

Lorna's Route

Chapter Two

Discovering

Lorna's gaze ricocheted in accusing astonishment from the crying bundle to the old man, only to be met by a determined stare while he crossed his arms in front of his thin chest, daring her to complain. His stare fell to the infant with the implication that Lorna had an assignment and she'd better start working on it.

The frenzied wail in the trembling blanket retrieved Lorna's attention. She was familiar with wiles of babies, although the three of her own were long gone from the cradle. The little bundle was hot and sticky. She unwound the offending blanket and dropped it on a nearby chair. Pressing the infant against her shoulder, she slipped her cool hand under the warm shirt and patted its sweaty back, while crooning meaningless words of comfort.

The crying turned to a snuffle. The silence was startling. The old man's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. His hands fell to his side and he stared at the quieted infant.

"I assume you're Bill. I'm Lorna Bannon," she explained to the gaping old man. "I had the only car around when you called so I brought Mr Woodall out." Her eyes swung and her head nodded toward the car.

The old man's shock turned to annoyance when she carefully extended the quiet baby to him, explaining, "Wipe the sweat off the top and dry the bottom and this baby will be much happier." The infant was fighting hot discomfort, a condition that she already remedied.

As if sensing the old man's dislike of the prospect, the baby's snuffles gathered steam for another wailing session.

"I ain't no wet nurse," he said, backing off with his open hands upraised.

"Well, I'm not either," Lorna stated firmly, "but some things have to be done. Where's a diaper?" Lorna was directed down the hallway.

Bill ushered her into a nursery equipped with every modern convenience for infant care. He shuffled along, scratching his unkempt white hair until it stuck out in every direction with thoughts flying in as many directions. He

praised Rip for showing up at the right time. Rip always was efficient at solving problems but where did he find a nursemaid so quickly just when they needed special baby care? Bill could take care of the toddler, Sarah. When she woke from her nap he could help her dress and get her lunch because she was nearly five years old, but he was afraid to handle little Bud.

Bill's arthritis bothered him more than ever lately. Lucky for him he was assured of a place on this ranch as long as he lived. He had done his duty as much as the next person in WWII, the BIG one, the world war that was going to end all world wars. The shrapnel could not be removed from his back near his spine and the cussed bits nagged at him in reminder. But he owed the folks here and would tough it out to the end. Keeping tabs on little Sarah was all he could do now, but he rode herd on her when Barb was out working with the hands. Doing for little Bud was beyond his physical abilities.

The old man watched Lorna look over the supplies and nod her approval before laying the baby down on the change table. He stood by, sucking speculatively on his front teeth, the only ones he had left. This Lorna's good, he thought. It was lucky that Rip came at the right time with this woman to care for Barb's baby.

The kicking infant claimed Lorna's full attention. She wasn't deterred by the tiny flailing arms and legs. His fussing wasn't over. When she removed the soggy diaper and revealed his red bottom, she understood the depth of the baby's distress. The rash needed more than a dry diaper and she must find something to sooth it.

"He's got to be washed." Lorna shook her head. Almost anything she would use to wipe the tender skin might irritate it more so she looked around for a place to bathe his bottom. "Where's a bathroom?"

Lorna filled the shell shaped sink with lukewarm water and held the infant just above the surface, splashing the soothing water over his crotch and rinsing the creases of his scrotum, penis, legs and buttocks. After carefully patting him dry, she applied petroleum jelly over the red area.

She filled her palm with powder and reached under the tiny shirt to spread the soothing stuff across its chest, then turned the infant gently and spread powder across its back. The lively baby cooed and kicked with contented joy. She fastened the clean diaper and put him in the crib. She was still for a moment in silent wonder.

Bill sighed in relief as if he had been responsible for the baby's comfort himself.

Lorna wasn't going to pick up the curling infant that now lay playing with its toes. She hadn't understood why Bill had so adamantly thrust the baby into her care and she did what had to be done but she wasn't going to assume continued care of that cute bundle.

Thoughts of the baby's mother came to mind, and the length of time the injured woman would be in the hospital. Lorna arranged a hanging mobile so the baby's flailing hands hit the rattling bears. He kicked wildly and blinked with surprise as the colorful figures gyrated above him. With all that energy expended, the baby was going to need nourishment. Before Lorna questioned Bill about feeding the baby she had to smile at the old man's obsession with the baby's comfort.

Bill stiffened and closed his mouth when he realized Lorna caught him staring at the contented baby.

"Is there a bottle? Do you know how to feed him?"

"I'll show yah where they are," he stammered, "but I never fed him." He shuffled with a slight limp into the kitchen and opened a cabinet where bottles and infant formula were neatly lined on an upper shelf.

Lorna read the directions for mixing on the side of the nearest container, thinking how some things hadn't changed in the six years since her grandchildren needed formula. If the baby complained again it would be because he was hungry. He appeared sturdy and healthy and she might as well have a bottle ready. She busied herself with the task, worrying if doing this was the right thing. She was unaware that Bill had left the kitchen until she heard the deep rumble of Rip's voice. She strained to hear what was being said.

"I offered her money for gas but she refused it." Rip's voice held a husky edge, angrily directed toward the kitchen. "I thought she'd leave. I didn't hire her to take care of Bud."

Bill wheezed, "Well I can't. Are yah gonna do it?"

The ensuing silence was deafening. There was an intervening grump that must have come from deep in Rip's throat.

Lorna almost lost count of the measures of formula she was mixing. Bill thought she was a nurse but Rip knew different. She could walk out of here with no hesitation. They would just have to find somebody else. There must be some compassionate person in the community that could care for the baby. But in the hours since the accident no one was found to do the job.

Lorna wished she had not gotten out of her car. She strained to hear the conversation in the kitchen.

Bill's wheezing whisper broke the silence. "She's awful good. I think yah better talk her into it."

Lorna was not going to involve herself with this nest of strangers. So why did her heartbeat pound a repudiation in her ears? She walked with deliberate steps toward the nursery. She felt Rip's advance rather than heard his uncertain footsteps. Even with her back to him she sensed his hesitation. For a moment she thought he'd stopped, waiting for her to turn around. Her

own steps slowed under the pretense of testing the temperature of the baby's bottle on her inner wrist. Her nape chafed as if being studied was a physical irritation.

Why didn't he say something?

Why didn't she turn to face him?

She was annoyed that Bill mistook her for a nurse when she first came. Lorna experienced a niggling of regret at the thought of refusing to let Rip talk her into playing nurse. For some incomprehensible reason she was annoyed at Rip's scorn. For some equally incomprehensible reason she wanted to challenge him.

The challenge itself would prolong her association with him. He aroused a childish daring within her, feelings exciting and provocative. And they were comforting, too. He was coming closer and her heart beat with maddening irregularity. The anticipation encompassed her like a blanket, a warming blanket that prickled even as it soothed.

What a crazy reaction to a complete stranger!

The thought startled her back to reality. She'd give the baby its bottle and get out of here.

When Rip stalked into the kitchen to confront Lorna, it was her retreating figure he encountered. Her back was straight, her shoulders square and substantial. Her yellow suit radiated the hallway with pleasant sunshine that couldn't otherwise penetrate this windowless area and he basked in that sun without regard to what his next words would be.

Mutely, he followed her into the nursery. She bent over the crib and pushed aside the mobile figures, extending the bottle. The baby took the nipple and sucked eagerly. His coordination was not precise enough to hold the bottle for himself so she tucked a blanket around it to hold it in place against him. Only then did she turn to face Rip.

His hands and face were free of surface dust, otherwise he was the same unkempt figure she'd brought to the ranch. The set of his shoulders held a strength of resolve. There was a quiet authority about him she found exciting and her stomach lurched at the emotional overtones.

Oh, come on, she scolded herself, sixty year old women don't get titillating thoughts about men.

Oh, no? Why then did her stomach do a tiny flip that sent erotic sensations through her?

She was a realist. Her hormones were playing tricks. Get yourself under control. She put on a mask of friendly disinterest.

The blue of Rip's eyes turned a steely gray, narrowing with accusation. The subject was not what she expected.

"Well, have you seen enough to know we're quite civilized?"

She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of responding to his cutting remark. The real issue was the baby.

"I fixed the baby's lunch," she said, her friendliness fading. She wouldn't be a standing target for his unwarranted hostility.

He was perplexed that she avoided his question and hesitated. In his surprise, he held his tongue, and she continued.

"Bill needed a little help but now I'll be on my way."

The baby began to fuss, little dispirited cries. The bottle slipped and his inexperienced hands thrust at the nipple, dribbling the warm fluid down his cheek, frustrating his searching lips even more. He snuffled with increasing anxiety. Lorna flashed a look beyond Rip's dusty shirt imploring Bill's assistance.

No way was Bill going to volunteer to help. He stood beyond her sight, rooted to the spot in the living room where he urged Rip to keep that woman for Bud's nurse. He couldn't expect any help if Lorna left, in spite of Rip's promises. Rip always found important things to escape to at his convenience. As far as Bill was concerned, Lorna was there to take care of Bud and that suited him just fine.

He heard the baby's cry. Silently, Bill goaded Bud to fuss good and loud so Rip would have to take over. Or better yet, so Rip would talk Lorna into staying. Bill held his breath and sneaked out the front door.

Lorna tried again to tuck the bottle into the blanket folds against Bud's excited jerky gasps and realized the futility of it. He was too uncoordinated to hold his own bottle and too hungry and enthusiastic to let it remain passively beside him. He had to be held, that's all there was to it.

"Are you going to hold him so he can eat?" she asked.

Rip grasped the implication immediately, rearing back with indignation, eyeing her warily as she tenderly picked Bud up. She turned, intending to hand the baby off to him, but she grimaced at the sight of Rip's dirty clothes and lowered herself resolutely into the rocker. She tucked Bud into the crook of her arm and raised her critical eyes to Rip.

"Your shirt's too dirty. Hand me the bottle." Her tone was not pleasant.

"Please." Her manner was polite. The green of her eyes hardened and the request was an outright demand.

Rip retrieved the bottle from the crib and handed it to Lorna. Her wide competent hand turned the nipple toward Bud's mouth and she settled back, holding the baby firmly against her corn yellow jacket. Rip couldn't drag himself away.

Why didn't he take the baby and feed it? He told Bill they could handle the baby. He'd seen Ted Danson and Burt Reynolds do well enough in a movie

and thought he could help Bill do the same. After all, Bill had been around the infant since it was born. For that matter Bill had been around since Sarah was born. Where was the little girl anyway? She had to be considered, too. A dozen scenes to address the problem went through his mind. All the alternatives eliminated Lorna. He searched for one that didn't.

In not one of Rip's thoughts did he dismiss the woman who gently rocked the baby. She was a perfect picture of competency. He pursed his lips in search of expression but words failed him. She couldn't be expected to fill the role that Barb's accident created. He had to send her away from here. The words to do so did not come.

Sweat beaded under his collar and the dust around it made him itch. He set his chin to hide his discomfort. He couldn't make her stay, yet she had stepped in willingly to help when Bill really needed her. He shouldn't ask her to stay. He didn't understand his ambivalence but it was there. He didn't want her here and he didn't want her to leave. Why the hell not? His fingers clenched and relaxed, the only outward sign of his dilemma.

"Is Barb going to be all right? Have you heard?" Lorna narrowed her eyes at Rip, smug at his discomfort. She expected more gruff verbal abuse but he was floundering about for words.

"Len says she's still in the operating room. Her leg was badly torn and it's taking time to repair. He won't leave until she's out of surgery and her condition stabilized." He blinked and dropped his gaze, thinking the full details were of no concern to her, but before Lorna could more than gasp a comforting phrase, he continued, "Her arm was injured, too. It'll be a long time before she'll heal completely."

"I'm sorry about that," Lorna murmured. The baby stirred and she thrust the bottle out to Rip, which he grasped instinctively, watching her tuck the infant upright against her shoulder. She rocked with deliberate sweeping movements, pressing her gentle hand across his back until he released a whopping belch.

"How did you know to do that?" Rip asked, genuinely impressed.

"It's the same thing you expect after a hurried meal, only this little guy doesn't have the experience or the muscles to do the job himself so I just let the law of physics do it for him," she said, reaching for the bottle after cradling Bud again in the crook of her arm. The baby returned to the serious business of withdrawing the remaining formula from the bottle.

Rip removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair as he did when he made unfortunate decisions. He had no right to ask her a favor. She gave him a ride to the ranch because he asked, expecting to receive neighborly favors. Now he wished he had not brought her here at all. Yet it was fortuitous that she was the one to drive him to the farm. Who else could have

taken over the baby's welfare as easily as Lorna? He felt oddly apprehensive and strangely comforted at the thought.

"Bill thinks I brought you here to take care of Bud, you know."

"I got that impression when he pushed this howling little bundle into my arms," Lorna nodded, her eyes flashing to him with boldness, "but I heard you correct him."

Rip fumed inwardly. Damn, why isn't she timid and docile like a woman should be? Here was a challenge like he never before faced. Not in any of his business dealings. She isn't going to do any more than she already has, he thought. He fumbled with his hands and stalked from the window to the crib.

"I don't have any authority over the Pederson kids but," he came back to face Lorna, "it would be a neighborly favor if you'd look after Bud tonight. Len and Barb aren't in a position to decide what to do."

"A neighborly favor? These folks don't even know me. How can you turn their baby over to a complete stranger? What's wrong with your neighborly favor extending to some real neighbors?" At least he didn't ask a personal favor.

The front door opened at that moment with a swoosh that rattled the blinds on the nursery windows. Bill's voice was loud as he prattled to someone with him. Curiosity gave Rip an excuse to retreat from Lorna's rebuke to go find out who it was.

A woman's sharp voice cut the air. "Rip, how good to have you back! I just knew the Pederson's would need help. I brought dinner."

Dishes rattled, cupboard doors slammed and the refrigerator shelves clanked as dishes were put in various places. Lorna couldn't tell what was said but low wary words were interspersed with the high pitched tone of an excited woman, ingratiating and sweet.

Then Rip's voice became clear, "Lorna Bannon is taking care of the baby until things get sorted out." The changing source of his voice indicated he was returning to the nursery.

Bill raised his voice as if to warn Lorna of an enemy's approach, "We're mighty grateful for the food, Mizz Lewis."

The woman must be coming, too, Lorna thought. Bill was cowardly staying behind in the kitchen.

Thudding footsteps told Lorna the curious sharp tongued woman was being led to the nursery. Why did her presence have to be verified? Who was this woman to deserve instant explanations? A familiar neighbor, that's who. Why did Rip tell her that Lorna was going to take care of the baby until Len sorted things out? Lorna hadn't said she would. The baby was asleep and Lorna rose to lay him in the crib. She held the empty bottle in her hand and slowly turned.

Lorna was confronted by a commanding ornate figure, almost a straight cylinder from shoulders to the hem of her dress. Her height matched Rip's but the contrast of his grubbiness to her tidiness was startling. Her big boned figure was meticulous and proper in an expensive silk dress of dusty rose.

Lorna was stunned as she compared herself to the reproachful woman. If Lorna had known of Rip's assessment of her as a cob of corn, she would have concurred. As it was, Lorna felt like a dandelion beside an elegant rose, complete with thorns. The woman's hostility showed through every inch of artfully applied makeup. The picture of composure was haughty but gracious.

Rip's attention was on Lorna's bright clean figure and he glanced at the crib. Then he deftly managed the introduction of Dorothy Lewis to Lorna with a quiet level voice, aware of the sleeping baby.

Dorothy showed no such awareness when she demanded, "Where did you come from? I haven't seen you around before." The loud sharp response struck the air between them as if it was chopping ice.

Bud woke with a start at the sound and screamed as if he'd been stabbed with the ice pick. He kicked with a fury and his fists pounded the air in defense. Lorna placed an outspread hand on his stomach and gently rubbed it, but that didn't appease him. From awakened insight Lorna knew a clean diaper was in order. She hid her smile and let the baby wail. His outburst was a more effective rebuff than any response Lorna could have made to the unwarranted attack by Dorothy Lewis.

Rip herded Dorothy out of the room, aware they couldn't carry on any conversation over the crying. Lorna didn't think he apologized to the sharp-tongued woman but what else was new? She cradled the infant against her shoulder for momentary comfort. Then she bent to the task of another change using the last diaper in the pack.

Rip's lips were thin and hard as he shut the door behind the indignant widow. He tried to be civil to her because of the neighbor that she was and the close relationship they shared, but gave up when she turned a nasty side to Lorna. Dorothy would have been the logical woman to help Barb. She was unencumbered with husband or family. She was a good cook although she didn't do the cooking for her farm hands.

Then it occurred to him that Dorothy hadn't shown the least concern about the fussing baby, and, beyond the food which was a convenient reason for her visit, not the least interest in being a helpful neighbor. At the recollection of Lorna's dignity in the face of Dorothy's hostility, the corners of his mouth turned up gently. She exercised restraint and pride in unruffled composure at the unwarranted antagonism heaped upon her.

He hoped Lorna wasn't angry. He didn't pretend he was only concerned for the baby. Of first importance was to help Len and Barb the only way he

could at the moment. He looked toward the silent nursery and went quietly to see if Lorna would accept his apology. She was bent over the crib in total concentration. A surging tenderness shot through him and reverberated through his groin. Why? What was it about this city woman that revitalized the energy to his hibernating glands and shifted them into overdrive?

In all the months of association with Dorothy that had never happened. She made it clear to him she wanted to be his wife but there was no such chemical explosion at the sight of her. He would have tried her out in bed but she warned him that couldn't happen without the sanctity of marriage.

He left his ranch last year to isolate himself from the community assumption of their union. He came back thinking he might marry her. Now he suspected that would never happen. He couldn't help but compare the two women. Alongside Lorna, Dorothy wasn't all that likeable, let alone the picture of a wife. No matter how solicitous she was, Dorothy never filled his picture of a lover, either. She was his picture of a woman who wanted to be taken care of, although he knew she was far from helpless. She reminded him of a marshmallow, white and puffy, stuffed into expensive clothes and colorful makeup. He never before heard her tongue so sharp. He did not see her outburst for the jealousy it was.

He watched Lorna remove a light blanket from the shelf and make a cocoon around the infant. He simply stood and watched. Here stood a city woman, darkly tanned, strong willed, and uppity. His first thought was to get her out of here. He suspected she was all too eager to go.

Lorna was vaguely aware of the cease in conversation in the living room and, after the sound of a closing door, wary at the ominous silence. Was she going to confront Rip with the fact that she had not agreed to stay? Or was she simply going to let it happen? She wasn't compelled to hurry out to her car to get away.

She caressed the infant, turned him on his tummy and tucked the light flannel blanket snugly around his back. He wiggled with contentment, cooing quietly, falling asleep in complete comfort. When she straightened and turned to leave she nearly bumped into Rip's solid length.

She jumped with a startled gasp, her hands coming up outspread to rest against his chest. His hands steadied her by the elbows to prevent her falling back against the crib. She looked up at him wide-eyed.

"You concentrate real hard on one thing at a time, you know that?" he challenged lightly in a husky voice, "I didn't mean to scare you, I didn't want to start him crying again."

Rip's features were softened with genuine regret, his gaze open to forgiveness. It dawned on Lorna that he thought Dorothy's loud voice had prompted the baby's outcry and she smiled, thoughtfully studying the buttons

struggling to hold the faded shirt across his masculine chest, warm and solid under her outspread hands.

That hard male surface felt so good. She'd been a long time without a man's embrace. Memories stirred of the pleasures a masculine body could inspire. She dropped her eyelids to mask the elation his contact brought. She would set him straight about babies and noises after she indulged in the pleasure of his hard sinewy arms on hers. It was almost an embrace.

"Bud yelled because gas pained him," she admitted. She leaned slightly toward him, sliding her palms over his pectoral muscles, contacting the hard tiny pebbles of masculine nipples. She felt the catch of his breath that made her own heart race.

Time went unnoticed while she languished in the pleasure of his nearness, holding her indrawn breath to allow an imprint of the precious feeling on her consciousness. It was worth appending to the impressions of the recent discord in her existence.

Was this what she was seeking? Was this what her life was lacking? With a push and a backward glance she indicated he would have to step back to release her because for her to retreat from him would jostle the crib. She did not press the issue. She was in no hurry to break contact.

"I couldn't have asked him to holler at a more opportune time," she added, "I'm sorry if that spoiled your plan."

Rip's chin dropped. His jaw was leathery under the bristle of beard, weather baked and sun warmed from years in the outdoors. A scowl formed between his deep set eyes.

"What plan?" he asked, his blue eyes glaring, yet responding to her implied nearness to the crib by turning her aside and pulling her away. He did not loosen his hold, he actually tightened his grip, a hard demanding grip, on her arms.

Lorna was so distracted by a tingling awareness of his hands, she didn't try to accuse him of some devious motive for bringing Dorothy into the nursery. Her line of reasoning evaporated under his searing touch. She enjoyed the exciting sensations his hands sent racing through her body.

"I didn't have a plan," he insisted, his gaze capturing hers with steely intensity. He wanted to refute the skepticism he saw in her eyes. He wanted to shake her but she did not challenge him. She remained openly receptive to his answer. Both stood in awesome wonder at the undercurrent leaping across the narrow space between them, neither understanding nor refuting the electricity that fused their minds for a shocking moment.

They stood locked in mutual awe with an erotic energy binding them in sizzling expectation. Rip never felt such a forceful attraction to a woman before and he lost his breath as if he'd been punched in the midsection.

He surveyed the depths of her soul and her searching gaze returned the exciting exploration.

Lorna trembled under his grasp, pulling away when he gripped her tighter. She rubbed her arms where his fingers had been, but she couldn't take her eyes away from his. She was after all, old. What man could love her? Her green eyes were bright with the question.

As if he shared her sudden insight, a touch of terror flashed across his eyes, triggering his body into action and he bolted away.

Had he read her thoughts?

Two seconds later the outer door slammed leaving Lorna stunned, her mouth open in disbelief. Two seconds after that, Bill came limping in, his splitting grin dissolving on his face as he stopped to stare at Lorna's stunned appearance.

"Well, yer staying ain't yah?" he asked, his features taking on a desperate expression, showing worry over her answer. His chin worked up and down convulsively.

"Rip said yah was b'fore he tore out. Why'd yah tie a can to his tail? What'd yah say to him anyway?" He peered into Lorna's puzzled face when she offered no answer.

"Well, don't matter. Pedersons need yah."

Bill's eyes brightened as they slid beyond Lorna and she turned to see a thin little girl rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her disheveled hair was the color of wheat and her worn jeans were torn at the knees, her grubby toes peeked out from under frayed cuffs.

"What's a matter, Uncle Bill?" she asked. Her blue eyes took in Lorna at a glance before she aimed herself at the old man, who stooped to receive her rushing body in his arms as he fell back under her pressing weight into the armless chair. She struggled to turn for a safer view of Lorna from Bill's arms.

"Who're you?" she asked of Lorna, but she looked into Bill's face with a more pressing question: "Is Mama back?"

"Not yet, Sarah, m'girl, but yer Daddy'll be here soon. I think yah ought to say 'Hello' to Mizz Lorna Bannon. Lorna, this is Sarah, the Pederson's four year old daughter."

"Five, Uncle Bill, I'm 'most five, 'member?" Sarah admonished, putting her palm impatiently against the old man's cheek to force his agreement.

Lorna smiled at the friendship shared by the bright little girl and the wizened old man. He held the child's trust completely.

"I'll remember that, Sarah," Lorna said, "I'm pleased to meet you." She stooped down to Sarah's level when greeting her.

"Hi." Sarah said, politely, pressing back against Bill. "When's Mama coming back from town?"

Lorna stood up, wondering what the child knew about the accident.

"Well, Sarah, m'girl, Mama'll stay in town tonight, but like I said, yer Daddy'll tell yah all about it."

Sarah's questions didn't end but Bill answered each one with patience, evading the truth of Barb's accident. Lorna guessed Bill did not know the best way to describe the tragedy.

Lorna searched the cupboard for cookies and held an opened package of Oreo's out to Sarah, asking, "Do you like milk with your cookies?"

Bill flashed a look of relief at Lorna. By golly, he thought, that pert city gal is perceptive. He couldn't give the right answers to the child and appreciated the diversion.

It was quite some time before the diversion wore off. Bill made coffee, slowly, deliberately, so Lorna could see how to do it for herself next time. Oh, he expected there to be lots of next times. He had a feeling--a deep bone crunching feeling--she just might become a fixture around here.

If that put a knot in Rip's tail, that was just too bad. He could stay over in his own place. He usually did anyway--if he was here at all. It was up to Bill to keep an eye on Sarah every time mother Barb turned into a needed ranch hand.

Bill answered yet another phone call. Lorna was somewhat surprised at the quick response of sympathy by the neighbors to the Pederson accident. If something equally terrible happened to her in town it would be days before her friends and acquaintances would hear of it and call. Yet no one came to care for Bud.

"No, Len, I ain't," Bill was saying, "Rip brought a gal back with him to do the job." He made a face and held the receiver away from his ear. He was a tad hard of hearing but Len had no call to shout. Sarah looked at Bill when she heard her dad's name.

"It ain't like that, Len. There ain't nothin' between them two. This gal knows what she's doin'. Bud's sleeping just fine." Bill waited through another tirade.

"She's younger than Rip for sure, Len. I take it Barb's not so good." Bill scowled at the report he'd been anxious to hear.

"Well, stay with her. Rip 'n me will see to things here." Bill's gaze settled on Sarah during the silence.

"No, I tol 'er yah'd be here soon. Yah better talk to her." He propelled the receiver toward the little girl. "Sarah, m'girl, yer Daddy's on the phone."

The nearly five year old child very maturely held the receiver to her head. The distance from her ear to her mouth was shorter than the parts on the receiver but she knew how to move it to hear and talk.

"Hi, Daddy, where's Mama?...Yes, Daddy...No, Daddy...I want Mama

home...Yes, Daddy...Yes, Daddy...Yes, Daddy...All right, I will." She hung up the phone. "He says he talked to Uncle Rip already." She went thoughtfully back to her cookies and milk.

Lorna was no psychologist but she was certain Sarah was aware that something awful was being kept from her. Lorna didn't like it but she couldn't interfere. She didn't know the right thing to say anyway. Apparently Barb's life wasn't threatened by her injury so Sarah did not face more than a short separation from her parents. Meanwhile what was Lorna to do? She had taken on a temporary task and there was at least one phone call to make.

"Mary, I'm not going to come home tonight. I found a place in the Palouse hills to stay. I didn't want you to worry. Will you call Peter for me later this evening?" Lorna and her neighbor kept close watch on each other. It was the old buddy system they'd used since they lost their husbands.

"No, it's not an ordinary Bed and Breakfast but it's nice. I'll be home some time tomorrow."

Maybe to pick up some clothes, she thought, but not to stay.