

for a moment. "Where did you go this afternoon, fellow?"

He turned the key in the ignition. "It was more than half an hour. I can't remember you ever pulling a stunt like that before."

He'd been annoyed to step out of the phone booth and discover Monty had taken off, but when the dog didn't respond to Rob's whistle, he'd felt a touch of panic. Frustration had him swearing as he moved back into the phone booth and called Nora to ask if either Anne or the dog had shown up. While he was at it, he'd called Blanche Howard's home in Groverton, as well, on the off chance she'd returned. It was four-fifteen when he finally hung up, having received no answer. Monty had still been missing, but he put the dog out of his mind to deal with the more urgent matter of Anne.

He'd tried the sheriff's office again and finally learned where Ryan was. It was when he went back to his truck to drive there that he found Monty sitting on the sidewalk waiting. He was panting heavily, as though he'd been running.

where did
you go?

Chapter 12

When they entered the sheriff's office, Blanche Howard was sitting there. Rob's heart leaped with a moment of hope as his gaze darted around the room, but Anne wasn't with her. Blanche rose, her anxious gaze flicking from Rob's face to Ryan's.

"Rob, do you know where Anne is?" she asked unsteadily.

"No," he replied. "I was hoping she was with you. Haven't you seen her?"

Before she could answer, though, the sheriff was steering them into his private office. "You're Mrs. Howard?" he asked, and after nod, he repeated Rob's question. "And how long has she been missing?"

"Not since around two o'clock," she replied. "And I'm convinced that she may be in very grave danger."

Rob's heart slammed against his ribs as Ryan invited, "Please sit down, Mrs. Howard." Lifting his phone, he buzzed the deputy. "Jim, arrange for Dr. Simon to get back to the chopper. And I'd appreciate your staying on for a

while to answer the phone. I don't want any interruptions until further notice."

The lawman replaced the receiver and turned to Blanche. "Rob's spent the better part of the afternoon trying to track Anne down. You have no idea where she is?"

She shook her head. "We were to have met again, but I had some trouble getting back."

Ryan regarded her thoughtfully for a moment, while Rob moved closer to panic at the knowledge of how long it had apparently been since anyone had seen Anne.

"Mrs. Howard," the sheriff said. "Before we get into this any further, I've got to tell you something that I'm afraid you're going to find very painful."

Blanche kept her gaze level, but tensed, sure she knew what was coming.

Ryan clasped his hands on the desk and regarded her with sympathy for a long moment before he continued. "Some remains were found today that have been identified as those of your sister, Margaret. We've just come from a meeting with Dr. Bristol who confirmed it through dental examination. I'm sorry to have to give you such news," he added gently.

"Peg's body..." Blanche's voice broke and she swallowed, then tried again. "My sister's body has been found? But, how? Where?" Unconsciously she clenched her hands together.

"On the strip of land you returned to Raymond Kincaid. He began plotting there this morning and..."

"Oh, dear God! You mean she was buried on that land? But who would...?" She looked up in anguish, then said, "I'm sorry. I just need a minute to take it in."

"Of course," Ryan murmured.

"I'm sorry," Blanche repeated. "I know we must concentrate on finding Anne. When I left her at the courthouse this afternoon, I drove to the Schaeffer offices. You see, a journal of my sister's contained several references to

a man who did some bookkeeping for my father. She distrusted him and was about to offer Father proof that he was dishonest. From something she wrote, and a description of what she'd seen, this man is a logical suspect in my sister's death. Anne was to read the journal to see if anything Peg wrote would help to clarify her own memory of—of what she saw. And I was to check the old personnel files to see if I could find some clue as to his full name."

"But you weren't successful?" Ryan asked.

"No, I wasn't." Blanche shook her head unhappily. "Peg always referred to him as Ross, or by the initials R.C. There was no such person in the records."

"You said a few minutes ago that you had a problem getting back this afternoon," Ryan stated. "What time were you to have met Anne, and just what delayed you?"

"I'd expected to be back by three-thirty at the latest. We were to meet at the courthouse again, or if Anne decided to come on ahead, I was to catch up with her here. We intended to give you whatever information we had. But I had a flat tire on the way back, and I'd never had to deal with one before. I waited for a while, hoping to flag down another motorist, but no one came by. That stretch of road isn't heavily traveled. Finally, I walked back to a couple of houses I'd passed. There was no one at either of them."

"And how long did all of this take?" Ryan inquired. "Was it far to the houses?"

"I don't know, but by the time I made the round trip, it was past three-thirty. Then I ended up changing the tire myself. It was nearly four-thirty when I reached the courthouse. Of course, I didn't expect that Anne would still be waiting, but I checked anyway, then came directly here."

Too restless to sit, Rob got to his feet and paced until Ryan stopped him with a question. "Is there a chance she might have gone out to your place, Rob?"

"No," he answered in a bleak voice. "We were at the boarding house, and Nora cut her leg. I had to rush her to

the clinic for stitches—that's why Anne went alone. I was to catch up with her as soon as I could. She knew I wouldn't go back home."

"All right," Ryan said. "I think we've got to assume that she identified the man and somehow he found out before she could act on her knowledge. The courthouse is the logical place to begin asking..." He paused to look at his watch, then shook his head. "Damn, it's already closed," he said.

Rob was pacing again. He'd never felt so helpless, nor so frightened. If anything happened to Anne... He couldn't bear the thought and pushed it away.

"Mrs. Howard," Ryan said. "We need to know everything you can remember from that journal. Did your sister give any physical description? And has Anne ever told you what she could remember of his appearance?"

Blanche quickly sketched the journal entries. While she was speaking, Rob picked up the telephone directory and turned to the yellow pages, although he missed nothing she said.

When she'd finished, the sheriff murmured, "Odd eyes, bushy brows. That's not a lot, but it's a start. Rob? Anything to add?"

"Anne mentioned heavy brows, too, and said his hair was dark, that he was a young man. But she was remembering from a child's point of view, and children have a different perspective than adults. She tried to allow for that kind of distortion."

Ryan nodded, then asked, "Did you have another idea?" He indicated the directory.

"Yeah, I was looking for accountants. Maybe Schaeffer didn't pay a full-time bookkeeper, but contracted with an independent. Is that possible, Mrs. Howard?"

Blanche looked surprised, then said, "Yes, that's a very good thought. Do anyone's initials fit?"

"No." He laid the book on the desk. "There are three whose last names begin with C, but none of them have an initial R."

Ryan had begun to frown while they were talking. "It would take too long to check licenses with all the county and state offices closed. Who else does Anne know in town?"

"There's Sylvia Mills in the Land Office," Rob said. "I tried to talk to her after I looked in the courtyard, but she was out on an errand. The women she works with said she'd left alone, though."

"But she might have seen Anne after she left the office," Ryan suggested. "If her errand took her by the courtyard, and if she didn't see that could give us a closer time fix. Rob, what time was it when you got there?"

"Probably a quarter past three."

"Let me see if I can find a listing for Miss Mills," Ryan said, picking up the directory. "Anyone else?" he added as he began turning pages.

"There's Mike Walters," Rob said. "He goes with Sylvia and works for Edmund Chambers. And she's met Chambers. Except for them I think I've checked with everybody she knows, all but Albert. I haven't talked to him today."

Ryan nodded, then said, "Here's an 'S. Mills.'" He reached for the phone, dialed, listened, then hung up. "No answer," he said.

"Try Mike's," Rob suggested. "I think they spend most of their free time together."

Within seconds, Ryan was speaking into the receiver. The conversation was brief. When he hung up, he said, "They were just leaving. He says Sylvia did see Anne this afternoon."

It was dark, musty, and Anne heard scurrying sounds around her. Her head hurt, she was emotionally drained, but she'd gone beyond error to a strange, calculating calm.

How could creatures moving through the dust, or a headache matter now? The only issue was survival.

He intends to kill me, she thought, and acknowledged that premise with the same detachment that she accepted the presence of rodents. It was a reality that couldn't be wished away.

If only he'd remove the gag. . . . If I could talk to him, get him to talk some more, she thought, maybe I could buy some time for Rob to find me. There were too many "ifs." She couldn't afford to dwell on them.

Thinking of Rob was half hope, half agony. No, don't think about him—that makes you cling to those "ifs." Concentrate on now, she told herself.

Why hasn't he already killed me? she wondered, then thought about the ride out from town. He'd talked, rambling, and though she couldn't answer, she'd listened, hoping for some insight. Know your enemy, she thought. What do I know about him? That the bland exterior hides a violent personality. That he's killed at least once, and he can't let me go because I know.

Some of what he'd said had been vague recriminations directed at her. Why had she come back? After all those years, why couldn't she have left well enough alone? And there had been something about the survey.

He'd been behind those phone calls, the author of both those ridiculous letters. He'd only meant to keep the survey for a while, he said, to use as leverage against Schaeffer. The old skinflint had him over a barrel because he was new in town, new in business, had to take what he could get. There'd been only three part-time accounts in the beginning, one of them Schaeffer's, and none paid a living wage.

Then Chambers's tone had changed, and he'd laughed. "That was for the best, though. It meant only three customers who needed to forget me. After Margaret was gone, I had to change my image in case the authorities came around."

Anne had managed to sit up in the back seat by then, hoping to attract someone's attention through the window. Chambers didn't notice, but it hadn't mattered because the road was deserted. He turned in at the Schaeffer driveway and kept talking even after the car was stopped.

"I thinned my eyebrows, lightened my hair, dropped my first name," he explained. "I became Kim Lind and promoted the new image. Told Schaeffer and the others that I'd acquired some full-time accounts and couldn't do their books any longer. The odd thing was, the new personality seemed to win people's confidence. Before long I was rolling in accounts. And Schaeffer—he never even turned in a missing person report. He believed every word I wrote in that note. I packed a couple of her suitcases while he was out, to make it look good, and that's all there was to it."

Then he noticed that Anne was sitting up. Furious, he dragged her into the house and tied her to a chair. He'd gone to hide his car in the woods, and later moved her upstairs.

She was sitting on the couch, her arms outstretched. The waiting was taking a toll on her nerves. Finally, she decided that whether or not anyone was around to hear it, she was going to make some noise. At least it might scare away the mice.

In one motion she swung her feet over the edge of the couch and brought them to the floor with a thump. She hit something soft that squealed and scampered away. Fighting a nausea brought on in part by the realization that it had been too large for a mouse, she managed to get to her feet.

Then she began to jump, with no idea where she was headed. Her goal was noise, and she accomplished that. There was a sharp exclamation from below, then footsteps pounding up the stairs. The door crashed open and a flashlight's beam zigzagged crazily around the room until it found her.

"Damn you!" The words were spat out, and followed by a spate of murderous imprecations. Finally Chambers stopped cursing and drew a ragged breath, then lifted his hand. She braced herself for a blow, but instead he waved the gag from her mouth.

"You've just given me another reason to finish you," he growled. "And you're going to pay in pain for every minute of anxiety you've caused me this week. The more you cry and yell, the more you beg for mercy, the better I'll like it."

He paused for breath, and as he did, Anne drew in one of her own and obliged him with a piercing scream. His fist caught her on the cheek, on the lower left eye and she went down with no means to break the fall.

"Go ahead, Anne, scream again," he said in a mocking voice. "It gives me more incentive. Besides, no one will hear you tonight, and by morning it'll all be over."

After his phone call with Sylvia, Ryan told Rob that he and Anne had gone to Chambers's office in a dawning suspicion of what was going on. When a commotion in the outer office drew their attention. The door opened to reveal Albert Hayes standing there with an agitated deputy hovering behind him and apologizing.

"I tried to tell Mr. Hayes you didn't want to be disturbed. Sheriff, but he says it's important."

"It's okay, Jim, thanks. Come on in, Albert," Ryan invited.

Albert squeezed into the room, and as he did, Monty got up from the corner where he'd been lying and made his way to greet him.

Rob, impatient to get on with the questioning, turned back to Ryan just as Albert exclaimed, "Well, here you are, Monty old pal!" Then, speaking to Rob, he added, "He's been on my mind ever since I saw him hightailing it after that car this afternoon, so when I saw your truck outside, I stopped in to find out if he was okay."

For a moment nobody spoke, but the tension in the room doubled.

Rob exclaimed, "I've never known Monty to chase cars. When was this?"

"It was about four. I was just coming into town when this car skinned around the corner off Potter, heading south. I nearly hit it, then Monty came running hell-bent after it. I've never known him to chase cars, either, but I swear it was him."

"Albert, did you see who was in it?" Rob asked urgently.

"Naw, I didn't, Rob, but I got a look at the car. It was a Chrysler, last year, I think, dark blue."

Rob shot a swift glance at Ryan. "Chambers has a blue Chrysler, and his office is on the corner of Potter." An expression of deadly purpose settled over Rob's features as he moved toward the door.

"Rob, wait," the sheriff said, holding up a hand.

"Damn it, Bill, that bastard — Anne!"

Chambers literally dragged Anne back to the couch. Anne clenched her teeth to keep from crying out as she landed half on and half off it.

He had turned off the flashlight, but still stood nearby. She could hear his breathing.

Tense, waiting for the next blow to fall, she tried to catch her breath. Nothing happened as the silence stretched on, and Anne felt that she was alone. "You know," he said, "I'm the only one who knows your identity. You won't get away with another killing."

He said nothing.

"There's one thing I'd like to know before you do whatever you're going to do," she continued after a few seconds. "Did you know I was there the day you killed Margaret? Did you see me through the back the way I saw you?"

He laughed, a chilling sound with an edge of madness in it. "Do you think you'd have left this town alive if I'd seen you, if I thought for a minute that you had seen what happened? No, no, my dear Miss Goodwin. The first I knew about it was when you and your friend MacKenzie were talking to Margaret's sister yesterday, out there in that storage shed. I stood behind the door and heard you describe everything. And that's when I knew I had to make good on my warnings. I might have let you off on the survey. After all, there was really no way to link me with it."

He fell abruptly silent and remained so for several seconds. Then a low, eerie laughter began, and it swelled and swelled until it was a maniacal howling that raised the hair on Anne's arms and sent a chill down her back.

As suddenly as it had begun, the terrifying sound stopped and he wailed, "Oh, Margaret. I would say yes just once, let me hold you, just once. I could have convinced you. It could have been so different, so good." Then the silence fell around them again, like a cloak, muffling even the sounds of their breathing. When he finally spoke, his voice came from somewhere behind her, making Anne aware of how easily he could slip up on her.

"They were digging out there today," he said. "You wouldn't listen, and today they were digging. The sheriff's car was there—that means they found her."

Anne's brain scrambled to make sense out of the words. Digging? Found her? What did he...? And then, suddenly, she knew. "You buried her out there!" she cried. "You buried her on that strip of land, didn't you?"

"Naturally," he said calmly, reasonably. "Naturally. It was a place that would never be touched as long as Henry Schaeffer held the deed. He didn't like farming. He only held on to his land because he didn't need the money its sale would bring, and he wanted to spite the Nobles by owning something they wanted—even that pitiful little strip that was really Kincaid's."

That pitiful little strip of land. Anne remembered how it had looked in the moonlight when she'd been there with Rob. Fleeting she remembered walking across the field with her hand in his. Then she pushed back the memory. "But my father had the survey. Didn't that worry you? Weren't you afraid he'd make it public?"

"Only at first," Chambers said. He'd moved closer, was standing beside her now. "I soon realized I had nothing to fear from him. He had the sense to take my warnings seriously."

Anne felt his finger in her hair and gave an involuntary shudder. Then he gripped a fistful and drew it up tight so that she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. In contrast to the painful grip, his voice was almost gentle when he said, "I didn't mean to kill her, you know. I just lost my temper. But then I had to do something in a hurry, and I knew as long as Henry Schaeffer was alive, that land would stay intact."

Abruptly he let go of her hair and moved away. His voice, sounding perfectly normal, next came from someplace to the left.

"I wanted you to let that damned survey go," he said. "I overheard Mike and Sylvia talking about it when they came by the office one evening. They didn't know I was there. I'd already turned off the lights to leave, and I listened from my office. It's too bad you don't scare as easily as your father did. Too bad for you, that is."

The flashlight came back on then, and Anne turned her head to watch him. He kept on talking in the same tone. "You know, I might have let you off on the survey, even though you wouldn't leave it alone. There was nothing to connect me with her death, and after all these years no one would remember that young Ross Chambers worked on Henry Schaeffer's books for a while. But when I heard you say you'd seen what happened to Margaret—well, you can see I had no choice."

He was moving around the room now, aiming the light along the floor as though searching for something. The light began to flicker and Anne thought, The battery's failing. That's why he's had it off.

While he moved about, he muttered to himself. She couldn't understand his words, but the fact that he was making noise was enough. Maybe he wouldn't hear her if she was very careful. Anne knew it would be her only advantage, and that it would only be temporary, perhaps momentary. But if time was her only weapon, she'd take every bit of it that she could get.

She lowered herself off the couch onto her knees, then stretched out and rolled, praying that she wouldn't bump into anything. She moved along the couch, keeping her feet against it. When she reached its end, she drew up her knees and managed to scoot until she'd made the turn. One more roll took her to the back, and she scooted again, until she was behind it.

Something brushed against her hair and she froze, then recognized it as a fold of fabric, a dustcover.

She had just managed to roll behind into a space created by the slope of the couch, and pulled the cover lower with her teeth to provide a screen of sorts, when she heard Chambers approaching.

He still spoke coherently. "It's time, Anne Goodwin. There's no paperweight handy, but I think this will do as well." He stopped speaking abruptly and swore. "Where are you, you..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but she heard him move across the room toward the door. He thinks I found my way out, she thought. If only I had.

A sudden scream of pain, or perhaps fury, came from the hall. Accompanying it was a ferocious growling. Anne heard somebody running up the stairs, and the sounds of a struggle. The growling continued for a few seconds, until all the

sounds of battle stopped with the thud of something, or someone, falling.

A command uttered in a gasping voice had her dizzy with relief, and a moment later something bumped against her and the material was pulled away. The voice, still winded from the struggle and tight with strain, said her name. Familiar, beloved, it was the most welcome sound she'd ever heard.

Light wept across her face, she sensed it through her closed lids. Strong arms wrapped around her, and she felt Rob's face pressed against her own, and heard her name uttered over and over, through what sounded like sobs. Then both the light and his voice faded away.

Vertical shafts of sunlight slipped around the edges of the window shades. One of them bisected the bed and fell across her face, causing Anne to stir. She heard a sound beside the bed and turned toward it. There, curled on a braided rug, lay Monty, head raised to watch her.

"Well, what are you doing here?" she asked, and wondered why her tongue was so thick. She moved stiffly to reach out to the dog, and frowned, trying to remember.

At the click of the latch, she looked toward the door, and when Rob appeared in the opening, everything came rushing back. He stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and moved quickly to the side of the bed.

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?" he asked softly when he saw that she was awake.

"I'm okay," she said. "What time is it?"

"About nine-thirty. Do you mind if I raise the shades?"

"Go ahead." It was still hard to talk, and the skin on her face felt tight. She touched her cheek, and the contact hurt. I must look awful, she thought, and winced for a moment. She didn't want Rob to see her that way.

Sunlight flooded the room, and Anne turned her head away from the windows.

"Too bright?" he asked, standing beside the bed again. "I'll pull them back partway if you'd like."

She bit her lip as tears threatened. When she didn't answer, he said, "Anne?" His voice was full of concern.

"The shades are fine," she mumbled. "I just need a minute to regroup."

She felt the mattress give as he sat carefully on its edge. "Take as long as you need," he told her, "but please look at me."

Reluctantly she turned to face him, and he took her hands in his and lifted them to his lips.

Anne stared at a purple area on his cheekbone, then asked, "Did that happen when you fought with Chambers?" At his nod she carefully touched a fingertip to the bruise. "Does it hurt much?"

"Not when you touch it," he caught her hand in his and pressed his lips to her fingertip, then raised his eyes again. "The doctor left some pain pills. You don't have to be brave," he told her.

"Doctor? Did he mean... oh, yes I do. Gray haired, fatherly? Kind of plump?"

"That's the man. Only I think he'd prefer 'portly,'" he added, smiling.

Anne gave a weak smile in return. "Portly, then." Without warning, her eyes filled again. "I guess I should have waited for you yesterday. If I had, we wouldn't be sitting here with matching shiners."

Rob ached for her as he looked at the bruises that covered almost the entire left side of her face. It tore at him to think of the terror and pain she'd experienced. If only he'd been with her, or realized sooner that it was Chambers. If he'd even arrived earlier at the Schaeffer house... But "ifs" wouldn't help, so he gave her a grave smile and said, "We can always tell people we walked into a swinging door together."

Anne began to laugh, but tears ran down her cheeks, and she stopped abruptly and cried, "Oh, I love you."

For long moments after the words were spoken they only stared at each other. It had been so easy, so natural, she'd forgotten that he was not to know. And now it was too late, she'd said the one thing most certain to distance him.

But instead of seeking distance, he bent to press his lips to hers in a tender kiss and asked, "Sweetheart, do you think you could sit up for a few minutes? I have this overwhelming need to hold you."

Her arms went around his neck, and he gathered her close. "Can you hear it?" he asked, his lips to her ear.

Could she deny it now? she wondered. Would it keep him with her a little longer—days, hours—if she did?

"Yes," she breathed. "I want it."

His arms tightened, and his voice was barely recognizable when he said, "Do you have any idea how that makes me feel? How wonderful, how grateful. Anne, I love you so much. I wish I could tell you how much I love you... When he couldn't speak at all, could only press her to his heart.

Loved her? Surely not, if she'd heard it or only wanted it so badly that she'd imagined it. Anne could only cling for a moment while her heart thudded painfully.

Then, as they drew apart and looked at each other, he smiled gravely and said, "It's supposed to make you happy when a man tells you he loves you—especially if you've just told him the same thing."

"It takes a minute. Some things hit the brain more slowly than others."

"You mean daily bad news travels fast?"

"Yes, something like that. Rob—is it really true?"

"Oh, yes," he said softly, "it's true. I love you, Anne." He put his arms around her again, tightly, and his lips on hers. Emotion flowed between them, deep, poignant. "Sweetheart, I'm so sorry you were hurt," he said unevenly.

"Darling, don't. Maybe it had to happen the way it did. I'm just glad it's finally over."

"So am I."

It was some time before Anne thought to ask, "Rob, how's Nora? Everything about last night is so hard, but I remember seeing her downstairs when you brought me in. Is her leg all right?"

"It's doing pretty well. She's been hobbling around this morning, and she's in good spirits overall. Worried about you, though."

"I'd better go now and see her. But she made no attempt to move out of his arms."

"In a little while," he agreed, and kissed her again. When he finally released her, he took her hands in his and simply looked at her.

Anne's heart did some acrobatics, and when the dog ambled over to rest his head on the bed she pulled one hand free to pet him. "Did Monty spend the night in here?"

"Yeah. Nora wouldn't let me," he added with a rueful grin. "She made me sleep on that damned, lumpy couch."

"I don't think I'd have been very good company, anyway. I was dead to the world. I don't even remember coming to bed. How long did I sleep?"

"About twelve hours. You needed it."

"I don't suppose you got anywhere near that couch," she remarked, shifting to prop a pillow behind her back.

"I had enough." He reached behind her to slide a second pillow in place. "Do you want to rest some more?"

"No. I'm wide awake now. Rob, tell me what happened last night. I remember hearing growling. That was Monty, of course. And there were sounds of a fight, then your voice. I don't remember much else."

"That's because you passed out. And gave me the scare of my life till I realized you were still breathing. It was so dark, and with all the commotion of everyone arriving, I wasn't sure for a minute. But Monty was first on the scene,

and had Chambers in hand by the time I got there. And he wouldn't let you out of his sight, even after we got back here, so I let him stay when I went back downstairs. Did he bother you?"

"No. I didn't even know he was here till I woke up."

A knock at the door interrupted, but before Rob could get up to answer it, Dan Ryan walked in.

"How's the patient?" he asked with a smile for Anne.

"Much better than I look."

He studied her face, then said, "Aw, those bruises'll be gone in no time. Do you feel up to a little talk?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good," he said. "Somebody said, 'Confession is good for the soul,' and our friend Chambers is taking it seriously. But I'd like to know what he may have told you yesterday, for the sake of comparison."

Anne nodded and said, "Well, make yourself comfortable, Sheriff. This could take a while."

"You mean to tell me Joel had actually driven into that awful driveway with Debbie to make out? It wasn't even dark yet, was it?"

Rob smiled at Anne's shocked look. "Darling, you'd better be glad they didn't wait for nightfall, because if they hadn't been there and heard your scream, yesterday's outcome might have been a lot different." Unthinkable, he added silently.

"I know," she agreed thoughtfully. "So," she said after a moment, "he called the sheriff to report what they'd heard?"

"That's right. The call came in just after we'd left for Chambers's office, but Albert stayed behind and saw the message, so he hustled it over to us."

Anne thought about the sequence of events that had led to her rescue and Chambers's arrest. She'd had a string of

visitors at Nora's until midafternoon, each adding to the picture until it was complete.

Now she and Rob sat on the end of the deck that he and Albert had finished flooring that afternoon, directly on the boards for want of suitable furniture. Anne sighed and settled a little more cozily against his side.

"Just think," she said, "when I came to town it was only to right an old wrong over a small strip of land, and to clarify those hazy memories. And all Edmund Chambers wanted, until he knew I'd witnessed the murder, was for me to leave the survey alone so the land would remain undisturbed."

"Mmm-hmm," Rob murmured as he shifted, pulling her closer.

Anne let her head rest on his shoulder. How well it fit there, she thought contentedly. "And, who'd have suspected that a quiet little town like Noble's Run would harbor an urban horror like murder?" she continued after a minute.

The sun was poised to drop out of sight, and the western sky was lavish with red and gold that played over the remaining cloud surfaces. A month earlier there had been a shower, a quiet, cleansing rain with none of the violence of the previous week's weather.

"I would," Rob replied. "That's why I go off on photo expeditions so much of the time. It's too dangerous to stay here all year round."

Anne raised her head to look at his eyes in the fading light. "Oh, is that a fact?" she asked as she detected the gleam of humor.

"Absolutely. And if you're wise, you'll do the same thing."

"Not stay here all year, you mean?" She smiled.

"Yes—and go off on photo expeditions."

"But, I'm not a photographer," she pointed out. "What would I use for justification?"

"Hmm," he mused. "You have a point. Maybe you could carry equipment," he suggested after a moment.

"Sounds too heavy," she objected. "Think of something else."

"Okay. How about posing with the wildlife? That should be right up your alley."

She laughed and punched his arm.

With an exaggerated sigh, he tipped his head back and said, "All right, all right, let me see. Well, there's one other possibility. Of course, it's a fairly novel concept, but I hear it's catching on. Why don't you marry a photographer? That way you could—"

"I thought you'd never ask," she interrupted softly, and her arms went around his neck. "I accept."

Rob's lips found hers as the sun slipped behind the ridge, and Monty's tail began a rhythmic thumping against the floorboards of the deck where he lay ten feet away, curled in a golden arc.

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