

Lorna's Route

Chapter Four Stirring

The embrace in which Lorna held Bud against her hip tucked the oversized cotton tee shirt in at the waist, creating a distracting irregularity in the hemline, bringing it rakishly above her knee. Rip discretely took in the attractive picture that presented. His expression remained stoic and unrevealing, his focus presumably on the baby firmly held in the crook of her arm.

Under lowered lids he surveyed her legs, but he spoke to Len of other things.

"Like I told you, Lorna Bannon is taking good care of Bud," Rip informed Len, apparently to emphasize some previous claim. His gray-blue eyes moved from Lorna's cradling arm to her disheveled hair. His gaze flittingly touched her firm chin, softly rounded cheeks, and smooth broad forehead, lingering on the smile lines of her expressive green eyes.

Lorna's radar was fully tuned to his critical appraisal, sensing a disapproval momentarily suspended. Unless she had read him wrong, he'd come out with jabs about her unseemly appearance in his own good time.

He turned to her and said, "I guess you figured this is Len Pederson." She nodded, rewarding him with a dimpled glance. She didn't let his remark interrupt her task.

Her indifference annoyed him but invited an unfettered study he wouldn't otherwise have dared to make. She was far more visible stripped of that corn yellow suit. The wild horses on her shirt bucked and galloped with her movements. The faded message of running free strangely reflected a pride and latent energy that radiated in her features.

His puritan upbringing left him with some guilt for observing her in her nightgown as it so obviously was. He recognized the oversized tee shirt as one he'd brought for Barb in a souvenir spree long ago at a Calgary Stampede. The scantily dressed city woman stirred all sorts of forgotten scenes in his memory. What was it about her that hooked his sanity?

What made him suddenly dress up like a dude? His attire had surprised her, and the glimpse he caught of her approval zapped his system with an intense jolt of pleasure. That kind of sensation he thought was lost in his antiquity and its reappearance was like a revitalization of his youth. Its

passing left a void and he felt bereft. He was drawn to her like a moth to a flame, and he reflected how futile that could be.

What twist of fate brought this strange woman to his place? But, he reminded himself, it was she who brought him home and almost instantaneously became indispensable.

Len monopolized her attention.

"I'm grateful to you Mizz Bannon," he said as he took Bud from her, tucking his finger in the tiny fist with a loving greeting to his infant son. The baby wiggled and cooed with recognition as his daddy murmured and cuddled him against his chest.

"Thank you--more than I can say." Len let Bud tug at his finger and entertained him with loving infant sounds.

Lorna mustered all her inner forces to remain composed no matter how ridiculous she felt, embarrassed at being caught in a fashion show by a totally unexpected pair of reviewers. It was the time and circumstance that momentarily unsettled her. She was in a more complete state of dress in Barb's long loose shirt than she often was in her shorts in the park or her bathing suit on the beach. Len entertained his son but the lean and awkward Rip Woodall remained stiffly poised to broadcast an uneasiness that soaked into Lorna's self-control. It was most unnerving.

Rip continued to be preoccupied and uneasy. The whole community expected him to marry Dorothy last winter. That's what Dorothy wanted. He was still mulling the idea in his mind, too, but he had been distracted by Barb's injury. Wasn't that why he didn't think to call Dorothy for a ride home?

Lorna stood ready with the bottle and continuing her conversation with Len, "You're welcome, Mr Pederson, I hope your wife improves quickly."

"I do, too," he said wearily, handing the baby back to Lorna. "Right now I want to get something to eat and get some sleep."

"The fridge is full of food Dorothy brought over this afternoon," Rip offered, looking pointedly at Lorna, as if to indicate her shortcomings. Without that gaudy yellow suit she was easier to appreciate, mostly because more of her was visible. He finally allowed his eyes to rove suggestively down her figure.

God, she had little feet. Pretty little feet. And they were a healthy tan right down to the edge of her unpainted toenails. Didn't all city women paint their toenails bright red? Her legs were well formed and tanned right up to?--where? At least as far as he could see when her loose shirt had been hiked up under the baby's weight.

Those horses galloping wildly across her--breasts? The word didn't come easy but the wild intrusion was offensive. He was swept with the desire to grope and fondle, to tear her away from the pounding hoofbeats and Len's sight, as well. How could she stand there so unconcerned in front of two men?

Didn't she feel embarrassed at being half dressed?

You big clod, he thought, she's been wearing a lot less to get an all over tan like that. He filled a cup with cold coffee and punched the microwave buttons to bring it to a temperature that would equal the heat rising up his delirious frame.

Lorna pointedly ignored Rip after her flickering approval of his clean appearance. She offered a civil goodnight, avoided looking at him and took the baby away with the bottle.

Rip pictured her feeding Bud in the armless rocker in the nursery. Why did that stir him so? Did she have children of her own? He never asked. What difference did it make?

Why had he made such a point of that damned widow's food? What made him think this city woman didn't know how to cook? She took care of Bud and she did that exceptionally well. He hadn't meant to mock her efforts by pointing up Dorothy's contribution. He couldn't seem to control his impulse to lash out at Lorna, make her notice him. It wasn't working. He couldn't expect her to admire a man like him. She didn't react in any way he expected.

What did he expect of her? He already admitted women didn't 'fall all over' him. He wouldn't know what to do if they did. For some reason when she was around, he did want to be favorably noticed, or at the least, he wanted to make a good impression. That pointed remark couldn't have helped.

But what was done was done. He resented her whole manner and didn't stop to wonder why. She had an attitude problem that was too much for his pride to swallow. That damned woman tied him up in knots and left him feeling like he'd committed the biggest blunder of his life.

"What are you going to do about the kids?" Rip growled the demand. He'd try to find some local woman to come and help, but he'd been away so long he wasn't sure who was available.

Len shot Rip a most incredulous look and held a forkful of spaghetti suspended above his plate just a half second before placing it hungrily in his mouth.

"Doesn't look like I have to do anything," he said around the mouthful of food, "Lorna Bannon's made a contented baby out of that fussy son of mine, just like Bill said." Len scooped more food into his mouth and chewed while he cut a hunk of chocolate cake.

"Where'd you find her anyway?" Len looked up and waited for an answer.

Disturbed at Rip's hesitation, he asked, "She will stay, won't she?"

"How the hell should I know what she'll do? Can't you see she's one strange woman?" Rip growled. He knew that wasn't true. Lorna was a pleasant capable woman. She certainly wasn't strange, although a stranger to

them all. God, she makes me testy.

Len savored the mouthful of cake. His expression changed as if a new thought dawned and the incongruity puzzled him.

"She doesn't seem strange to me, just full of quiet confidence. You agreed with Bill that she stepped into a job neither of you wanted. What has she done to get you riled up?"

Len expected an answer. When one wasn't forthcoming, he continued, "She excites you, doesn't she?"

Rip let out a breathy snort of rebuttal.

Len didn't stop, "Why else would you get all dressed up like I haven't seen in years? Are you mad because she doesn't fall all over you?"

Rip snorted remembering his conversation about women falling all over him when Lorna defined him as a cowboy.

"I didn't think ladies' attention bothered you one way or another. You'd better stick with Dorothy. She's steady and dependable. Don't set your sights on something you can't have."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Rip demanded.

"I think you know exactly what it means. Lorna Bannon need not concern you unless you want her to."

"It don't matter to me," Rip shrugged.

"I think the man doth protest too much," Len put his plate and cup in the dishwasher and faced the older man.

"I thought you'd talked to her about staying, but I'll handle it. Above all, Barb needs peace of mind to help her injuries mend. She'll be helpless for a while and I've got to do something. Looks to me like Lorna is the best thing that could have happened. Now I'm going to get some sleep. See you in the morning."

Len dismissed the father of his boyhood friend as if he were an ordinary farmhand. Len had to speak to Lorna before he could get any rest, even as tired as he was. He knocked on the frame of the open nursery door at Lorna's back before he stepped in.

"I'm confused about how you came to take care of Bud," he said, getting to the point. He didn't wait for her comment before he continued.

"I understand you came with Rip to the ranch. Where did you meet him?"

Lorna explained briefly how she happened to be at the store and the reason she gave Rip a ride.

Len listened and grew more puzzled. "But how did you come to take care of Bud?"

"Bill tossed the fussy baby at me thinking Rip had brought me to take care of him. When I quieted him down, Bill refused to touch him again, even

when Rip explained why I had come. Then Rip asked me to stay and talk to you. He didn't want to handle the baby either."

Lorna gently smiled at Bud, reminded of how she challenged Rip to feed him earlier. She wasn't sure Rip would have refused to hold the baby. It was her own repulsion at his dusty clothes that made her hesitate. The compassion on Rip's face and his withdrawal at her rejection had caused her immediate regret but she had pride, too, and wouldn't reverse her stand.

Could she make it up to him? She banked her feelings against the lanky cowboy. Bud was the focus of her concern. She looked up at Len.

"I have no professional qualifications to take on your infant's care, Mr Pederson. I happen to have a mother's experience with babies and Bill couldn't cope so I agreed to help."

"Yes, and you certainly impressed him. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. We need you for a while. The question is: Are you willing to help us?" Len worried when she hesitated, but he felt a surge of encouragement when she didn't rush to say no.

"It's too late to do anything now so I suggest you and I take Bud in to see Barb tomorrow. I want her to help me sort it out. We can talk then." He wiped his hands wearily over his face and rubbed the back of his neck.

"I'm really bushed. I need to get some sleep." He halted at the door. "Sarah's not in her bed. Did she go home with Dorothy?"

Lorna explained where Sarah was and Len went to look in on her before retiring to the master bedroom at the opposite end of the mobile home.

Lorna rocked Bud with a jerky vigor that matched her emotional indignities. Len's assumption that Sarah had gone to stay with Dorothy annoyed her. Rip's pointed remark about Dorothy's good deeds irritated her. Rip's entire demeanor infuriated her. He'd certainly cleaned himself since he left the nursery earlier and that was a pleasant surprise. His every rugged craggy feature was enhanced by the change. But his haughty arrogance was not in the least mitigated.

She had hidden her discomfort at being seen in the sloppy tee shirt. Rip made no secret of his disdain of her appearance, no matter how flashes of admiration slipped through. Forget it, she admonished herself, he's not likely to have a passing appreciation of this old widow. Just because he looked long and hard doesn't mean a thing. Every man makes appraisals of a woman. That doesn't obligate them to a romance. Funny, she thought, how that description popped into her mind.

When Bud went back to sleep, Lorna got up to prowl as she often did at home. Security lights among the utility buildings reflected enough glow so she could find her way without turning on the lights. She had complete privacy in that end of the house and walked from window to window getting her bearings,

sorting out her thoughts.

The responsibility for strangers' children in a strange house shouldn't have made caused her uneasiness. Perhaps that was not the proper description. She wasn't uneasy as in fearful. The better description was soul-stirring. She was truly in a state that wouldn't let her rest.

And it was impossible to put her finger on the cause. She didn't consider the present circumstance as the reason for her restlessness. An odd agitation had lurked in the depths of her heart for some time. And the fact she could not identify the cause, or quell the feeling, was ultimately what disturbed her.

So far Bud was easy to care for, but how long could she stay just to care for him? Although her thoughts centered on the baby, the image of the tall rugged man remained in the corners of her mind. She couldn't separate the two, yet Rip didn't stay in this house. Where did he go? He clearly was not the boss but held some position of authority and respect. What difference did it make? If she stayed it would be to care for a helpless three month old infant, not an insufferable grown man that didn't give her the time of day.

No doubt she would have to make friends with the little girl who clung to Rip and Bill for reassurance. Sarah had two strong adults to care for her so the responsibility wouldn't fall to Lorna. Sarah took Bill's suggestion to 'camp out' in her own sleeping bag on the thick carpet in front of the video Bill put on the television for her. She sucked up spaghetti just like the lady dog and the tramp did in the movie. Sarah fell asleep long before the story came to an end.

Lorna was half jealous that Sarah might have stayed with Dorothy and wholly pleased to remember Sarah's dislike of the widow almost to the point of refusing to eat the favored spaghetti. None of that should have mattered at all.

Rip's inconsistent attitudes bothered her more. Why did he openly admire her one moment and turn cold angry eyes on her the next? Her attitude towards him was equally ambivalent. She was repelled by his arrogance but intrigued by his pride. Weren't they one and the same?

She looked out on the shadowy darkness among the trees between the house and the barns. From the nursery window a shrouded mystery enveloped every shadow beyond the artificial light. The real mystery was not in the darkness of the shadows but in the depths of Lorna's heart. She finally got a few hours of fitful sleep.

Bud wakened Lorna at dawn and she fed him again but this time she did not go back to bed. She was a morning person and in spite of sleepless nights, her active mind never let her go back to sleep once the sun was up. She showered and dressed in the suit she wore the day before.

She made a fresh pot of coffee and went to get milk from the refrigerator. Dominating the middle shelf was a huge liver. At least that's what she thought it was. Chicken livers looked like that only a hundred times smaller. She

recalled the butchered beef of the day before. When she got over the shock she had tomato juice and toast.

She stepped out on the screened deck beyond the kitchen when it was light enough for her to see and was surprised to hear voices and activity in the direction of the barn. If Len had gone out, she hadn't heard him, although she was not surprised. The master bedroom with its own bath was at the opposite end of the building from where she'd slept.

Len was conferring with the ranch hands. Ranch work went on and decisions made to identify the tasks, machines and workers for the day ahead. He waved to Lorna as he came toward the house.

"Can you have Bud ready by nine?" he called. "Rip is going to take Sarah. Bill can help get her ready." As he came up the steps, he made a favorable remark on Lorna's bright yellow suit.

"I didn't have a change of clothes," she said. "If I stay, I'll need to go home and get a few things." With that statement, Lorna practically put in a formal application for the baby's care.

"I'll follow you to the hospital. One way or another I'll need my car."

Len didn't get his hopes up too high because Barb might not approve, but Lorna appeared amenable to caring for the baby. Len couldn't take over Bud's care completely. He still had the ranch to run and with Barb remaining hospitalized he wanted to spend a lot of time encouraging her. Neither he or Barb could call in a mother or sister for emergency help. Rip was the nearest thing to a relative either of them had.

If Barb approved, and Lorna didn't immediately agree to help, Len was sure Barb's condition would be the final persuasion when Lorna met her. Her bandaged body garnered sympathy from all who looked at her. It would be weeks before she could use her left arm and perhaps longer before she could walk without crutches. Perhaps when she came home he could manage alone.

Barb brightened through her waning sedative when Len leaned over for a kiss.

Lorna stood back during the interchange and held the baby still strapped in a car carrier.

"Honey, this is Lorna Bannon. And I brought Bud, too. Do you feel up to making decisions this morning?" Len set the car seat on the chair and released the restrictive belt. He brought Bud to Barb for cuddling. She couldn't do more than give him a one-armed hug. Her other arm lay immobile in bandages at her side.

Lorna greeted Barb and they liked what they saw in each other. Lorna's heart went out to the bandaged woman, struggling against her pain. Barb's left arm was heavily bandaged as was her left leg. Both appendages had been badly mangled in the accident, fortunately without a broken bone.

"Rip brought Sarah in a few minutes ago. The doctor didn't let her stay. She was so worried about me, but I think she's reassured. I didn't expect to see Rip. I'm glad he came back just now. He'll be able to help you with the children."

"That's what we need to talk about, Honey." Len explained who Lorna was and how she happened to be at the ranch.

She stepped from the room to let Len and Barb discuss the children. Surely Barb had ideas of her own about their care. Lorna would not be surprised if Barb had already come to a decision that would end the discussion and leave Lorna free. A freedom Lorna was willing to forego for a few days.

Lorna looked again at the map Len had drawn for her. She couldn't find her way back to the Pederson farm without it. As she looked around the shrub dotted ravines and twisting road, she wasn't all that certain she would find the farm with the map. If she didn't arrive by noon, would they send someone out to search for her? She doubted it. There was no one to spare on a hunt if they did decide she was lost.

Suddenly she saw a part of the road which she remembered. She was approaching the curve where she had stopped yesterday. The road was wide enough for two vehicles but as all unmarked primitive country roads, it had no railing on the downhill side. She stayed in the middle to avoid the steep dropoff on her right.

Not one car had passed, coming or going, just like yesterday, she thought. If that was normal, she wondered why the road was so well maintained. Even at the speed she was traveling, dust rolled up and trailed out behind her. She slowed down and indulged in viewing the awesome scenery from the middle of the road.

In the next moment, a pickup truck spun around the corner unable to hold to its own side of the road. Brakes squealed before she was flung against her shoulder harness at the moment the truck slammed into the left front corner of her Ford Probe.

Before the dust settled, Rip stepped out of the truck. He slammed the truck door in frustration. Dozens of times he had driven here. He knew every lump and rise in the road. Why did he pick today to challenge that curve? He had taken the corner too fast. It was because of his wayward thoughts reflecting on this very woman that he hadn't been paying attention to the road. He was disgusted and angry with himself, doubly so because it was HER that he ran into.

Lorna was devastated at the thought of her dented fender. Rip was angry enough to kill with the look in his gray-blue steel eyes. If his thoughts were bullets Lorna would have been mortally wounded. As it was, her shock

reverberated in pain and outrage from the familiar scowling anger exploding from Rip's advancing hulk.

He had his nerve being angry at her! He was traveling too fast to keep on his side of the road. The tire tracks in the dust attested to the truck's position. His carelessness was evident but who could prove his speed?

"What the hell are you doing in the middle of the road?" he yelled.

"Don't you swear at me in that tone of voice," Lorna shot back. "Just look what you did to my car." She ran her hand over the crumpled metal. Her voice trailed off to a keening whisper, "My beautiful green chariot."

She turned and glared.

Out loud she coldly demanded, "What do you propose we do?" Lorna reflected on her use of we instead of you. Was she accepting some responsibility for the outcome? There was no way they could inform police immediately.

"A sheriff isn't likely to come along to ticket you for driving too fast for the curve." Lorna did place the blame on Rip's fast driving and wouldn't budge on her opinion there. She faced Rip with the obvious truth and he stood his ground perilously close to her.

"No. And none will happen along to ticket you for parking in the middle of the road, either." Rip's chin was set, unyielding.

"Do you deny your liability for the damage to my car?" Lorna demanded, despite her trembling knees. She had been badly shaken at the terrible possibility at being crashed into the canyon but even the comparatively less damage to her car was devastating.

"Of course I deny it. You were in the middle of the road where you didn't belong," he snapped.

"The impact would have knocked me right off the edge if I had been over any farther. See how my car was pushed?" She swept her open hand toward the tracks in the settling dust. When she leaned to measure the depth of the canyon beyond, anger rapidly replaced her trepidation and bolstered her trembling body.

"I could have been killed." She recoiled at the fear of it, her figure frozen with the shock of what might have been.

Her pale green slacks and flowered blouse stood in sharp contrast to the brown grassy hills beyond. Rip, too, realized the grizzly outcome if her car had rolled with her over the edge, and in his relief that it had not happened, he denied the notion.

"You're imagining things." Rip was late for his appointment in town and this crusty woman wasn't going to give up. She turned on him, indignity flaring.

"Well, are you going to have my car repaired?"

He threw up his hands. "O.K. I'll take the responsibility." He jabbed his fists on his hips and matched her glare. The damage to the fender did not restrict movement of the wheel. She could continue to drive to the ranch.

"Now will you move that green pod out of my way so I can get to town?"

She stood her ground. "Can I trust you to remember your promise to fix the damage when we get to the farm?"

He dropped his hands and perceptions of disbelief spread like storm clouds over his features. He released a long indignant breath.

"Lady, I may be a big ugly cowboy, but I am not dishonest," he growled. He turned away before she could humiliate him further.

"You're not ug--" Lorna bit off the word. What a harsh portrait he painted of himself! He didn't like his own appearance! Well, that explained a lot of things about his ornery personality. What an enlightening, even amazing, observation. She was astounded at how she dropped her own defensive attitude when she heard him express that unkind description of himself.

Rip scrambled into the truck and backed off against the bank so she could drive past. With his chin set and his mouth in a hard line, he avoided Lorna's gaze. From his corner vision he knew she avoided his.

Deep in the back of his mind sneaked a tiny suspicion that Lorna blurted a denial at his statement. And it was not a denial of his honesty. As he waited for the dust to settle, he frowned in speculation, not completely believing what he heard, but the hard line of his taut lips softened just a little.

Lorna thought long and hard about the vulnerability of the insolent man and the lack of confidence his unfriendly attitude revealed. What difference did that new insight make? None, of course. But Rip's image would unsettle Lorna for a long time to come.

Lorna wanted to believe that the Pederson home expanded with consolation the way the screened door burst open when she drove in and came to a stop by the picket fence. Sarah rushed out to greet her. Len strode out behind her, leaving Bill to stand by the door, holding it open in welcome. She trembled with pleasant surprise at the gesture of friendship the flurried reception implied.

Just cool it, she told herself, it's not you that is so important. This family had a solid nucleus in Barb and they're using me for a substitute, when it's really the baby they rally around. Who would suspect an infant would create such dependency from a group of otherwise self-reliant individuals?

She looked beyond Bill into the living room, but no one else appeared. Of course not, Rip passed her on his way into town, impressing with his unwarranted fury, lasting damage on her indelible psyche and her dependable

chariot. The angry exchange with which they'd parted had left her drained. What mysterious yearning within her stood poised for his reception? Why did she crave a welcome from that cantankerous man?

Sarah stopped abruptly at the gate, suddenly shy, clinging to the pickets, peeking through. Len came forward to help Lorna with her luggage. The crumpled fender caught his eye before he reached the gate.

"What happened?" he asked, stopping to evaluate the damage.

"It seems I was in Mr Woodall's way and he took a parting shot at me." Sarcasm dripped through Lorna's tone. Even at a distance she felt compelled to lash out at him. Was there no limits to the ways he could effect her?

"Rip did that to your car?" he remarked with an incredulous tone. "He just left a few minutes ago, on his way into town."

Len looked off into the distance, and mused, "He's been a different man since he came back and it's got me worried."

"What do you mean?" Lorna had most often seen Rip moody and disagreeable. She thought back to what Joyce had said about his rodeo work.

"I got the impression he came back from the rodeo circuit under duress, as if he didn't want to come." Lorna put into words the thought that just now occurred to her. Rip was tense about something that had nothing to do with her so he had no cause to take his misery out on her. And she wouldn't stand still to be his whipping post.

"I wondered if he was always so testy. He surely vented his anger on me," Lorna continued, "He came around that high curve too fast on the wrong side of the road and I couldn't swerve to avoid him without going over the cliff." She waved her hand in the general direction of the hills.

"I know the place. It's a dangerous one all right," Len agreed. "Rip knows the danger of that curve. It's not like him to forget it. Used to caution Brad and me about that part of the road all the time. Well, we'll get your car fixed. Now let's get you settled in."

Lorna hadn't heard Brad mentioned before. She sensed he shared some drama with Len but her curiosity had to be curbed. There was plenty of time to hear details about the lives of the Pedersons'. She had agreed to care for the baby for at least a week. She packed her clothes and returned to look after Bud full time. She lifted her travel bag out of the car.

"Let me carry that," Len urged. She handed it to him and indicated she would carry the overnight case herself.

Len stepped through the gate and swung Sarah on his hip, saying, "I want you to help Lorna. Promise you'll do that for Daddy?"

Sarah smiled faintly and gave an exaggerated nod with her face half hidden against Len's chest.

Lorna smiled at the gesture. That was the third man in the last twenty

four hours to hold Sarah within strong arms. What a lucky girl, Lorna thought, wistfully. How she envied the simple hug the child received. Lorna should be so lucky to rate that affection. When she pictured the thought in her mind, it was on Rip's chest she would choose to lay her cheek. But he wasn't here and that was not likely to happen even if he were.

"Glad yer back," Bill said, as he stepped out of the doorway to let them enter.

Before Lorna unpacked she checked on Bud and found him peacefully asleep. Len had cared for him after she left him at the hospital with Barb.

In Sarah's room the rugged maple bunks had been separated, one placed on the far side of the spacious room and one near the door, for quick access to the nursery.

Lorna considered this room the same as she did the hotel rooms she occupied in her previous travels. It was temporary. She was not here for a long stay so found no need to make herself at home any more than she did on the many other trips.

She hung her blouses and slacks in the roomy closet and left her underwear in her travel bag, not finding an empty drawer in the dressers or bedside stands. Perhaps that could be changed when she became better acquainted with Sarah's preferences.

Bud was now top priority in her life. Lorna was surprised at the excitement with which her friend, Mary, greeted the news of her babysitting job when they talked as she packed for her stay on the farm.

"Lorna, that will be an adventure," Mary said with enthusiasm, "you'll have your hands full, if you ask me. How long will you be there?"

"I have no idea. I suppose it depends on how rapidly Barb's injuries heal, although I'm sure she'll be recuperating at home rather than in the hospital as soon as the doctor releases her. I have a feeling she'll want Bill to take over then. She wasn't completely at ease about a stranger caring for her baby."

"But if Bill didn't want to take care of the baby right away, what makes her think he'll willingly do it later?"

"I don't know, Mary, and I won't know until the time comes. I promise you'll be the first to know."

"Peter has doubts about the arrangement. He thinks it will be too strenuous for you. You've never spent that much time with your grandkids and he's miffed about that, too."

"Peter nor Sally asked for help when their's were that young and certainly didn't have the kind of emergency the Pederson's have," Lorna stated.

"I'll talk to them about that. I've always felt Sally didn't want me to be too close to her kids. Maybe I've just been too sensitive about intruding on her

child raising methods. You know the nasty reputation given mothers in law."

"I know what you mean. I had to bite my tongue many times around my grandchildren. They can be selfish little poops. Always wanting to know what I'm going to give them."

"I'd be there for Peter and Sally the minute an emergency came up but in their home the job would be different. I'd take more responsibility because they are my family. I'm going to take care of Patrick and Amanda's children early this winter."

"What's going on there? Another baby due? You're not keeping me informed."

"No. Patrick won a free ticket to Hawaii and he wants to take Amanda on a real honeymoon. They couldn't afford tickets for the kids and they are too little to get much out of such a trip."

"Except making it more difficult for the parents to really enjoy the trip. Little kids aren't always happy travelers."

"They're wonderful on short trips, though. And I'll drive so I'll have my own car. I love taking them out to parks and even the mall."

"Then you'll get some practice on the kids you're going to take care of out on that farm."

"I only have the baby to care for. The Pederson's have other people that share responsibility for the house and, of course, farmhands for the chores."

"You mentioned a little girl," Mary ventured.

"Yes, Sarah was so cute when she insisted that she was nearly five years old. Seems with that age comes extra privileges. There's an old man who looks after her most of the time; she calls him Uncle Bill. He's her companion and protector so I don't expect her to be any extra work. She could surprise me, I suppose."

"What about the man--Woodall--where does he fit in?"

"I haven't a clue. He returned from a rodeo circuit, that's all I know. Mr Pederson called him back, I guess, but I'm not sure why. I think an old car was stolen."

"I wouldn't have thought there was crime in the country. Oh, Lorna, you aren't taking any valuables with you to be stolen, are you?"

"Me? Valuables?," Lorna mocked, "I will leave my crown jewels in your care, my friend. You can have the privilege of spending sleepless nights over their protection." They laughed at the thought of Lorna's hypothetical wealth.

"I'm going to miss you, Lorna. Who can I get to go with me to the concert Thursday night? Can you come back for that?"

"I won't make any promises. There's a neighbor woman who needs enlightenment but whether she'd enjoy a city concert is hard to say. She probably doesn't know the difference between Wagner and Bach anyway." The

expression on Lorna's face brought a start to Mary, causing her to study her busy friend for an intense moment.

"You met a woman you didn't like?" Mary asked, hesitantly.

"She didn't want me to like her. And she made it plain that she didn't like me. She suspected I was making a play for her big boy friend."

"Ahhh, the plot thickens. Is that big boy friend, your Woodall?"

"You guessed it, but he's not 'my' Woodall. Don't you go making the wrong assumptions, too." Lorna pulled the zippers closed on her travel bag and carried it to the door, turning to wait for Mary to precede her into the hallway.

"She must be quite insecure about him to get defensive over a chance meeting and a car ride. Or is there more you haven't told me?" Mary asked, with a sly bend of her head.

"I've told you all I know about the man."

"I'm not talking statistics, Lorna. How about attitudes? Feelings? Radar? Intuition? You know there's more to communication between people than tangible facts."

"I did think it was strange he didn't call her to get a ride in the first place, if they were so close to getting married. The store keeper mentioned that and wondered why the woman didn't offer to look after the Pederson kids. I don't know what Woodall said to the woman, but he sounded courteous enough. He growls at me or loses his temper or clams up completely."

"But Lorna, the point is, what do you think of him?"

"I think he's arrogant and ill-tempered and insignificant, that's what I think of him."

"Hey, that's pretty strong stuff. I hope he doesn't get in your way. He won't remain unscathed." Mary reenforced her statement with a strong jerk of her chin looking for confirmation at Lorna.

"He's not around Pederson's house so he won't get in my way," Lorna shrugged, "I'm ready to go. Don't forget to water my plants."

And Lorna had told Mary all she knew about Rip Woodall. But there was no way she could tell Mary or anyone else what she THOUGHT about Rip Woodall. She couldn't define for herself her feelings, the way they conflicted with each circumstance. He had an effect on her that brought him to her thoughts far too often. And there was nothing she could do about that.

She sat on her bed, leaning forward with arms rigid, her hands on her knees while she pulled her thoughts together. With frequent regularity she summoned the recollection of the titillating jolt she'd felt under Rip's hard grip in the nursery when she accused him of some devious plan for bringing Dorothy in to meet her. Lorna had not heard Dorothy voice concern that day about Bud so she couldn't believe Rip's introduction was entirely innocent. He

wasn't making a big deal out of Bud's care. If anything, it had made Dorothy angry to find a stranger in Pederson's home. But Rip didn't appear to care about that. Whatever his motive, it would have to await his disclosure if he chose to reveal it at all.

He readily pointed out Dorothy's superiority in culinary skills. Did he bring her in to Lorna to point up Dorothy's superior femininity as well? Lorna bemoaned the fact that she was less feminine than Dorothy and a few years older. She wanted to shrug off the negative comparisons. But no doubt Rip's eyes were clear. He could see the differences. Would he ever come close enough to touch her again?

Rip's absence, in a most distinct way, was Lorna's answer.

Rip was not around before and wouldn't be now except she was holding him responsible for her car repair. That was next on her priority list. How that damage depressed her! That arrogant man's carelessness was another cause for anger and she couldn't purge him from her thoughts.

She slapped her open palms against her thighs, stood up and turned in one sweeping motion, catching the shrinking action of Sarah at the doorway. The wide eyed girl, stood clutching her arms around her stomach, holding a finger in her mouth.

Lorna was momentarily puzzled, then realized Sarah had reacted with fear to the sudden slapping movement Lorna had just gone through in her frustration over her feelings about Rip Woodall.

Damn that man! Was fretting over him going to prevent a friendship with this timid little girl?