

## Lorna's Route

### Chapter One Roaming

"Oh, no!" Lorna Bannon moaned, "I'm almost out of gas!" The feisty widow hit the brakes, staring at the gas gage resting on E. "E" as in Empteeeee.

"How could I be so careless?" she complained, craning her neck to search the endless hills for help. She had been distracted, not paying attention to where she was or how many miles she traveled. It wasn't the first time since she finished her volunteer work that she found herself preoccupied with a mysterious ambience, a desire to wander, a longing that eluded description.

She touched the accelerator gently, moving her car ahead slowly, alert for a hint of gas pumps. Never did she let the needle get down to the empty mark before and she was not a casual driver. She lamented with an unbelieving shake of her head that the first time might occur in the middle of barren rolling hills.

A knot pulled at her stomach. She would not want to walk far on this graveled road in her canvas shoes. The hot sun wouldn't be pleasant and she had no idea how far she would have to go for help. Not one car passed her all morning, either coming or going.

Had she been so distracted by her restless state of mind that she didn't notice? Lorna did not think so. Her intent when she left home this morning was to put her recent committee work out of her mind. Her friend hinted a desire to ride with her, but Lorna made no offer. She needed solitude to clear her mind for new projects.

The problem was that the new project on the horizon left her cold. She resisted serving on the committee offered by the Women's League, no matter that it was the most prestigious volunteer position the community could offer, no matter that she was most eminently qualified to hold that position, no matter that it would keep her in close contact with the shakers and movers of the state and the nation.

What it would also do was obligate her to work toward a goal not of her choosing, require long hours of intensive research, and restrict her personal activities.

Lorna was burned out from years of dedicated volunteer work. She

blistered with the need to break out of the selfless image in which volunteer work ultimately placed a willing widow who had the intelligence, freedom, and energy to undertake time consuming tasks. For now she wanted to get away from the demanding routine and think carefully before she decided on a specific course for future action.

For weeks she had been filled with longing, a desire for more fulfillment in life than community servitude, a selfishness which surprised her, a deep seated restlessness she could not define. Today, her ambivalence put her in jeopardy, threatening to forsake her in the middle of nowhere.

Taking each curve with deliberate care, she concentrated on willing the needed gas pumps to appear. The graveled road angled upward, then flattened, and curved sharply. A hill to her left might give her a better view of the surrounding countryside. She hit the hazard button to activate the warning flash, laughing derisively at following the safety rule where there hadn't been traffic for hours.

She braked to a stop on the outer edge of the road and surveyed the hills void of buildings. Not even a fence broke the lines of hills and gullies. She remembered a sign at a turn off from the marked county road that read 'primitive road, no warning signs.' It hadn't warned her there would be no signs of civilization.

Cultivated fields began at the crest of the rolling hills, some broad areas deep green with new plants, some areas golden yellow with stubble. Idle machines stood in the fields, people used them for tilling but not now. Lorna's shoulders slumped in despair.

She walked to the opposite edge of the road and was more disheartened to discover the ground fell sharply down to a ravine floor more than thirty feet below. Heavily dotted with large sagebrush, the ravine, only briefly level, rose again to the cultivated field beyond.

The scene was awesome in its broad expanse, beautiful in its pristine condition. She examined the details of the steppe shrub environment, appreciating the gray green foliage attended by flitting birds.

A smooth green spot below caught her eye, the color and texture unlike the surrounding brush and windblown sand. Only after leaning to peer more carefully into the canyon did she realize the spot was discarded metal. She was repelled by human carelessness. Thankfully, sand and tumbleweeds blown by the wind almost hid the trash from sight.

She could not indulge in lengthy appreciation of the surrounding scenery. If she didn't find a gas station soon, she would be stranded and have to walk through this sagebrush in the dark.

Back in the car she proceeded along the dusty road to the canyon bottom, where fresh erratic gaps in the clay banks showed signs of erosion from relentless water, creating deltas of mud along the raised road bed and

spilling mud into a bank since dried and graded to the side.

Stories of vehicles caught in the swift torrential waters in such canyons were reported after sudden hard downpours in the area and she shuddered at the thought of being caught in what is commonly known as a wash, as she apprehensively glanced from her fuel gage to the unmarked road she followed.

On the canyon floor, the road branched with the left track following the floor of the canyon and the other branch angling up the steep canyon side in hairpin curves to reach the top. She chose the right branch to get her out of the canyon. Rooster tails of brown dust billowed behind the wheels as the motor strained to make the grade.

Her son warned her many times of the dangers of driving on what he called back roads. Peter often reiterated news items of attacks on single women, horror stories of robbery and murder.

"You can't be too careful. Never know what maniacs are out there. Please, Mother, be careful where you go." He was exasperated with her singular determination to strike out for a drive whenever and wherever she pleased.

"I wish you wouldn't go alone."

She couldn't do anything but go alone. What help would a companion be in this situation? Stranded with no gas made her nervous. If she was stalled in this empty land, what would she do? Not a single car had passed her on these back roads. How long would she have to wait for someone to come along who could help? How far could she walk to get help?

After an agonizing amount of time, a faded relic of a sign emerged above a bank, announcing a country store with groceries and diesel fuel. Farm machines ran on diesel but she fervently hoped that she would find the unleaded fuel she needed.

If there was a store at all, there would be a phone. She would solve her problem somehow. The promised store was the only prospect. Hoping the store was not deserted and as faded and overgrown with brush as the sign, she eagerly negotiated the last curves.

Trees towering over a weathered building finally came into sight on a level expanse stretching to include a well traveled highway. A sixteen wheeler pulled away from a side road and spun dust up from the graveled road partially obscuring her view.

Major commerce took place in the community after all.

She swerved to miss a tall man on the edge of the road close to her car. He didn't have his thumb out but she was sure he was a hitchhiker and she grimaced at his dusty appearance when she passed. Her foremost concern was to get her tank filled with gas and the store was not more than a half mile away on the corner of the paved highway.

Lorna sighed with relief when she pulled under the roof extending over

two gas pumps. The cement apron around the store was bare and clean. To her pleasant surprise the pumps were shiny and modern.

As she watched the meter ticking off the gallons she realized how close she was to getting stalled in the unpopulated countryside. She grinned as she topped off the tank, pleased at having tempted the fates and won. She replaced the gas cap and patted her Calypso green Ford with a triumphant smile.

"You sweet little chariot," she crooned.

When she entered the store to find the cash register, she threaded her way among racks of snacks and wondrous products. Wildly colored advertising announced merchandise a traveler simply must have to survive miles on the road, as if drivers needed entertainment to prevent boredom. Driving for her was never a bore.

The room was crowded with ranks of shelves stacked with an odd assortment of necessities: aspirin, cough syrup, diapers, canned soup, bread, ice cream, and milk. In the far corner, round seats on pedestals were fastened to the floor in front of an ancient lunch counter, evidence that this was not a new establishment in the farm community. It was a nostalgic sight, those signs of a vanishing era, although a freezer stood in place of the remembered soft ice cream machine. Lorna's tanned features radiated with simple pleasure.

Joyce Olson, owner and clerk, eyed her warily, wondering what stage of Alshimers lurked behind the grin of this gray haired woman who carried no purse. Lorna was a flash of color.

Her suit was a bright yellow, the pant legs slimly tapered to pink canvas shoes, the thigh length box jacket opened to reveal a silk blouse with windblown pink poppies splashed upon it. The choice of colors did nothing to bolster Joyce's confidence in the sanity of this customer.

Joyce's worst fear - that the customer was without money - was laid to rest when a twenty dollar bill was pulled from a slash pocket and placed upon the counter.

"I've a fresh pot of coffee and home-baked cinnamon rolls," Joyce announced, hoping to add a lunch sale to her cash flow.

"That sounds perfect," Lorna agreed, welcoming the conversation after her solitary drive. A familiar mug of deep blue with bright yellow daisies was filled with coffee and placed on the counter before her. Similar mugs hung on a rack beside the coffee pot.

"Nice mugs," she murmured, recognizing a design she'd mass produced for a flea market when she was into pottery a few years back.

"Thanks. I think so, too. My friends bought them for me when I opened this lunch counter. They thought I should have special mugs."

Lorna still had blue glaze left over somewhere. She gave up her pottery business when the marketing took too much of her time. She never regretted

it, pleased she no longer worried over the whims of buyers. To create pieces that were the right color, or the right shape, or the right price to be sold became too time consuming.

"I was lucky to find your store," Lorna explained, perching on a pedestal by the counter. "There wasn't another sign of civilization for miles."

Relaxing on the stool she sipped the aromatic black coffee. A bite of fresh sticky cinnamon roll tantalized her taste buds.

The worn counter indicated a sheen from years of constant cleaning. A crisp red and white checkered valance emphasized the top of a large clean window through which she viewed a fenced area shaded by an enormous tree that dangled a rope swing from a sturdy limb. A bright yellow Tonka truck and front loader stood abandoned in a sandpile.

"You're really isolated here," Lorna stated, "I drove for miles and saw no one. Where do your customers come from?"

"Local ranchers rely on us for emergency supplies. Saves them long trips to the city. There are many families in the vicinity," Joyce assured her. "We aren't getting rich but we can make a living and stay in the community where we grew up." Sudden footsteps outside the door distracted her.

The dusty hitchhiker burst in the door. He was a tall lean man with a flat look to his muscled chest and stomach. His narrow hips and hard flanks were encased in worn dusty jeans.

Joyce jumped up to greet him with happy surprise. "Why, Rip Woodall!" She extended her hand. "Welcome back!"

"Howdy, Joyce," he said in a deep masterful voice, shaking her hand. "I'm glad you're still here. I'm amazed you and Jim hang on to this place."

His blunt features were hard and unexpressive. Unruly sideburns covered the upper part of his jaws and scruffy salt-and-pepper bristles thinly concealed a jutting chin. The contours of his sun leathered features were lean and harsh. He moved with a quiet arrogance and he looked tough. Lorna wouldn't have picked up a hitchhiker like that for a million dollars.

His gaze scanned the room, resting briefly on Lorna while his broad calloused fingers gripped his dusty pointed hatbrim in curt acknowledgment.

"Where is everybody? Can Jim give me a ride to the ranch?"

"Jim won't be back for an hour, Rip, and then we've got to pick up our kids," Joyce lamented, "Sit down and I'll pour you a cup of coffee. Are you back to stay?"

"I'd like a cup," he grinned, deliberately skipping over his future intentions, "but I want to call Len first."

He stalked toward the phone, knowing exactly where it was, expecting to use it without asking, as if doing so many times before.

The confident predatory mortal he resembled looked dangerous but was not Lorna's picture of a menacing hitchhiker. The ease with which Joyce

accepted him was comforting to Lorna.

The trilling ring of an incoming call sounded before he reached the phone and Joyce turned to lift it from its cradle, calling a cheery hello. Her features became seriously attentive.

"No, Bill, I'm alone and can't get away," she answered after a short pause. "What's up? Why does Barb need a sitter this time of day?"

Joyce paused again then turned shocked eyes to the dusty Woodall who stood near her elbow.

"Oh, no! What happened? Is she going to be all right?" For a still moment Joyce listened, her gaze frozen without focus. "Hang on. Rip just walked in. Let me put him on."

Joyce handed the phone to the dusty cowboy, confiding, "Barb's been hurt. Bill wants me to take care of the baby."

Rip's grim expression showed he understood. He moved swiftly to phone and asked Bill to explain the accident. An attentive grimace crept over his sharp features. He listened for long moments. He held the phone from his face and sliced a sidelong glance toward the window with a questioning frown. His attention darted around the entire area, inside the store and outside through the large front window.

"Jim's not here. I don't know when I'll get there," he confided, then added with an assuring tone, "Yah. Right, Bill. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Joyce stood holding a bright blue mug of coffee she poured for him, waiting for him to explain.

"They were loading steers and the chute buckled. Barb's hurt bad. Len's taking her to the hospital."

Rip gulped the hot coffee and put the mug on the counter. He folded his slim length on a stool and leaned resolutely forward, sliding his forearms on the worn black and white marbled Formica, his fingers slowly clenching and releasing. His bearing held a deceptive nonchalance, one leg bent to the side, as if gathering strength to spring into action.

"They can't spare anyone to pick me up but I've got to get out there." His voice was tense. His hatbrim shadowed his bushy eyebrows and emphasized his dominant cheekbones.

"Can you remember how to handle a three-month old?" Joyce asked skeptically, with a distorted grin. She doubted Rip did much handling of own his son when he was little and she suspected he hadn't practiced on any other babies in the last thirty-five years.

"No." Rip surmised he could do as well as Bill. They'd manage somehow.

"Barb's going to need help for more than tonight," Joyce confirmed.

"You're right about that," he admitted. "I have to get out there and see what I can do."

Lorna's large knuckled fingers encircled her mug as if capturing new

information. Rip's calloused fingers overlapped around his mug as if grasping for answers. Joyce's slender fingers gripped her mug with serene patience as if resolution was close at hand.

Lorna's car stood outside with a full tank of gas.

The thought prompted Joyce to introduce Lorna Bannon to Rip Woodall, adding, "Lorna's been exploring the countryside. She's amazed there's so few signs of people in these parts." Joyce paused with a controlled smile, while the idea settled in Rip's mind and Lorna shrugged in agreement.

Joyce added, "Maybe she'd consider giving you a ride just to see some buildings." Her gaze darted from Lorna to Rip to catch a clue to their acceptance of the idea.

Rip frowned curiously at this exploring woman. She was a bright eyeful. Her outfit was the color of fresh shelled corn and the pink on her shirt and shoes were like the licking tongues of the steers that fattened on it.

Exploring? What was there to explore on these farm roads? Exploring sounded phony to him.

With narrowed eyes he contemplated. It had been a long time since he'd given any woman such a studied gaze.

Women were pleasant objects for his roving eyes. But he left it at that - simple roving glances - nothing more, usually covertly, never as openly as he did now.

Something about this woman warranted careful scrutiny. He was wary and mentally circled around her like testing a hot branding iron with a spit finger. He hadn't done that in years either.

She wasn't pudgy but she wasn't skinny. In fact she looked too hard and too damned tanned to be a city woman. He'd heard of tanning saloons, probably where hers came from. Her large knuckled fingers ended in blunt clear fingernails, no bright red polish there. She had no unnatural red anywhere on her face either. The city women he'd seen plastered their faces with weird colors around the eyes and lips. He was oddly stirred at the way her green eyes showed open amusement awaiting his appraisal.

Rip speculated on her clear and steady gaze. His eyebrows went up and his chin came down with the anticipated question.

"Would you consider that, ma'am?" Rip pushed his hat toward the back of his head with his forefinger to get a clearer view of her response, his best effort at lifting his hat to any woman. They rarely stood still for his contemplation at any time.

Lorna regarded the suspense in his blue-gray eyes, deep set and wide beneath bushy eyebrows that put her in mind of the old labor leader, John L. Lewis. His nose was crooked with flaring nostrils above a wide determined mouth. His beaten, once-tan, Stetson perched jauntily on his head, its worn state matching his sunfaded cotton shirt, buckskin vest, faded blue jeans and

heel-worn scuffed boots. If Lorna was asked to describe a derelict she would consider him a perfect example.

Rip's gaze didn't falter. It was a challenge to accept him as he was--unkempt, dusty and whiskered in threadbare clothes. There was no apology in his bearing, but a sense of pride in what he was. He needed a ride and he wasn't going to beg. Conversely he arrogantly expected to have his request granted. He had the bearing of an indomitable savage, and it was this very strength and potential power that bestowed on Lorna a cautious feeling of security.

His concern for an injured woman spurred him to action, his energy held in restraint like a spring coiled in readiness. He was no stranger to the store owner so he wasn't the derelict hitchhiker as Lorna first thought. She was just interested enough to find out for herself about the unpopulated hills and here was an excuse to get right to the heart of them.

"I planned to be out all day," she said, "and if I actually find some buildings, it will set to rest the mystery of the missing civilization."

Rip's wide mouth straightened firmly and turned down at the corners in response to her foolish statement. He picked up his dusty bag to follow her to the car. He saw her yellow suit behind the green car door and thought of peeling back the fresh green husk from a succulent ear of roasted corn. He snorted impatiently at the absurd comparisons this little woman brought to mind.

He batted his hat at his pantlegs and sleeves in an effort to dust himself off before he opened the passenger door. At her measured look, he slammed his hat back on his head and muttered, "I don't want to dirty up your car."

"You can clean it when we get to the ranch, if there are any modern amenities there," she challenged, amused at his backhanded apology.

Rip shot a disbelieving look at her. He hadn't meant to apologize but she accepted it and, by the set of her chin, he suspected woefully that she would extract more than apologies before she was finished with him. He folded himself into Lorna's sleek green Ford Probe.

There was plenty of leg room but he had to remove his hat so he could straighten up. He raked his fingers through his thick brown hair, damply plastered against his head.

"I chose this car for my driving comfort," Lorna explained, seeing his effort to stretch out. It was more than adequate for her. She half turned to study him with a curious tilt of her head.

"I never intended to taxi folks around so I didn't size that seat for passengers."

Rip squirmed in the bucket seat at her mocking gesture and that was irritating. He fumbled for a way to fasten the shoulder belt that stretched across the space in front of him.

The hackles came up his back and he ran a finger through the caked dust between his neck and shirt collar. A sudden wish to be clean and presentable swept him and that irritated him even more. He was never uncomfortable in his working clothes before, not even with the neighboring widow, the woman he considered marrying, but this yellow ear of corn was different and unsettling. He fumbled uncharacteristically.

Lorna understood his frustration with the seat belt and brought the engine to life, automatically bringing the shoulder belt across his broad chest. Her expression was businesslike as she buckled another belt across her hips and motioned for him to do the same. In one swift fluid motion, she backed the car around and started in the direction he indicated.

Lorna concentrated on driving, her attention focused on the turns of the rough graveled road around the hills as it led up and down across the wide gullies.

Rip's attention was on her profile. He watched the approval in her expression as her sweeping gaze took in the view on both sides while carefully assessing the road.

Every fold of the earth was glutted with the senescence of plants, blackberry brambles heavy with fruit, willows beginning to yellow and sumac bursting with dark red seed heads. The color starkly contrasted with the dark golden stubble of grain fields. The familiar hills pleased Rip, too, and he listened to the humming of the gravel under the moving tires. He worried about Barb but couldn't think of anything to say and his jerking thoughts wouldn't remain on Barb's condition.

"You really exploring?" he finally asked. "Wandering around out here doesn't offer much excitement."

"I'm not looking for excitement." She flashed her gaze at the passing landscape. Honestly she didn't come looking for anything in particular. Her desire to be away from those things that crowded in on her for the past years thrust her in the direction of this solitary drive. Her search of a change brought her here. She wanted to think and be alone. She didn't expect so much empty land. And she was fascinated at how serene and tranquil it made her feel.

"Actually this land is peaceful and challenging at the same time. I can understand why pioneers settled here," she added.

"It's peaceful all right," he conceded, "The farm houses are miles apart and families would really be isolated without telephones and cars. Some folks look on it as lonely."

Rip never felt lonely in these hills. The fact was, he was glad to be back because he'd been lonesome. He put some distance between himself and widow Lewis because he wasn't exactly comfortable about marrying again. Longing for her had not brought him back. He began to wonder how satisfying

a life with her might be. She filled a need for him in a companionable way. Her presence never disturbed him like this driving woman did.

Lorna, that was her name. Lorn rhymes with corn. Lorn. Logic didn't follow his obsession in equating her with corn. It was that suit, the color, reminding him of ripe shelled corn, a hardy grain with promise of satisfying hungry animals on bleak winter days. Lorna filled that suit....

What was she really looking for? A peaceful place? That's how he thought of this place among the hills. But her? Why was she attracted to his favorite landscape? He glanced at her clean profile as she observed the road, his gaze riveting on her sturdy hands controlling the steering wheel, commanding the direction of the car with smooth assurance. Her tanned wrists sported no watch, her fingers no rings.

Lorna recalled her emotions on her earlier solitary drive. The vastness of the rolling hills astounded her as did the lack of people and she was alarmed at the possibility of being stranded if she ran out of gas, but loneliness never occurred to her.

She shot a brief glance at him, explaining, "That's not the feeling I had when driving around these hills this morning. Loneliness isn't limited to distance from people. I've felt some of my loneliest moments in the midst of crowds in airports. Loneliness is a product of the person and the circumstance, not the place."

"That's a fact," he concurred. How incredibly close her assessment was to his own.

"So why are you exploring this emptiness?" he wanted to know, suspecting some frivolous purpose.

"I was curious about real emigrants after working with the Committee to Celebrate the National Historic Oregon Trail. So much of the celebrated trail is four lane highway. I wanted to get an idea of how the emigrants might feel when they came to this country. The grassland here is tilled but the roads wind around the ravines much like the pioneer trails and the distant panorama is incredible."

"Used to be cattle range. Not enough money in that anymore," he mused. A comfortable silence hung between them.

"Did you come back from a rodeo?" Lorna suddenly wanted to know why he suddenly turned up at the country store.

He looked at her, warily. His business was none of hers. "Why do you ask?"

"You look like a typical cowboy, I guess that's why. And I thought one reason they came and went was rodeos."

He jerked back in his seat and turned his broad shoulders toward Lorna. He was a rancher, always had been. When he took off to be somewhere else, he was still a rancher, always would be. He was fed up to his ears listening

about the silly public image of cowboys. It was just the sort of idea to come from a frivolous city woman.

"What's this about typical cowboys? Why do I look like one?" he demanded.

"You've got the boots and hat," she answered. She couldn't use the trite statement - tall, dark and handsome. He was tall but his hair wasn't very dark. He wasn't handsome, at least not in a Hollywood sort of way. His rugged features were striking. He might possibly be good looking, providing he bathed and shaved.

"Yes," she repeated, quietly, "You've got the boots and the hat."

"If that makes a cowboy, then I suppose I am one."

He watched her until she shot him a sidelong glance and with total skepticism and a mocking tone, he added, "Typical cowboys, like movie stars, are much admired. So why aren't women falling all over me?" He spread his hands to indicate his dusty worn clothing, boldly turning his lean raw features for her perusal. The tone of his voice was challenging.

"There's no accounting for taste," she replied, with an appeasing shrug and a teasing twinkle.

Rip noticed the shrug and the laugh lines in the corner of her mouth. Did she imply he might be an admirable cowboy and women just didn't have the 'taste' to recognize his worth? Hardly. His blue eyes took on a deep gray intensity as they measured the white hairs outshining the black hair on her head, a sign of aging - yet she radiated a vital youthful energy he found appealing.

His gaze strayed to her scrubbed firm jaw, the square shoulders, the smooth brown arms, the veins and knuckles of strong large hands, the corn yellow pants suit, the length of her legs, and the wild pink of her canvas shoes.

He discounted her in that quick measure, of that Lorna was certain. His intense study was ignored for now in favor of her driving. Not that she was pleased to be discounted but why should she care what he thought of her? She wasn't going to seek the approval of this derelict. He was dusty and unkempt. But he was lean and fit, something to be admired in any man. She'd been as open and capable of admiring men in general as any man admired women.

"Joyce says you're a city woman. Is that what you are? You don't look typical to me."

When she concentrated on the road, he added, "If you think you are, I can give you a list of things that country folks expect of city women. And let me tell you, you don't fit many of them."

The car slowed abruptly, throwing them forward. Rip flung his hands flat against the dash, thinking she'd taken offense at his remark but her attention was on the road ahead.

"Look," Lorna commanded, pointing to a doe and fawn bounding across

the field. "Aren't they graceful?"

Rip wasn't looking at the deer. He watched Lorna treasure the sight, her clean features shining with open joy and complete pleasure. His was a natural appreciation for all animals but her attitude made him focus more clearly on what he took for granted.

He dipped his chin and made a face, "Oh, they're graceful all right, and protected, and hungry." His voice was hard and critical but after a pause, he added in a softened tone, "and actually quite tasty."

"You eat those pretty things?" She couldn't bear to think of it.

"Not much. We're only allowed one buck a year. Hunting season is short so we encourage hunters. Cattlemen can't afford to feed deer and cattle, too. Farmers don't care to share their grain."

Lorna often worried about accidentally hitting a deer on the highway. She never thought of them as pests when she admired the fleeting animals before. She brought the car up to speed again and remained silent. Not that she wanted to satisfy this cowboy, or rancher or whatever he called himself, with an argument. She indicated the countryside with a sweep of her hand.

"I've seen pictures of this with captions describing an openness and I'm still convinced that it's unpopulated," Lorna said firmly.

"You're right if you're looking for numbers, but you're wrong if you think it's uncivilized," he insisted, and they dropped into another comfortable silence, broken only when Rip directed her to turn on a very narrow trail.

If she met a car, would they be able to pass?

"Some road," she snorted, straddling the ruts to prevent the drive train from dragging on the high ridge in the center.

"I'll drive if it's a problem," he offered.

Lorna shot him a snapping glance, "Nobody drives my car but me, thank you very much."

Rip shrugged and remained silent.

"Is this considered a driveway? Not an impressive entrance to civilization, if you ask me." Lorna sounded as belligerent as she felt.

"It's the back way in. A nice shortcut," he clipped, "only one more hill."

"Good," she snipped. The quicker she delivered this rancher and got on the main road to the city the better she'd like it. The trail was straight but the deep loose sand held her concentration. She strained her attention to staying out of the ruts, her eyes widening as she pulled over the crest of that one more hill.

Dozens of buildings came into view. She turned briefly and grinned into his expectant expression. Okay, so there were buildings, the first requirement of civilization.

Rip anticipated her surprise but he was unprepared for the overwhelming excitement radiating from her. Why did that make him catch his

breath? He promptly inspected with fresh eyesight his old home. Why did it take a stranger to appreciate what should be obvious to him? He scowled with annoyance and thought about the disaster that prompted this disturbing woman to be his taxi.

He had to get away from her, and fast. He'd get right to the loading chute to inquire about the accident.

The cluster of buildings resembled a small village. Lorna followed the driveway to a white picket fence that surrounded a doublewide manufactured home and stopped near the gate. Uncountable white, mauve, purple and pink cosmos blossoms reached between and over the pickets.

Rip growled a thanks as he got out of the car, his abruptness surprising Lorna more than the surroundings. He strode toward the weathered outbuildings. Briefly stunned, she watched his long lean legs carry him away.

Lorna scowled at Rip's sudden unfriendliness, indignant at being rudely ignored. With a practiced stubbornness she left her car and walked up the wide steps to the spacious deck on the front of the lovely white home. Her anger was mollified by the friendly welcome from the nodding spikes of double red hollyhocks and purple false dragonhead that lined the deck foundation.

The frantic bleating of a frustrated infant came from the open front door. A old wizened man appeared with a wadded blanket obscuring the crying infant in the crook of his arm.

"I see Rip found a taxi," he said holding the door open for Lorna.

"I don't suppose he paid yah. I never seen yah before. Come in and I'll get yer money. How much yah want?" The baby's cry increased in volume with the old man's every word.

"I don't want any money," Lorna said, loudly over the crying infant. "I'm not a taxi." She stepped in anyway, determined not to be intimidated by misconceptions.

The crying baby was no deterrent either. She leaned forward to get a look at the baby's face just to satisfy herself that the noise really was a baby. Her hands shot forward automatically when the old man handed off the noise, wadded blanket and all, toward her chest.