

"I wish so this wouldn't happen," she said. "There was no way we were supposed to make love. Lord," she said then. "What if I had won?"

Rob laughed and rolled her over so that she was pinned under him. "We'd have gone for two out of three falls," he said, and gave her a quick, hard kiss. Then he raised his head and smiled down at her as her eyelids grew heavy. Finally he touched his lips to the tip of her nose and murmured, "I think I'm glad you don't have a wart here, after all." He pressed his lips to hers one more time, then rolled over and held her to his side while he pulled the sheet over them.

the cord
of life.

Chapter 8

Even before she was fully awake, Anne knew she wasn't in ~~her bed at Nora's. And she knew she wasn't in it alone. Then she remembered, and she smiled as she stretched her arms over her head.~~

"Do you *always* wake up like this?"

Anne's eyes flew open and she was looking into Rob's ~~only inches away and already aware with desire. Her response was immediate and astonishing. She shifted involuntarily as heat swept through her, and a ball of sensation centered between her legs. She realized that the sheet was down to her waist.~~

"I don't know what to kiss first," he murmured as he stroked her hip. Her movement beneath the sheet was instinctive, ~~and the tip of her tongue delicately over her lips was deliberate.~~

Then his mouth was on hers, devouring, while he fondled a breast, teasing the now erect nipple.

~~His uninhibited movements tented him into throwing a leg over hers, clearly revealing his own arousal. They~~
~~twisted with parried lips and seeking tongues. At length he~~
~~pulled away and kissed her breasts. Finally his hand moved~~
~~under the sheet to find her.~~

~~Instantly, Anne dug her nails into him as he tried to drag~~
~~him closer, and her movements against him were wild and~~
~~insistent. Then, with their lips pressed in another desperate~~
~~kiss, he was on top of her, parting her legs, and she opened~~
~~to him. He plunged into her, taking her higher and higher~~
~~with every thrust, until together they broke free and soared~~
~~into an ecstasy of sensation.~~

It might have been one minute or ten. Rob lay next to her; his face bowed against her back and his breath shuddered over her skin as, slowly, his breathing returned to normal.

Anne's fingers trailed through his hair to the back of his neck, lightly caressing, stroking in small circles, raising gooseflesh on his arms and legs. With a groan, he rolled onto his back and caught her hand in his. "Sweetheart, if you don't give me a few minutes, you're going to kill me," he protested with a weak laugh.

"So sorry," he murmured, leaning over and kissing his shoulder. Then she dropped back onto the pillow and closed her eyes. Spent, content, they lay together for some time longer. Then he brought her hand to his mouth and gave a kiss like a playful nip before he raised up on one elbow and looked at her. "I repeat," he said with a smile, "do you always wake up like that?"

Anne shook her head. "No, that was the first time."

"Really?" He reached over to smooth her hair off her brow, then bent to brush his lips over hers. "I'm glad I was here."

She laughed appreciatively, then asked, "What time is it?"

He twisted to look over his shoulder at the alarm clock. "A little after seven," he answered. "For the mornin' to you, darlin'."

"Only seven? Let's go back to sleep!"

He smiled and said, "Honey, I'm surprised, just to see if you wake up the same way again. But it's too late to go back to sleep now."

"Are you crazy? It's barely daylight, and—"

He cut her off with a kiss, then said, "I've got a much better idea, and he rolled on top of her to kiss her thoroughly."

"Rob," she protested, "You can't possibly be ready so soon."

"Again," he interrupted with a kiss, "and she wasn't all that far from ready herself."

But instead he swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "Come on, let's go hit the shower." Before he could object he was pulling her into the bathroom.

It was delicious to wake up next to a man, Anne admitted to herself fifteen minutes later. She admitted being mad with passion first thing in the morning, getting dragged into a shower and feeling her lover's hands all over her then being caught in slippery embraces while the spray of the shower drove hot needles of sensation into her flesh.

The pleasurable game had ended when he'd wrapped a towel around her. "Will you get the coffee on?" he volunteered. "While you slip into something comfortable. Like my robe—or the bed."

If I had any sense, I'd slip into my clothes and get out of the house, she thought as she rubbed at her arms and legs with the soft towel. But she didn't have her car and had to admit she wasn't actually that anxious to leave.

She took her time dressing, though—in the clothes she'd worn the night before. She found a comb in a drawer under the bathroom counter, and opened the seal on a spare toothbrush Rob had laid out for her.

Finally, she walked out to the kitchen, then stopped in the doorway to stare in amazement.

The room was filled with breakfast aromas—coffee, bacon sizzling in a pan, and muffins fresh from the oven and still steaming. A bowl of beaten eggs sat waiting to be poured into a skillet.

Two places were set at the table with moisture-beaded glasses of orange juice beside the plates. A small pot of jam, a stick of butter, and a slender vase holding three peach-tinted roses sat in the center.

Rob looked around and smiled. He was wearing jeans and no shirt as he had the first time she'd seen him. "Could you use some coffee?" he asked.

"About I ever." She waited until he handed her a steaming mug, then said, "Rob, it smells wonderful. But how did you manage all this so quickly?"

"Muffins only," he replied. "None of the rest took much time." He lifted his own coffee for a sip, then turned to pour the eggs. "I hope you're hungry," he said. "These'll be ready in a couple of minutes."

"Can I do anything?"

"No. Just relax."

Annie stayed in the kitchen and thought about her first visit there. "How's Blanc doing?" she asked as she approached the table.

"Fine. I'll be able to turn him loose in another day or two."

"That's good. Is he calmer now?"

"Not much. He doesn't like captivity, but he accepts the food I give him, and he tolerated my removing the sling and bandage yesterday to check his foot."

"That's some progress, I guess. These roses are lovely," she added, leaning over to smell them.

He turned to look at her, and thought of how she'd looked in bed, naked, passionate... Roses, he reminded

himself. The subject was roses. "They've grown wild with me being away so much, but they're thriving." He paused, then added, "They're a lot like your skin." He turned then, to lift the bacon to drain, while Annie stared at him with her heart in her throat.

When he picked up the basket of muffins and crossed to the table, she had regained her composure and donned the smile with which she'd grown. "I hope you're up to a little hiking this morning," he said.

Her eyebrows arched. "Hiking?"

"Yeah. You know—tramping on foot through the outdoors. It's an old custom. Predates the automobile by several decades."

"Is that far? We've got our own hiking did you have in mind?"

"Not much. No more than five miles or so."

Annie choked on her coffee and he laughed. "Maybe a little less," he reconsidered.

"I don't know," she began dubiously. "I'm not much on the great outdoors. Besides, I don't have the right clothes with me."

"We'll take a run up to town after breakfast so you can change," he offered while he gave her a speculative look.

It was apparent that he'd been planning the outing, and except for her vague uneasiness about the elements, Annie had no reason to refuse. So she nodded and gave him a weak smile. "Wonderful," she said.

Rob grinned. "Cheer up, honey," he said. "You might like it."

She met his look, caught the gleam in his eye, and countered with, "We'll see, MacKenzie. Who knows? Maybe I'll come up with some entertainment options."

At a amused expression on his face, she smiled and added, "I think your eggs are ready."

"What?" Rob looked around, then moved back to the stove to rescue them just before they crossed the line from gold to silver to charcoal.

"Are these shoes all right? I don't own any hiking boots."

Anne stood at the bottom of the stairs in Nora's front hall, and Rob's size 10 over her, amusement yielding to appreciation at the way her jeans and shirt conformed to the curves beneath them. With an effort he concentrated on the canvas footgear. "She says they're fine," he said. "You ready to go now?"

"I guess so." She sighed, tucking her purse under her arm. "If you're sure this is all I'll need." At his nod, she turned to lay a sheet of paper on the mail table. "I wrote Nora a note telling her I'm still with you," she explained, preceding him out the door.

Anne insisted on driving her own car back to Rob's. As she drove, she worked out how she'd let him talk her into the imminent hike—as well as a number of other things, she added with a wry smile.

In the truck, Rob's thoughts came close to travelling back to the wonder why she'd been so reticent about the hike, and remembered a few other remarks she'd made about "the great outdoors." Finally, he decided he had to know why. When they started out on foot a short time later, he asked, "Anne, why do you hate the outdoors so much?"

She turned to him in surprise. "I don't hate it," she denied. "I'm just a little nervous about it. I don't understand wildlife and survival skills and that sort of thing. I always expect to get eaten by a bear or something if I venture farther into the wilderness than a city park."

"There must be a reason," he said, taking her hand to help her over a patch of uneven ground. "Did you have a bad experience when you were a child?" The path evened again, and she turned to him with a startled gaze. He met it

briefly and said, "Sorry, I meant besides that. Something to do with the outdoors?"

"Well, I've been afraid of thunderstorms as long as I can remember," he admitted. "But if you mean an animal attack or a fall off a cliff or something like that, I don't think so."

"Will you take my word for it that you have nothing to fear today while you're out there?"

They had reached the stream, and he indicated a series of rocks in a crooked line across the rapid flow of water.

She eyed them uncertainly, then gave a little laugh and said, "I'm not really afraid. Just cautious."

"Good, I'm glad to hear it," he replied. "It's wise to be a little cautious. But I predict you're going to enjoy this outing."

"All right, MacKenzie, but it had better be good."

"I always keep my word," he promised.

It took the better part of an hour to reach the ridge. Rob and Anne tried to reach a vantage point on the ridge that Rob called a saddle. The climb was interesting and fun, with just a dash of alarm thrown in. It really wouldn't have surprised her to learn that he'd planned it that way.

He had a canteen of water clipped to his belt, and carried a camera slung over his shoulder, but didn't take any pictures. Now and then he stopped to sight something through the telephoto lens. Once he handed it to her, then reached around her to steady it so she could watch a hawk sketching effortless circles against the bright morning sky.

Rob pointed out things that she knew she'd have missed on her own—tiny flowers blooming in the shade of other plants, or peeping out from behind rocks or bits of rotting wood. Animal tracks and broken branches in the brush spoke to his trained eye of the passing of some woodland creature.

The one thing she spotted for herself was a long, dark snake. When she saw it, she saw the path ten yards ahead of them, she turned to Rob without hesitation and threw her arms around him. He gave her a quick squeeze, then, smiling, tried to help her toward the spot. Anne tightened her embrace and insisted, "I'm not taking another step until you can guarantee me that it's not waiting to pounce on me."

"Snakes rarely pounce," he replied, and enfolded her again, closely this time.

But when he lowered his head toward hers, Anne protested. "Rob, this is no time to get romantic. That snake could be anywhere."

At that he laughed. "How far that snake's a long way from here by now. In any case, it's just a harmless black snake, and it's as wary of us as you are of it."

"How do you know?" she challenged, and he admitted that he didn't know.

"Then what was the idea of stringing me along like that?" she demanded.

"Because I like the things you do when you get nervous." He grinned, pulling her closer.

"This is not the way to get me comfortable with the outdoors," she complained. Then with a snuffle, she met him halfway, and within moments her laughter ceased as they became involved in the kiss. It was Monty, running back to stand with his nose pressed against Anne's leg, who put an end to it.

Rob loosened his embrace when she mumbled something and reached down to pat the dog. Then Monty lifted his head to present the gift he'd brought. At Anne's scream, he backed away, stood uncertainly for a moment, then carefully laid down the limp animal he'd been holding in his mouth.

Anne looked at the unmoving creature, and after several seconds, looked back at Rob, who was watching her with amusement. "I don't see anything funny about it," she said in a tense voice. "It's dead, isn't it?"

"I shouldn't think so," he replied mildly. "Probably close to having a coronary, though."

She looked from him to Monty, both in disbelief, and asked in a hushed voice, "What is it—a possum?"

"Yes. Not full-grown yet. Monty must have sniffed it out and liked it. They're not so and about it anytime as a rule."

"Does he do this sort of thing often?" she asked, glancing at the animal in the path.

"Well, he is a retriever," Rob grinned and slipped his arm back around her waist. "And he's crazy about you. That's just a little token of his esteem."

"Great," Anne replied. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"You could tell him thank you," Rob suggested.

She studied him for a moment, decided he was serious, and looked at the dog, who still sat expectantly over his trophy. "Thanks, Monty," she said at last. "Good boy."

The dog wagged his tail profusely, then he turned his head toward the opossum, but Rob intervened. "Leave it," he ordered quietly. Monty froze, then slowly lifted his head. His tail stilled, then dropped, and he looked disappointed that Anne couldn't help smiling.

Rob waved the dog on ahead of them as they stepped around the pile of rocks. "Will it be all right there?" Anne asked, looking down at the possum. "Should we put it someplace safe?"

"No. As soon as we're gone, it'll move into the brush. One thing we don't want to do is move it. That type of possum has fifty very sharp teeth."

"These nature hikes are a laugh a minute," Anne observed dryly.

He grinned and caught her hand. "We're almost at the top now. You might get a new perspective there."

Surprisingly, he did. As Rob led her into a clearing, then helped her up to sit on a large rock, the landscape opened before them. In the distance some of the buildings of Noble's Run were visible. To the east, the river glistened through its fringe of trees. Fields green or golden with crops, and brown fields lying fallow, or like Raymond Kincaid's, being prepared for late planting, checkered the area between the town and the river.

Anne absorbed the view, struck by its utter peace. When a church bell rang faintly from a distant church, they enhanced the quiet rather than disturbed it. She sighed, and Rob put his arm around her.

It would be perfect, she thought, leaning her head on his shoulder, if this wasn't such a sham. Yet if they were alone, Rob had brought them together, tentatively by a brief experience shared in childhood, and by a threat that he didn't think she could handle alone, they'd succumbed to a basic physical attraction that might actually have been enhanced by the sense of danger.

But after that danger was past she would move on to New York and he'd be off on another trek through the wilderness. If they saw each other again, it might not be for months. That kind of thing was murder on a relationship. She wished immediately that she hadn't used the word murder, even in her thoughts.

"A penny," Rob offered quietly.

Anne straightened and turned to meet his gaze. She forced a smile and said, "Not worth it. Tell me about your travels. Where are you off to next?"

He held her arms and regarded her patiently for a few seconds, then ignoring her request, said, "Anne, I know

you're worrying about what happened to Margaret Schaeffer, and with good reason. Believe me, I've been giving it a lot of thought, too."

"I'm sorry," she said. "For just a few hours, I wanted to get away from it."

Her voice had grown wistful and her eyes troubled. Something moved in Rob, a new emotion that made him cautious. Better to stick to reason, he decided, than to go with untried feelings.

"Anne, there's a chance we'll never be able to prove anything, you know. With no body, and no evidence of foul play, it's a real skeleton. He's not likely to give it much time if he doesn't have something concrete to go on, and there's only so much you and I can do on our own."

Anne studied his face as he spoke. Was he trying to tell her he'd changed his mind about helping her? She couldn't tell, he seemed able to mask his thoughts at will. Still, if he wanted out wasn't that what she wanted, too?

"Don't worry about it, Rob. I'll handle whatever happens."

Something in her tone disturbed him. "Even living with this nightmare if nothing's resolved?" he asked carefully.

That gave her pause. It hadn't occurred to her that she might not find her answers—not since the questions had become clear. "If I have to, I suppose, I will," she said morosely.

"Honey, it may not come to that. I was only trying to prepare you for the possibility. Nobody hopes more than I do that we'll get it resolved, and soon."

She nodded, and bit her lip. "Look," she said after a moment. "Talking about it won't solve anything. Maybe after I see Blanche Howard again..." She turned to him and added, "Why don't you answer the question I asked you?"

He studied her face without speaking for several seconds, his eyes grave as he searched hers. Then he pulled her

closer and gave her a gentle, lingering kiss. "Do you really want to know about my next job?" he asked after he released her.

She nodded, looking up at him expectantly.

"Okay," he said. "It's scheduled in about a month. I'm going to be traveling in the west, shooting typical scenes around several states for display in their Interstate Welcome Centers. Desert sunsets, waterfalls, rock formations, representative wildlife—that sort of thing."

"Isn't that a little tame for you?" she asked.

"Sweetheart, most of my work is tame," he said with a laugh. "The hard part, usually, is getting there, then putting up with days of boredom, sometimes weeks of it, waiting for the right shot to come along."

"That's not the way it looks in the travelogues," she argued.

"That's because a hell of a lot of editing goes into them. But I'll have to admit that this assignment will be almost like a vacation compared to some. And I'll be driving the van, going at my own speed, which I like."

"It sounds lovely," she said as she shifted and flexed her back muscles.

"This rock getting to you?" he asked. She nodded. "Me, too," he said, standing up and extending a hand to pull her up.

They walked over the crest of the ridge to look westward. The view was of a wooded valley, with successively higher ridges in the distance. "It looks like they go on forever," Anne said. "I wonder what the first settlers thought when they saw it?"

"Probably the same thing."

For a few moments Anne tried to imagine those hardy pioneers who had braved the elements, hostile Indians, and the wildlife in pursuit of their dreams.

"The dangers were real then," she murmured. "Makes my uneasiness seem pretty foolish by comparison."

Rob brought his hands to her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Anna, it's not foolish. There are risks in everything. The trick, I think, is to understand whatever environment you're in. Find the natural one far more logical and much easier to manage than the urban scene."

Anne nodded thoughtfully, and her eyes clouded as her thoughts were drawn back to her own danger. Without warning, tears threatened and she turned away, trying to pull free of his hands, but his grip tightened.

"Hey, what's this?" he asked softly. "Anne?"

"I'm sorry," she said, ducking her head and bringing her hands up to wipe at her eyes. "Just a weak moment, I guess."

Rob pulled her against him and wrapped his arms around her. "Nothing's going to happen to you," he said. "I'm going to be with you every step of the way."

"Rob, that's not what I wa..." Not for the first time, his lips stopped her in midsentence. And, not for the first time, her thoughts scattered as his hands stroked and molded. She had wanted to forget and he offered forgetfulness. With a sigh, she gave herself to the kiss.

Minutes later, he drew away, saying in an uneven voice, "We'd better head back." He whistled for Monty, then took Anne's hand in his without waiting for the dog to appear, and led her back across the ridge to the train.

On the return trip he used the camera, and it was soon apparent that she was his subject for that day. At first she felt self-conscious, but he didn't ask her to pose. He snapped pictures when she wasn't expecting it, and only once did he stop her for a smiling close-up, simply because he couldn't bear the thought of not having one.

By the time they reached the bottom of the ridge and started across the rolling area leading back to his house, it

was past noon. "Are you hungry?" he asked when the path widened enough that he could walk beside her.

"Getting there," she replied. "I'm not used to all this exercise."

"Have any aches?" He grinned. "Because if you do, I've got this great liniment."

"Not planning on playing doctor, are you, MacKenzie?" she retorted.

He laughed loud and long. "That's the best idea I've heard all day."

At the stream that marked his property line, he lifted the camera and said, "I've only got a couple of shots left. How about letting me take them here?"

Resigned by this time, Anne agreed. "Where do you want me?" she asked.

"Anywhere along the bank will be fine. Just do whatever you'd like."

She walked down the last dozen feet of sloping land to the stepping stones they'd crossed earlier. Stopping on the first one, she shaded her eyes and looked back at him with a smile. He lifted the camera for a few seconds, then waved her on, and she turned to the next rock.

That was when Monty burst out of the woods behind them, dashed across the open space, and launched himself onto the first rock before Rob could stop him. "Monty," he called, but saw that it was already too late, and yelled, "Anne! Look out!"

She looked back, saw the retriever in midair, and made a hasty leap for the third rock. But she missed. A moment later she landed in the stream with a loud screech and a splash.

Rob rushed to the bank, ready to drop the camera and wade in, but when he saw her stand up, dripping and wearing an expression of mingled surprise and fury, he couldn't resist and snapped her picture instead. Then he tipped his

head back and roared. She looked ready to commit murder as she turned and waded toward the opposite bank.

Meanwhile, Monty had made the crossing and stood on the far side looking as though he was debating the wisdom of going in after her. "You," she promised as she took two steps closer through the swirling water, "are going to get yours." The dog wagged his tail uncertainly and backed away.

By the time Anne reached the bank, Rob was there to extend a hand and pull her up onto dry land. "You should have told me you wanted to go swimming." He grinned. "There's a better spot about a quarter mile upstream."

"Cute," she muttered in disgust. Then she looked down to survey the damage. Her shirt and jeans were plastered to her skin, water dripped from her hair into her eyes, and her sneakers squished with each step she took. "Look at me," she complained. "I'm completely soaked because of that monster, and I don't have a change of clothes with me. You and your nature hikes."

Rob looked at her, as she'd demanded, and murmured, "Déjà vu." He fought a twitch at the corner of his mouth, along with a strong tug of desire.

"You think it's funny?" she asked, incensed. "How would you like to take a long walk off a short pier, MacKenzie?" She turned away from him to stalk toward the house.

He followed, smiling broadly at the infuriated swing of her hips, and Monty plodded to one side, keeping a wary eye on Anne.

At the door she stopped, and Rob gave her an inquiring look. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I'll drip all over. Maybe I'd just better dry off out here in the sun."

He ushered her firmly through the door, insisting, "A little water won't hurt anything. Besides, you need to get out

of those wet clothes. I'll find something for you to wear while they dry."

She eyed him uncertainly, and he wisely kept his impulses to himself and regarded her with steady, inoffensive patience. Finally, she shrugged and mumbled, "All right."

A few minutes later Anne stood under the hot spray of the shower and washed the stream water out of her hair. As the last reminder of her unceremonious dunking disappeared down the drain, her anger dissolved. She began to smile as she rubbed her hair with a towel. By the time she was dry, her good humor was restored.

She slipped on a robe that smelled faintly and pleasantly of Rob's after-shave. Mixed with it was something more personal, more the aura of Rob himself. The robe encompassed her with a warmth that made her think of his arms around her. Still smiling, she lifted her wet clothes from the sink and left the room.

Rob was emptying a can of soup into a pan when Anne walked into the kitchen. He smiled at her ongoing battle with his robe. Several sizes too large, it was overlapped and tightly belted, but threatened to slip off one shoulder or the other. She'd rolled the sleeves to her elbows, but they wouldn't stay that way.

When she met his gaze, his expression sobered and he asked, "Feeling better?"

She nodded and laid the wet clothes beside the sink, then walked to the window to see that a layer of dark, angry-looking clouds had formed above the ridge and was rapidly spreading over the valley. As she watched, the first lightning forked downward out of the deep gray, and after she'd counted to six, a low rumble of thunder sounded.

"Uh-oh," she muttered. "It's not looking too promising for drying clothes out there."

"I'll get some hangers and you can hook them over the shower curtain rod," he offered.

"Thanks."

Monty was lying on his side, but he raised his head and his tail thumped tentatively as if to protect him. Anne smiled and bent to pet him while Rob left the room. "You're forgiven, Monty," she said, and the dog got to his feet to lean against her leg while she continued petting him.

She was bent over him to pet the retriever, rubbing his neck, when Rob came back. He stopped to watch from the doorway, wishing he had a camera in his hand, but the scene was recorded in his mind. And he brought with it an air of undetermined origin as he handed her the hangers.

A tangy tomato aroma greeted her when she returned to the kitchen. Rob was pouring soup into bowls. Cheese, cold cuts, buttered bread and a bottle of wine with two glasses already sat on the table. He set down the bowls and held her hand.

By unspoken agreement, they kept the conversation light and amiable during the meal. Even so, and despite her earlier claim of hunger, Anne was able to eat little of the lunch.

She insisted on doing the dishes afterward. "You cooked, so it's only fair," she argued when he told her it wasn't necessary.

"All right," he finally agreed. "I can't argue with that kind of logic. While you're doing them, I think I'll put in a little time in the darkroom."

He walked over to take her face between his hands and press his lips to hers in a lingering kiss. "See you in a little while," he said with a smile that had her pulse racing.

"May I look at some of your work when I finish here?"

"Sure," he said with a shrug. "There should be an album or two in the table at the end of the couch." Then he was gone, and a moment later she heard the darkroom door close.

A heavy downpour blew against the windows, but the flashes and thunder were only intermittent and not particularly close. Anne finished the dishes, then sat down with the photo album. She became engrossed only with the quality of Rob's work, but with the variety. By the time she'd finished, only the rain persisted.

She glanced toward the darkroom, thought briefly of knocking on the door, but glanced toward the darkroom, thought briefly of knocking on the door, but decided against it. Instead, she stretched out on the couch and listened to the patter of rain while her eyes grew heavy...

Trapped again in the past, Anne peered through the hedge. As the grisly scene unfolded before her, she saw new details of the tragedy. She wanted to run, but stood rooted to the spot, unable to move for a moment.

He had looked up as he knelt by the still form of the woman. He was not facing Anne directly, but she saw him well enough. Wide in the forehead, his face narrowed at the jaw. His eyes were dark, but she couldn't determine their color. He had heavy brows, pulled together in a fierce scowl, and his hair dark and straight, fell over his forehead.

She summoned the will to take one step back, then another. As he looked toward the hedge, she turned and ran, praying that he hadn't seen her. She didn't stop running until she was on the porch of the Beeling House, and there she paused only long enough to open the front door. She sensed pursuit, and all the way up the stairs she thought she heard heavy breathing behind her. But when she reached the top and looked around, no one was there.

"Stop him, make him stop," she cried as she ran into her father's office. The figure at the desk swiveled around. Not her father's face, but that of the man by the hedge scowled at her as she let out a scream.

"Anne, Anne."

Strong hands held hers and she struggled against them for a moment before she came awake. "It's all right," Rob soothed. "You were dreaming." He held her gently.

As she recognized her surroundings, she collapsed against his chest and clung to him while she tried to stop shaking. "Oh, Rob, it was awful." Outside, the storm had intensified while she slept. Again, rain lashed against the windows. Frequent flashes of lightning emphasized the darkness of the afternoon, and thunder rumbled, then crashed as it drew steadily nearer.

He continued to hold her, smoothing her hair back from her brow. "It was just a dream," he murmured again. "Everything's all right now."

She accepted the comfort of his arms, but the images lingered, mixing somehow with the eerie light flickering through the windows. "Oh, God," she moaned, aware for the first time that tears were streaming down her cheeks. "I'm sorry." She tried to pull away, but Rob's hold only strengthened.

"There's nothing to be sorry for." His voice was low, soothing.

A sizzling flash, brighter than the others, and an immediate explosion of sound filled her, bringing in the old childhood reaction. She gasped, then pulled her face closer and whispered something calming as he pressed his lips against her hair. His arms were warm, safe, the beat of his heart steady and reassuring beneath her ear. For a few seconds she let herself lean on his strength. He smelled of soap, but it was his own scent that seeped into her senses. It felt so good to be close to him, to feel his concern, but she made an effort to pull herself together.

Sniffing, she raised a hand to brush at the tears. "I didn't mean to go to sleep. I was waiting for you to finish up in the darkroom and I stretched out on the couch for just a minute."

She was so troubled, so vulnerable, that he was swamped with the need to protect her. "Why don't you tell me what you dreamed?" he suggested. "That might help put it in perspective."

The fact that it was the killing again didn't surprise him, but what he said next did. "Rob, I saw the killer's face clearly this time. I still don't know who he is, but there was something familiar about him. Before—when I couldn't visualize his face—I thought it might have been her father, but now I know the man was much younger. What panicked me was the idea that he might have seen me, too. If he's still around and thinks I can identify him..."

She didn't finish the thought. Now she knew the face of her enemy, if not the name. A chill ran over her with the knowledge that she did indeed have an enemy.

She shifted so that her feet were back on the floor, but Rob's arms were still curved around her shoulders, and he tightened his embrace. "Anne, I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

She gave him a grateful look, then let her head rest on his shoulder. "It might have been better all around if I'd gone straight to New York," she said. "But the damage is done now. I can't walk away from the situation a second time."

"I know, sweetheart. And I can't walk away and let you handle it alone."

"But you should, Rob. It's not too late for you to get out of it, and since it has nothing to do with you, and you—"

Her argument was stopped by his lips, and by his arms enfolding her again. This time the kiss was gentle, soothing, and it went on and on while he stroked her hair, molded her back. But even with the passion carefully banked, emotion flowed between them, and she abandoned thought and went with an instinct that told her she was exactly where she belonged.

Gently, he drew away. His expression was grave when he told her, "Darling, whatever concerns you has everything to do with me, because there's something between us that's already gone too far to stop. You know it as well as I do."

The next clap of thunder went unheeded as she met his gaze. He lowered his mouth toward hers again, until their lips were so close that only a breath separated them.

Then her eyes drifted shut, as did his, and it was touch and taste that brought each the image of the other. Her breathing quickened, heartbeats skipped and paused, and a heavy sigh rushed through Rob's lips as he tightened his embrace and felt her softness mold against him through the bulky robe. His hand slid down her back to caress the curve of a hip, then moved up again to press her closer.

"I want you so much." His voice was thick, the words muffled against her throat, and a surge of desire—urgent, overwhelming—swept through her.

She lifted her hands to caress his face. Then she moved her fingers into his hair and met his mouth with hers already open, hot and hungry. Groaning, he pressed her down onto the couch, and while he devoured her lips, his fingers untied the knot at her waist and opened the robe.