

Lorna's Route

Chapter Three  
Floundering

Lorna explored the house, deducing that Barb and Len were just as modern a young couple as her own married children. Farmers weren't so different from city folks after all. The furnishings were fashionable by Good Housekeeping standards and must be a pleasure to work in, she thought. The wall phone matched the peach color of the wall. A utilitarian shelf of varnished oak hung below it with the phone book and a writing pad and pencil. She was reminded to call Joyce Olson at the country store.

"This is Lorna Bannon, Joyce. Remember? I took Rip Woodall out to the ranch." She paused to give Joyce a moment for recall.

"Did you deliver him all right? Are you satisfied now that you found people living here? Did Bill find someone to take care of the baby? Tell me, is Barb going to be all right? Where are you? Is there something I can do for you?" At last she paused and let Lorna speak.

"I put the last clean diaper on Bud and I'm not sure how I can get more. I saw them on your shelves but do you ever deliver? Everyone here is too busy to run errands." Lorna spilled all the facts in a pleading tone just in case she didn't get another chance to speak. She remembered how Joyce took charge of conversations.

"No, not normally, but Pederson's are good friends and I'll be glad to help. I'll bring some as soon as the kids finish dinner. Jim minds the shop in the evenings. I'll be there in an hour. O.K.? Is there anything else I should bring?" Joyce asked, forgetting all the other questions she brought up at first.

Joyce wanted to see for herself what was going on at the ranch. The fact that Lorna was still there and was requesting diapers, piqued Joyce's curiosity. Not in the habit of making deliveries, she was willing to make an exception this time for a good neighbor. Everyone in the community relied on the country store in emergencies. She made a point to keep the store stocked with essentials, except a babysitter. Come to think about it, maybe she'd furnished that commodity already.

"I haven't any idea what else might be needed around here," Lorna answered slowly. "I put the last diaper on that baby an hour ago and he's going to need more before too long. I'd be grateful if you would bring those." She hesitated, unsure of exactly what to order. "I know they come in different

sizes but I don't know what the baby needs."

"He's three months old. I'll bring the right size."

That was better than Lorna had hoped. She hung up the phone.

There was nothing to do but wait. She looked around Sarah's room. A large colorful book lay on the night stand beside a lamp in the shape of a horse's head. A ribbon hung over one brown ear and a matching piece of the ribbon stuck out of a closed book. Who read bedtime stories to the little girl?

Lorna wasn't familiar with this latest children's story, but from the shining castle and vicious dragon on the cover, she imagined the plot was much the same as those she had read to her own children years ago. She opened the book to the marker, and sure enough, the princess was weeping over her lost mother while a wicked stepmother leered behind the door.

Sarah had gone off with Bill, still asking questions about her mother. Lorna hoped Bill would know how to quiet the child's fears. Lorna certainly didn't.

Lorna's own thoughts were in turmoil. She had gotten herself into an untenable situation that was so unexpected. Whatever possessed her to get out of her car? She should have driven off when Rip got out. Why didn't she? There was something about that man and the isolated families living in the vast open countryside that intrigued her. When she went to the door she could have walked away. And she would have, if it hadn't been for the fussing baby.

She shouldn't be taking care of a stranger's baby. But what was she to do? The baby needed better attention than the old man could give, or that arrogant cowboy either. He was no small part of her being stuck here. Would it do any good to blame him for it? Wasn't it where she wanted to be? Checking out a rural family?

Of course not. Her drive into the hills was a spontaneous decision to go someplace. Just any place. She was unsatisfied at home. She was tired of volunteer work. Perhaps she should get busy with pottery again.

Voices came from beyond the house and Lorna hurried to find the source of the activity. Bill was holding the back door open for an unusual procession that began with a man carrying a wide piece of lumber that looked like a table top. Other men came with bloody chunks of some skinned animal. To Lorna the protruding bones looked too big to be deer but that was the only butchered animal she thought of because Rip had mentioned eating deer. Rip was not among the group of men carrying in chunks of carcass.

Bill explained, "Have tah cut the beef here. Too many flies out there." He placed a cover to protect the table's surface and the sheet of lumber was placed on top, enlarging the working space by half.

Beef? Lorna pulled at Bill's sleeve for more of an explanation.

"Steer bucked 'ginst the chute 'n broke two legs, that's what got Barb. Killed and skinned it right away, gotta have a place to cut it. Butcherin's usual

done in colder weather."

Lorna shrunk back from the bloody carcass but watched in fascination as a short husky man with his sleeves rolled to his elbows marked the carcass with the point of a sharp knife. She marveled when the cut severed the meat right to the joint between the ball and socket of the major bones. Finally it was cut into pieces she had seen in the meat counter in her supermarket. She had no idea how to calculate the dollars that much meat would cost.

The butcher and his helpers were bloodied up to their elbows from the unanticipated task. They worked with few remarks, intent on a quick finish to the job.

"What will be done with it?" she asked.

"Butcher gets a share. Rest goes in a freezer."

Sarah appeared and Bill helped her climb on a chair so she could see the job being done. Lorna was reminded to look in on Bud. There was no other reason for her to be here.

Bud was sleeping soundly. The nursery windows looked out on the opposite side of the house from where Lorna had parked her car. A row of tall shrubs almost entirely screened the outbuildings from her view. Tall trees were interspersed among the buildings and rose above them, indicating that someone had planted them long before this mobile home was brought in.

Lorna peered around the shrubs to identify the various buildings but had no idea of their purpose. If people lived in all these buildings there would be enough population for a small town. Off on a rise to the right was a thick grove of trees but she couldn't see what was on the other side.

The butchers left and the men carried packages of the meat off to another building. Lorna shrugged her shoulders, marveling at their efficiency.

She wandered into the living room and perused the shelf of video cassettes, noting that dozens of animated movies outnumbered the WILD AMERICA and other PBS series. Most of her grandchildren's favorites were there.

She found a stack of magazines about country living. She settled down in the soft recliner and turned the pages lazily, becoming engrossed in articles about enthusiastic innovative ranchers and farmers.

Ranch living looked exciting given the outdoor activities necessary to make a living. The routine had to be flexible and involved more energy than she could imagine. She had to give credit to those willing to put their livelihood in the hands of a capricious nature. Imagine waiting for rain or working in the hot sun. Rip obviously didn't put up with it. How did he fit in here, she wondered? Bill gave the impression Rip ran off on a whim when he got the urge. Still the Pedersons' and Olsons' hung on to cope with country life.

Joyce called out as she came up the steps but she didn't stop to knock, just breezed in, balancing a large sack in one arm. Lorna took the sack with a

grateful thanks after verifying the contents.

"I brought enough for a couple of weeks, 'til Barb can get around to running things again." Joyce looked expectantly toward the kitchen, frowning, "Are you here alone? Where's Bill?"

"Out somewhere with Sarah. He dumped the baby in my arms thinking I was hired for the job."

Joyce made a face. "And Rip didn't explain what happened?"

"He went right to the barn, I suppose to find out how the accident happened. He came in later and so did a Mrs Lewis. I thought she was going to take over but she seemed more angry than concerned about the baby, or Barb for that matter."

"She was probably miffed that Rip didn't call her to pick him up. She's defensive where Rip's concerned. They're as good as married, so everyone thinks." Joyce frowned during an uncharacteristic pause.

"It is odd that Rip didn't ask her to help out." Joyce gave a snort of disbelief and placed her hands on her hips, preoccupied with absorbing the way things turned out. She turned to contemplate Lorna once more. Her questioning stance seemed to demand an explanation.

"Rip asked me to stay until Mr Pederson gets home." Lorna spread her open palms outward and shrugged. "I've become the baby tender by default."

"Have you heard how Barb is? Is Len bringing her back from the doctor tonight?"

"No, she's going to stay in the hospital but Len told Rip earlier he'd come home after Barb was safely out of surgery."

Lorna shook her head and let a hard breath out, "I don't think the little girl knows what happened. Sarah wants her mother and Bill doesn't want to tell her the wrong thing so he avoids answering her questions. I don't think she's very happy about it. And I'm no help. I know nothing about anything except to change and feed the baby."

"That's important. Barb is lucky you came along when you did. But I don't understand why Dorothy didn't take over."

"She brought a casserole and a cake and some sort of salad and maybe other things. Bill was pleased about that. She was thoughtful but she was surprised that Rip was here. He left with her and hasn't been back since."

That wasn't exactly true. He had come into the nursery without Dorothy and Lorna had almost lost her head over the reaction brought on by the touch of his hands. She tried not to dwell on what happened between them.

Lorna felt uncomfortable over that encounter. She rubbed her palms together remembering the hardness of his chest and guiltily separated her hands to deny the impact on her emotions. Recovering her manners, she gestured toward a chair.

"Won't you sit down?" If Joyce would answer some questions about the

folks around here, Lorna thought, I'd feel less uncomfortable.

"I'd like to wait for Bill. He must have talked to Len," Joyce sat in the brown velour chair facing the door. She was as talkative as ever and just as surprising.

"You say Dorothy Lewis found Rip here? She didn't know he'd returned? Maybe she was being neighborly after all. Folks around here usually are. But she's been trying to get Rip to marry her and just when she thinks she's succeeded she wouldn't want to be stuck with the baby."

Joyce paused only slightly before continuing, "I think she might have made more points with Rip if she would have." She got up and went to the window to look out. Restlessly, she turned back to Lorna and kept on talking.

"I think she proposed to him and he isn't exactly unwilling, although he left without much fanfare last spring when the biggest part of the work was done. Len's been trying to get him back here ever since his old Edsel came up missing. Maybe that's why he came back." Joyce went into the kitchen and looked out the windows on the back of the house.

"Where has he been?" Lorna asked, throwing out the question that had been on her mind all along as she followed Joyce into the kitchen. Rip dodged that question smoothly when she'd asked him about the rodeo.

When Joyce didn't answer right away, Lorna wondered if she was going to dodge it, too. Lorna didn't know who Rip Woodall was and shouldn't care. Certain she was going to be told it was none of her business, she observed Joyce's reaction with trepidation.

"Rip handles stock for rodeos. Some animals come from this ranch. Those that do, he prepares himself. He's teaching younger people to do the job and he must have found somebody he trusts or he wouldn't have come back now."

Joyce's gaze bounced to the windows to finally settle on Lorna as she continued, "If he came back because of that car, it must mean more to him than anyone thought."

Lorna heard footsteps on the porch and Joyce flung the door open for Bill, who irritably pushed her aside and breathlessly asked Lorna, "Is Sarah here?"

At Lorna's negative nod, Bill smashed a fist into his open palm and exploded, "She run off, mad at me when I tol'er she couldn' see her mama. Thought she'd come to her room. I tol'er Daddy'd come but she's 'fraid." He stalked in his halting limp toward Sarah's room to look for himself.

"Why would she get angry at Bill? Does she throw tantrums?" Lorna asked.

"I've never thought of her as spoiled," Joyce said.

"She seemed so sweet and sensitive," Lorna reflected, "What do you suppose happened?"

Bill came stumping into the kitchen. "Figgered 'er mama's hurt real bad. Wouldn't believe what I said. I wasn't sure Barb was all right. Her blood poured out. Coulda been a goner."

His gaze dropped in guilt, then he swung to Joyce. "You help find 'er? Look around the yard, I'll check the sheds." Bill pushed at the back door.

In uneasy haste, they left Lorna standing helplessly unable to be a part of the search, watching them scour every nook and cranny.

With the number of buildings and overgrown shrubs within Lorna's view, she wondered if they could find a little girl who really wanted to hide. The coming darkness would make it ever more difficult. Soon the searchers disappeared from her sight.

Sighing sadly she picked up the sack Joyce had brought. She folded the paper grocery sack and tucked it in the cabinet below the sink with others, then took a knife to open the plastic wrapper on the bundle of disposable diapers so she wouldn't have to fight modern packaging when she needed to change Bud.

Lorna put the package in the nursery and stood admiring the perfection of the infant. Babies brought out the human instinct to protect. She had only to see one in distress to get the desire to move into action.

She wondered what her instinct had gotten her into this time as she retraced her steps to the kitchen past the washer and dryer set into an efficient laundry alcove.

She saw Rip coming across the back porch before she heard his crooning voice. His arms were wrapped around Sarah, almost smothering her clinging form. Lorna opened the door for him but his crooning didn't stop as he brushed past her, his eyes briefly conceding gratitude for her consideration.

"I'll take you to your mama in the morning, Sugar," he was saying to Sarah, "She's sleeping. It's soon your bedtime, too, isn't it?"

Rip leaned back to release Sarah's arms from the strangle hold she had on his neck and looked down into her face for confirmation. Her face was streaked with dirt and her nose ran profusely.

"Well, isn't it almost bedtime?" he gently demanded her answer through her dry sobs.

Sarah thrust her face into Rip's dusty shirt, the negative twisting of her head wiped her nose from side to side, smearing dirt with every turn.

Then she reared back, indignantly informing him that she was nearly five years old and daddy let her stay up to see Star Trek.

"Why can't I see mama sleep?" she demanded.

"Because the nurses won't let you in, that's why. When does Star Trek come on?" Rip defused her fears for the moment. He couldn't remember her being so easily frightened when he left last spring. He held her securely which was the comfort she sought. He shot Lorna a studied look.

"Do you know where Bill went?" he asked.

"He's searching the sheds for Sarah. She ran away from him," Lorna answered.

Rip frowned in distress and craned his head down to look into Sarah's eyes. "Did you really do that, Sugar?"

He'd made no move to put her down after she loosened her hold on his neck. She reclined loosely against him but didn't answer. "I thought Bill was your best friend."

"He's not troofful. He said mama was coming back for Bud but she didn't. She likes that baby better'n me so I bet she's never comin' back."

"When your mama comes home, it has nothing to do with how much she likes you or Bud, Sugar," Rip caught the skeptical look in Sarah's eyes. His eyes glazed in momentary thought.

"Remember that time your big kitty got hurt? Remember how she tried to get back to her babies? It was too injured to get there by itself. We put her back with her babies, remember? You and Bill fed those babies and the mama, too, because she couldn't do anything for herself."

Rip waited for Sarah's inner vision to stir her memory. When she puckered her eyebrows and looked up at him, he continued, "Your mama got injured and she has to wait until your daddy can bring her home because she can't come by herself. Can you understand that?"

"Will she really come?" Sarah's expression was hopeful and sad. "You said you'd take me to her in the morning. Will you? Really?"

"I said I would, didn't I?"

Sarah dragged the back of her hand across her face and sneezed, bumping her nose on Rip's chest.

Sarah sneezed twice more before Lorna grabbed a tea towel and stood by to clean her face, fully aware she'd drawn Rip's attention away from Sarah at the moment, fully aware of his unique masculine presence, fully aware he wore his dusty, threadbare clothes with pride, like a uniform, without presumption. His arrogance was overbearing.

"Don't you own another shirt? If you're going to handle the children you could at least be clean." Lorna held her breath, watching fury rise from Rip's swelling chest, sweeping across his rugged features in a flush, igniting his steel blue eyes with sparkling fire.

He clamped his lips in a tight straight line, his angry gaze bouncing off Lorna to Sarah. That does it, he thought. He had to get this audacious woman out of here before he throttled her. And he'd never before thought of raising a hand against any woman!

Turning to the wall telephone, he shifted the sniffling child to his hip and lifted the receiver, jabbing out two digits on the touch tone dial with his calloused forefinger. His stubby eyelashes snapped as his gaze ricocheted from

the window to Lorna while he waited impatiently for the intercom to ring in some other building.

When someone finally answered, he growled, "I've got Sarah here at Len's. You come get her."

Rip cradled Sarah against his shoulder, resting his massive hand against the back of her head, to protect her from his own anger as he lashed out at Lorna.

"My shirts are none of your damned business, lady. When a kid needs comfort I don't put her off while I run and change my clothes."

Sarah's head came off his shoulder to stare inquisitively at Lorna. A serene expression crossed Sarah's features as she turned from Lorna to inspect Rip's shirt. Instantly, she laid her face against it, repudiating Lorna's aversion to the dusty cloth.

Rip marched toward the back door, holding it open, craning his neck, waiting for Bill to come from the barn. He was stumping double time, still a long way off. Joyce came bounding up the steps to the deck.

"Thank goodness, you found her." She had to catch her breath. It was worrisome to think the child could have eluded them until after dark.

"Sarah, m' girl," Bill called when he saw Sarah safely in Rip's embrace.

"I worried," he added, his eyes begging forgiveness from the child.

"I'm going to mama in the morning. Uncle Rip's going to take me," Sarah said, leaning into Rip and raising one shoulder toward Bill in defiance.

"Yer daddy would, yah know. I can't drive, Sarah, m' girl. Yah know that." He asked Rip, "Where'd yah find 'er?"

"Under the pine trees by the fence. She's all right, now," Rip said, hugging her tightly again. "Aren't you, Sugar?"

Lorna wondered what Rip's next move would be.

He caught a wayward lock of Sarah's disheveled hair and gently brushed it back from her face as she nodded against his broad chest. Lorna caught herself thinking how it would be to lay her own cheek against it. Rip was oblivious of Lorna's feelings.

"Have you had supper?" he asked of Sarah. "Is spaghetti still your favorite? Dorothy brought a big dish of her homemade specialty."

"I don't like her," Sarah blurted, surprising everyone.

"You'll like her spaghetti. I guarantee it's one of her most delicious dishes," Rip insisted, fully apprised of the haughty widow's cuisine.

Lorna grimaced at the familiarity held in his voice. Was her cooking the limit of his knowledge? Why shouldn't he know her strong points? Dorothy was the neighbor. Lorna was an intruder, and a reluctant one, at that.

But Lorna also knew the importance of settling Sarah down for the night. She could not see her mother until morning and morning was a long night away. Lorna groped for a convincing tack to use on the child and suddenly

remembered how her grandchildren laughed at the spaghetti scene in one of the Disney classics she's seen among the videos.

"I know somebody who likes spaghetti better than you," Lorna challenged Sarah.

Lorna turned to Bill, "Will you wash Sarah and put on the video of Lady and The Tramp?"

To Rip, she ordered, "Will you dish up some spaghetti and nuke it for her while I find a clean sheet to spread on the floor for her front row seat at the movies?"

Joyce's chin dropped in shock, amazed to watch the men carry out Lorna's orders. They hesitated only for a few moments while the intent grabbed their imaginations.

Joyce gaped as the surly cowboy quickly offered a willing Sarah to the bony old man, who led her toward the bathroom. Joyce was even more astonished to see Rip open the fridge, take out a large covered casserole, place it on the counter and reach for a Corelle bowl.

"Why Lady and The Tramp, Lorna?" Joyce asked, recovering in the face of the willing activity.

"Those cute little dogs kiss when they each suck up opposite ends of one long spaghetti. I hope that will take Sarah's mind off her troubles and help her enjoy her supper."

Lorna took a serious dislike to Dorothy when Rip praised her cooking and watching a cartoon wasn't likely to dispel that feeling. Naturally the virile muscular man would be attracted to a good cook. What man isn't? He looked like he didn't get many good meals. Why should that bother her?

"I'd better get back," Joyce stated, looking impressed. And rendered speechless, thought Lorna, as she walked with her to the front door, thanking her again for delivering the diapers.

When Lorna returned to the kitchen, the microwave was humming and Rip was gone. She went to the linen closet in search of a sheet or worn blanket to protect the carpet from the stain of tomato sauce that might be spilled. She encountered Bill standing patiently in front of the bathroom door and Lorna was curiously amused.

"She wanted a bath," he explained. "I ran the water. Yah better help 'er. I'll get the movie."

Lorna knocked on the door, "Do you need help, Sarah? The movie's about to start." When there was no answer, Lorna asked, "May I come in?"

"No," came a sharp response. "I can do it myself."

Lorna smiled at the independence of the nearly five year old child. She knew how much dirt would end up on the towel, if Sarah was able to dry herself at all, but it mattered more that Sarah wanted to take control and Lorna respected that.

"I'll be here if you need anything." Lorna found a faded sheet to suit her purpose and waited near the bathroom door.

It wasn't long before Sarah appeared, dressed in clean jeans and shirt. Her hair was dripping and Lorna expected Sarah had dried herself mostly when putting on her clothes. Bill took exaggerated care in serving Sarah for which Lorna was thankful.

The animated puppies in the video were a catharsis even for Lorna, blotting out visions of a dusty faded shirt on a broad chest dappled with a child's tears. Other visions alternated with gray-blue eyes flinty with anger and large calloused hands tender with compassion. Rip's image didn't go away, his conflicting character traits tugged at Lorna in a strange way.

When Sarah finished the bowl of spaghetti and drank a small glass of lemonade, Bill suggested she get into her sleeping bag and camp out while she watched the movie. Before the plot really thickened, Sarah fell comfortably asleep.

Lorna ran her fingers through her short hair, scratching at her scalp. She couldn't remember how long it had been since she'd been awakened by a baby. Bud apparently expected an early morning bottle so she stretched and took a deep breath. It didn't occur to her to look at the clock. Babies made their own schedules and until she had overriding instructions she'd simply let him set his own pace.

Lorna yawned widely. She didn't feel very rested, not realizing it was only midnight. Why had she agreed to this anyway? She didn't offer everyday babysitting to her own grandchildren and she was too old for a permanent job like this. She would be relieved of it soon. Len would find someone to take care of Bud.

The cotton shirt she wore hung to her knees. She chose the long blue tee shirt from among many in Barb's closet because of the herd of white horses galloping across the front. It wasn't high fashion but it was a comfortable night gown. She was alone with the children and neither would make a Vogue review.

Bill left after rewinding the video to retire in some sort of bunkhouse. Where Rip went she had no idea. She wondered what time Len returned from his hospital vigil.

With the dry nuzzling infant tucked against her side she padded barefoot toward the kitchen where she had left a light before she went to bed. She confidently went about preparing fresh formula for the patient infant that had been so unceremoniously trusted to her care.

Amid the running water and the clutter of her own thoughts, Lorna did not hear the door open. She felt a presence and turned to see a stout tall man following Rip through the back door.

Both were startled to see her but no more startled than she was.

What startled her was the change in Rip's appearance. He wore a cleaner lighter version of the worn hat she first saw. He had shaved the bristles off his jaws making his chin seem more prominent than before. His mutton chops were clean and trimmed, looking charmingly old fashioned. He wore a bright green plaid shirt and tan twill pants tucked into black boots with silver guards on the heels and toes.

Lorna took in the change with sweeping admiration. Rip's mouth tightened with pleasure in response to her unmasked reaction. She immediately regretted her show of approval and turned her attention to the other man.

"How is she?" Lorna asked the man she presumed to be Len when she took in his weary features, worry lined from hours of waiting by his wife's side.

"They got her patched up," Len shook his head in desperation, "She's hurt bad, but she'll be sedated for the rest of the night."

He walked across the room to her and his focus was on the child.

The child was not the focus of Rip's attention. With Lorna intent on the child's care, he felt free to take in the total picture of the unusual woman so unceremoniously interrupted at her task. She was unperturbed. She fit in. Something about her felt just right and he was puzzled that it should be so.