

Lorna's Route

Chapter Five Posturing

Lorna rarely saw Sarah in her room. She greeted her now with mild surprise.

"Is it all right for me to be in your room?" she asked, when Sarah remained silent in the doorway. Lorna wanted to be friends and she needn't have worried.

Sarah moved her head up and down slowly, her eyes getting bigger with every downward stroke.

Lorna remembered Len instructing Sarah to help her settle into her room but she wasn't often near. The child's shyness kept her close to Bill and usually busy playing outdoors. Lorna would have insisted on sleeping somewhere else if the child didn't want to share her room. Bill or Len read Sarah to sleep before Lorna retired and the active little girl slept much longer than Bud, who got Lorna up before she did.

Lorna went to her travel bag and pulled out a book she had tucked in with her clothes. It was 'The Wind In the Willows' a story she'd read to her children and grandchildren many times. It didn't have the vivid colors of the fairy tale book Lorna found by Sarah's bed earlier but it had appealing illustrations of mice and rabbits and frogs. Lorna hoped the story about the little creatures would appeal to Sarah, too. Lorna handed the book to her.

"I read this book to my boys when they were little," she said, "Would you like to look at the pictures? If you like, I'll read it to you sometime. O.K.?"

Sarah hesitated. The next instant she grabbed the book and ran down the hall, calling, "Uncle Bill, look at this."

"Well, so much for that." Lorna shrugged and followed her toward the kitchen.

Len appeared in the living room doorway at Sarah's call and caught her on the run, lifting her high above his head. "Whatcha got there?" he asked as he cuddled her against his chest. His gaze fell on the unfamiliar book.

"Where did that come from? You didn't take something that belongs to Lorna, did you?"

Lorna answered for her. "No, I gave it to her. I thought it would be a nice change from that wicked stepmother story."

Len put Sarah down, keeping his eye on the book. Lorna smiled,

gratified to see the shy and timid part of the child disappear.

Sarah beamed up at her father's face with healthy extroverted pride, "She said I could look at the pictures."

"Can I see them, too?" he asked, and she thrust the book into his hands, willingly.

He opened it for a better look, ruffling through some of the pages. With contemplation he handed it back, saying, "I remember the adventures those animals had in the meadow. You'll like them. Go show Bill." He gave Sarah a gentle pat on her backside and she resumed her race to the living room.

Len frowned in thought. His eyes turned to Lorna.

"What wicked stepmother story were you referring to?"

"There was a book on her night stand with a ribbon marker in it. The marked story showed a wicked stepmother leering behind a door." Lorna thought those stories were written for adults anyway. Would Len be upset about her derogatory assessment of the brightly illustrated fairy tales? Would he resent her criticism of his child's book?

Len looked thoughtful for a moment and Lorna saw a revelation sweep across his features. He nodded, his lips forming a hard straight line of conviction.

"Maybe that's what happened. That story must have caused Sarah's fright the day Barb got hurt. Rip couldn't figure out why Sarah was so scared about Barb's absence. It was important that Sarah see for herself that her mother was all right. It makes sense, if she thought Barb was gone, that she might be replaced by a terrible woman. No wonder she was frightened. I'll get rid of that book."

"She can't always be shielded from those stories, Len. It was an unfortunate coincidence that the accident happened just when she'd heard that part of the story. She'll learn the difference between fantasy and reality with all the love that surrounds her. Children have a better grasp on life than we'd like to give them credit for."

"Good. I'll tell Barb that. I'm going to see her now." He called his intentions to Bill and Sarah, who were too busy looking at Lorna's book to respond with more than a fleeting goodbye to him as he crossed the variegated brown carpet to the lovely and intricate Peachtree entrance.

Len called to Lorna from the open door, "Rip's looking at your car. You might want to talk to him before this storm gets any worse."

Lorna hurried to catch up with Len to ask, "What can he do? I have to notify my insurance company and get an assessment of the damage before anything can be done."

"Yes, he'll need some information from you as well." When Lorna seemed reluctant to go down the steps, Len stopped and looked into her eyes, searchingly, before he asked, "Do I sense some antagonism between the two of

you? Is that what's eating Rip?"

"What makes you think that?" Lorna shot back quickly. Too quickly, thought Len.

"I find it hard to believe his missing Edsel is all that's bothering him. That was the reason he came back. His car was stolen. We noticed it missing right after a bad rain storm. Tore gullies in the fields and washed soil down the canyons. Made a mess of spring plantings. Now the wind is trying to blow it all away."

Len remained lost in thought as he looked toward the fields he had recently harvested. Lorna hoped he'd forget his analysis of Rip's attitude, but to her discomfort he returned to his first remark.

"Rip's been getting more and more restless lately. Thought the widow Lewis was going to cure that, but now I'm beginning to doubt she has what it takes. At least Rip doesn't appear to be giving her the chance to try. What do you think?" He watched Lorna puzzle over the question.

"I met Dorothy. She should be a nice companion for him," Lorna lied, quickly adding, "and cook. He says she's a good cook."

"I didn't expect him to look for a cook," Len disagreed. "A companion ought to be amenable and attentive to all his needs. He's normally an easy going person, patient, not restless."

Lorna didn't have a clue about what it would take to cure Rip's restlessness and thought it odd that Len should approach her with the subject.

"I don't know about his restlessness. He's always so antagonistic I hadn't noticed anything else about him. I don't know what makes him angry. If there's something about me that makes him act like that, it's wrong for me to stay. You don't need any more disruption in your life."

"You better believe it. But I need you here. Rip's going to have to work out his own problems. Anyway, I'm off to see Barb. Be back late, I imagine." And he bent into the wind as he walked out the gate, spoke briefly to Rip and went to his truck.

Lorna had to face Rip sooner or later. It might as well be now. She would give him the information and get the necessary repairs so she could be done with him.

A capricious wind gust teased a little dust devil from the sand in the drive and swirled it away across the field, building it higher and more menacing as it swayed and twisted faster when released from the protection of the towering cottonwood trees. Lorna winced and shielded her eyes from the wind gust that pushed at the door. The sky darkened to a brownish gray. A storm at any rate was coming, if not one of thunder, lightning and rain.

She struggled to compose herself and hunched down to face the pummeling wind. Ready or not, she took a deep breath and went carefully down the steps, watching through squinting eyes, the lean fit man examine the

damage, especially the seams in the car body, as if deciding how puzzle pieces fit together.

She searched her brain for civil words with which to open a conversation. Instead, what came to mind were words to attack him for his carelessness. But that wouldn't do. An approach like that wasn't likely to improve his personality. She had to prevent her anguish over her damaged car from turning into a verbal attack about an accident that could not be undone.

"What do you think?" she finally asked him, steeling herself against the wind as well as an angry retort. It came as she expected.

"Huh!" he snorted without looking up. "Aren't you going to ask if I'm going to fix it?" He continued to run his fingers over the joints of the car body, refusing to address her face to face. He had told her on the spot he would take the responsibility and haughtily defended his honesty. He had also blistered at how ugly he felt beside her that day, the only way he could think to punish himself for hitting her car.

Lorna bit her lower lip. The wind swirled about them and she leaned closer to him to protect her face from blowing dust. She would not lose her temper. She would not let him bait her. She would not be hasty with her response. She would not!

She would look squarely into his face. She would concentrate on those things about him which pleased her. She would look for enjoyable features. She would.

His jaws were rugged and solid as the basalt that tumbled from eroded cliffs. His unruly sideburns resembled the tenacious brush that grew beside them. She remembered Rip's description of himself and reaffirmed her former assessment.

Unequivocally, she decided he was not ugly. She would never classify him as beautiful, either. He had a solidness about him, a bold look of firmness, a substantial naturalness, an affinity with nature. Earthy was the better word. Her determination brought an intensity to her eyes that bordered on contemptible. Her expression challenged him to deny her decision.

Rip pondered her silence and straightened up to stare at her. But the natural uprightness of his male physique didn't make him any more civil. If anything, the straighter he stood, the grouchier he became. He watched her measuring his ugly features and he didn't like it. He couldn't endure the close scrutiny. He delved for his most sarcastic tone.

"Well, the city woman's at a loss for words. Imagine that," he mocked. He glimpsed a softness crossed with pain in her eyes a second before she dropped her gaze and turned to walk away.

Instant regret could not take back his reckless hateful tone. God, what a stupid thing to say, he thought. Now I've really done it. He reached out and caught her by the arm. But gruffness was ingrained in his nature.

"Don't walk away from me," he commanded, gripping her arm more harshly than necessary. He felt her muscle tense, and real muscle it was. That surprised him and he was immobile just long enough for her to pull herself around to face him.

"With an attitude like yours, how can you expect me to do anything else? You don't invite a decent conversation."

He knew that was true but he wouldn't apologize. He couldn't. If she ever found out how she affected him, it would be hell to pay. But what was he to do? He had to get her car repaired. And there was information he had to have before that could be done.

She stood calmly in his grasp, hardly breathing, never blinking. He released her arm and stuffed his hands into his pockets. She waited. He pushed out his breath and bent his head against the wind, ordering a calmer tone of voice.

"I need your insurance information," he announced in a remarkably moderate sound, "and a complete description of the car model and color."

He surprised himself. He wanted to be civil with this prideful woman but she made him wary. She kept him on guard like he was with the maverick broncos he took to rodeos for bucking stock. Not a fitting attitude to take with females that he'd been taught to protect.

Yet it was her refusal to expect protection that intrigued him even though her refusal struck him as a rejection of his manliness. Curiously, he didn't feel less of a man when she was near. Fact was, he felt much more like a man, more like a man who wanted her to respond to him like the man he was, and in the right way.

What was right? She kept him interested, didn't she? She kept him on his toes all right. He was so uptight he couldn't see straight. And although he had denied it to Len, Lorna did excite him. The feeling was exhilarating with a freshness that scared him, prickling his skin like nettles right down to his toes.

Keep cool, he insisted to himself, I'll see this repair through and be done with her. But even then he knew that wasn't what he really wanted.

Lorna returned his cool appraisal with her own. The man does have a reasonable side, she thought. I'd better go carefully because this side of him is fragile and I can't bear to have it shattered. I want my car repaired. But that's not the real reason I'll be cautious. I want to know more about this man and I'll never get to know him if I lose my temper. Will any amount of my restraint prevent him from losing his?

"The papers are inside," she offered, "Let's get in out of the wind."

Lorna got in behind the steering wheel and Rip got in the other side, without removing his hat as he had before. He continued to hunch down as he had when facing the wind. Lorna wondered if he hunkered down expecting a fight or just determined to sustain the fighting front. She was surprised that

when the doors shut out the blowing sand, his manner changed and he became somewhat subdued.

He abruptly announced, "The parts have to be ordered from the factory to match the paint."

"The color is green, Calypso green," Lorna replied, hesitantly glancing at the location of the verifying papers. Her hand carefully avoided Rip's knee as she reached to open the glove compartment. He swiveled his hips, moving his feet and legs toward the door to accommodate her action, inadvertently pushing his shoulders back, angling them closer to Lorna.

Her car never seemed small before Rip's length slanted toward her. It was unsettling. They were no closer than they had been outside but within the enclosed space she felt the nearness with a great intensity. The juxtaposition of their faces was level and far more intimate. Lorna didn't have to look up to see the darkness in Rip's eyes glow with suspense. She dropped her gaze quickly, catching the sensual impact of Rip's male scent. In retrieving the papers she sought, she became more severe, forcing herself to be businesslike.

Rip doubted the wisdom of remaining in such close proximity to her, no matter what business they must transact. He was patient until Lorna leaned forward and he was assailed with the freshness of her hair. For an intoxicating second he forgot where he was and why he was there. There was no dusty wind to cover the earthy smell of this efficient little woman who so briskly brushed aside his knee to go about the business he had assigned her.

She had given him no glance of approval as she had that late night in the kitchen, but he was struck with a recurring wonder at his awareness of her nonetheless. His eyes never left her face as she jotted down the information on a sheet torn from her mileage log but he forced his attention on the scrap of paper she thrust into his hand, avoiding whatever her gaze might hold.

"Is that everything?" Lorna asked. At his affirmative nod she laid the documents on top of the dashboard. Leaning over his body again seemed an unnecessary hazard she somehow didn't feel brave enough to repeat.

An unusually powerful gust of wind whipped fragments of dried weeds through the air, making clicking sounds against the car, pulling her attention out of herself and distracting her from heightening emotions. Rip slipped the notes into his shirt pocket and groped for the door release, remarking, "I've got some things to do."

"Do you have to work out in this awful wind? It is worse than I've been in. When it hits us in town we stay inside until it blows over." Her words implied that he should do the same. Did she want him to stay and talk?

His fingers poised on the release lever, as if he, too, wanted to linger. His eyes tugged to look her way but he refused to turn and face her.

"It's precisely because of the wind that I have to be out there. See to it things aren't blown apart in the wind." He held the door securely as he opened

it, to prevent it being slammed open by the forcful wind. He ducked his head back into the shelter of the car and added, "Be careful when you get out. We occasionally lose doors in a wind like this." And he left her sitting there, wanting to see her to the safety of the house, knowing she would resent his galantry, hating the adequacy of his indecision.

Lorna shielded her eyes from the sharply driven sand.

The sky was brown instead of the deep gray that marks a usual thunderstorm. Lorna knew they were in for a sandstorm of the first order and she was anxious to get inside.

Lorna looked again toward Rip's back as he challenged the windblown sand. She marveled that work on the farm continued no matter what the weather. Her gaze lingered on his broad shoulders until he was out of sight.

Lorna wished Sarah had agreed to have her read the mouse and froggie adventures in the meadow but Sarah chose Bill for that honor. Sarah appeared to be tired of listening to the words. She lay on her stomach absorbing every detail of the pictures so intently thinking up the story for herself. Bill stood to spread his palms up and shrug a defeated gesture.

"Let me pour some lemonade," Lorna offered, continuing toward the kitchen.

"Thanks," he concurred, following her with his shuffling gait. "Might as well wet mah whistle while she's thinkin'." He settled himself wearily into a straight backed chair by the table.

"Doesn't she want to hear the story?" Lorna asked, disappointed that Sarah didn't show the level of interest her own children had at that age.

"Oh, I coudden keep up with 'er. She hasstah 'read' the pitchers first," he lamented. Without a pause, he drank the entire glass of lemonade and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He had his own code of decorum.

How remarkably Bill's diction reverted to that of an uneducated man when he conversed. Lorna had listened to him read to Sarah with perfect enunciation, each syllable properly pronounced. She sipped at her drink, contemplating Bill's discontent for a moment before showing her sympathy.

"I wondered why you weren't reading to her. You're well attuned to her habits. I'm afraid I couldn't catch up to her, let alone keep up. She's a very bright child."

"Yep, she is." Bill agreed, pushing his glass toward Lorna to indicate he wanted a refill, but offered to say no more.

"She's a very lucky child, too, to have you guide her when her parents aren't around." Lorna found Bill to be congenial, but talkative, he was not. She grasped for a question that would require an explanation of his relationship to Sarah, more than a simple yes or no. None but the blunt question came to mind.

"Sarah calls you 'Uncle'. Are you? Or are you Len's uncle?" She

hesitated to hear his answer, before she poured out a dozen other questions.

"Nope, jest Rip's friend. We's together in the war, the big un. Gonna end all wars, we wuz. Cum 'ere b'for Len wuz borned."

"My husband had such noble thoughts, too, first in England, later to France, and came home without physical injury. I take it you weren't so lucky." Lorna recognized Bill's injury for what it was--shrapnel that could not be removed--and she wondered if he would describe the extent. Many veterans considered that kind of souvenir a badge of honor and expounded in great detail how they had been cut down in battle. Some made a practice of exposing the scars. She was not prepared for Bill's evasive statement.

"Can't complain. I'm 'live. That ain't a claim ever' buddy kin make." Bill wrapped his knobby fingers around his glass and slid them up and down the sweating surface, his gaze fixed on the lemonade but with long remembered scenes claiming his rapt attention. He would say no more and Lorna respected his silence.

Sarah haltingly walked into the kitchen, totally engrossed in the picture book and in a quiet pensive voice, interrupted, "Look at this funny car, Uncle Bill."

She thrust the open book toward Bill's face. "See the animals ride the funny car."

"I 'spose ya want one," he declared.

"Oh, no. I'm going to have a car like Lorna's, all green and shiny. With a big wide pink stripe. Uncle Rip says I can."

"He does?" Lorna gasped, surprised that her car had been discussed by this child.

"Yes, he says it's a nice car. Even had a ride in it. Can I have a ride?" Sarah turned her bright hopeful countenance to Lorna.

"When the damage is repaired," Lorna promised and, Sarah, mollified, climbed into Bill's lap to hear of Mr Toad's wild ride.

Joyce dropped in the next day with her youngest son, who was six months older than Sarah. Joey went off to play while Joyce chatted with Lorna, "Wasn't that sand storm awful?" she asked. "It fairly blew the stubble off the fields. I'd much rather have rain than a dry wind like that."

"That sand gets blown into town and I never liked it much, either. But someone mentioned having a rain here that was quite awful. Didn't you think so?" Lorna recalled that Rip's words were somewhat different. He'd considered it one of the worst ever to hit the area.

"That was the most rainfall we had in one day and it wasn't a local shower, either. It poured rain on several counties," Joyce recalled, "Did a real job of washing the gullies. Water carries soil. The wind moves sand but it tears plants loose and pushes them into nooks and crannies like you wouldn't believe. You should see how the wind packed tumble weeds into the canyons."

Lorna remembered the weeds and brush covering trash in one ravine when she came through what seemed a very long time ago. She probably wouldn't get out to see the canyons again until she no longer took care of the baby. That depressed her but she kept her mind on other things when Bud required only her watchful eye.

Lorna hadn't seen Rip for three days. He suddenly appeared before her on the porch as she lifted Bud to her shoulder for his early morning burp.

"Give me the keys to your car," he demanded, "the parts are in. They'll be replaced today." At the look on Lorna's face he realized his mistake. He used the wrong tone of voice again. Yes, and he used a command, not a request. He couldn't seem to speak to her without an obsession to dominate. Why was her compliance important?

If she would, just once, show a little female inclination, show him she believed he knew what he was doing, show him some respect, he would act differently.

But would he? He was, after all, acting as he always had toward women. They consistently deferred to his decisions, never questioned his actions, always sweet and passive, never sour and decisive.

Not that Lorna was sour. Never sour. Just resolute. With ideas of her own. Determined to have her way. No consideration for his side of the matter. Not many dared to question his word.

He didn't come to decisions impulsively, or without thought. He expected compliance. Agreement. It had always been so. Why should he expect anything different at this stage in his life? Why should he expect anything different from her? But she was different. She had a mind of her own. That was very unsettling.

Rip held her steady gaze with narrowed eyes and watched golden flecks of the storm grow in the distance behind the green of her eyes. Why did he keep pushing like he was training a bronc to practice petulance? She wasn't the bronc in a show arena to bring out the cowboy's skill in a riding contest. For the life of him, he wouldn't let up on her.

"You didn't expect the garage to fix it out here, did you?" He had his hands on his hips again, taking that dominating posture, intolerant, immovable as the basalt in the hills beyond him.

Lorna rose from the rocking chair slowly, her features grim and resolute. Rip inwardly recognized his defeat before his mind would admit it. As short as she was, she annihilated his arrogance completely when she tucked Bud against her side and leaned slightly forward, pulling up to her full height.

She was livid. She had been "Rip free" for three days, almost banishing him from her thoughts altogether with the job she had assumed. Three days without an encounter and she thought her animosity toward him had subsided.

She was wrong. Dead wrong. His tone was insulting. The first syllable prickled the dormant irritation and brought back complete exasperation. This encounter was loaded with the most arrogant and insufferable overtones Rip had ever transmitted.

Give me, indeed!

She did exactly the opposite of what she had vowed to do. She challenged him, outrageously dared him, to repeat his demand of anything from her with his mocking tone.

"Mr Woodall, I'll have you know, that nobody, absolutely nobody drives that car but me. I thought I made that clear the day we met."

Rip's volume shrunk imperceptibly. She was a woman and he couldn't deal with her like he could with a male adversary.

Lorna's volume swelled noticeably. They faced each other defiantly a long cold moment before she turned and walked away. Knowing Rip's propensity for grabbing her, she delayed to toss a question over her shoulder.

"Where shall I take it?" If Rip thought she was tied completely to the house by the baby, he had better think again. She had warned Bill of such an impending errand when she would require his assistance.

Rip followed her into the nursery, quelling the desire to shake the obstinate female. She insisted on making everything hopelessly difficult. He could so easily drop her car off at the repair shop and spend the morning searching for information about his stolen Edsel.

But was she amenable? No. She simply would not comply. She insisted on an agenda of her own. And it was always in opposition to his.

Lorna tucked Bud into his crib and stood to pat her pockets in search of her billfold and keys.

"I'll make sure Bill can stay near the baby while I'm gone. Otherwise I'm ready."

Lorna stood unbearably close. Her chin defied him. Her whole stature displayed defiance. Her body radiated a tempting energy. It was a challenge he couldn't ignore.

Rip's indignation demanded satisfaction. His hands extended. He couldn't resist reaching for her. He had to dominate but he was at a loss as to how to do that without crushing her with his superior strength. He couldn't bring himself to that. Yet he was drawn like a magnet.

Suddenly and to his own surprise, he wrapped his arms around her, lifting her face to his lips, kissing her with a hard wistful craving.

Lorna had no leverage with which to resist, although at first she sought to find one. Her elbows bent to let her hands come to clutch his waist. To her own surprise, she clung to his body, kissing him with compliant yearning.

When Rip's embrace relaxed, Lorna's firm form slid slowly down his length, heightening his desire. Her body was far from the hard muscular form

he had envisioned. Odd emotions fled across his features.

"You're soft," he murmured in discovery.

"You're not," she replied, a little startled at the promise.

He stepped back, embarrassed at the undeniable response of his maleness. He had been socially ingrained with a modesty and his unbidden display made him miserable.

"What have I done?" he growled. He closed his eyes to the shocked expression he expected would appear on Lorna's face.

Lorna was unsure what his outburst meant. Was it the male's desire to dominate? Or was he ashamed to be a virile male? Or was he simply angry at her for his own lack of control?

She waited, allowing him to chastise himself. The next move had to be his, for the sake of his fragile ego as well as her own. She instinctively refused to denounce his action. She intuitively left him to sort out its meaning for himself.

For her part, she couldn't analyze her own feelings with any degree of objectivity. She didn't want to make a fool of herself over a cantankerous man but she couldn't deny her response to the thoughts of him that often intruded uninvited when she was otherwise occupied with the job of baby care. She was too confused to speak. Defining her feelings was nearly impossible.

She felt a loss when he didn't appear, a sorrow when he anguished, an anger when he criticized, and a flush of pleasure when he touched her. She was entirely too sensitive to his feelings, too responsive with her own emotions, too quick to interpret his actions as a fulfillment of her hopes.

Rip avoided Lorna's eyes. He strode to the door.

"I agreed to have your car in before eight. I'll lead with the truck."

So a delicate truce was made. Could it last? Would every encounter be a dispute or a romance? Every meeting, whatever the circumstance, was going to be a challenge to them both. No doubt about it.