers. And she was everything he'd dreamed—everything he'd fantasized she would be—if he ever coaxed her into his bed.

But if she was his fantasy and his lover, she had also become his responsibility. Her trouble was real, her danger real, and he had made the trouble and the danger his as well as hers. Helping her hadn't been a clear-cut decision. Rather, he'd sensed her need and responded to it, as he'd responded to her beauty and sensuality. He regretted neither the need to protect nor the lovemaking.

She shifted in his arms. The hand that lay on her above his waist moved a little lower, and heat began to seep through him again. A strand of her hair lay across his lips and he closed his eyes and inhaled its fragrance. Fresh desire began to build.

In the storm Anne's mind was full of memories of the first time in weeks she didn't fear her dreams. But through her contented slumber an undercurrent of excitement stirred, nudging her back toward wakefulness.

For several seconds she kept her eyes closed and absorbed the delicious sensations she felt. Then she stretched and her skin and along his signaling an instant fire in both of them.

She looked into his eyes and found them already clouded with passion. His lips covered hers as he drew her closer, and their hearts sent heat pulsing through their blood. Both were suffused with awakened awareness every place their bodies touched.

This time he didn't have the patience to prolong the loving, to make the pleasure last. There was no leisurely journey of discovery, no gentle brush of lips over tender flesh. Instead, compelled by a need that seemed to rage more fiercely in him with every breath, he drove her with a frenzied kind of reverence.

She arched against him, and within moments he moved onto her and took her in a rush of passion that left them even more breathless than the first time.

When he could move again, he rolled onto his back, bringing her over on top of him. "Feels so good to hold you," he told her huskily while he caressed her back and hips and thighs. "Your skin's like silk, but so soft, so warm, and your flavor..." He pulled her head down until their mouths met, and his tongue sought hers. He probed and explored in an almost leisurely manner, then slowly withdrew and said, "You taste so good, I want to keep on sampling."

"Did I ever finish telling you why I shouldn't be here?" she asked.

Grinning, he answered, "No, I don't believe you did."