

## Lorna's Route

### Chapter Six Sleuthing

Lorna parked her car near Rip's truck and reluctantly surrendered her key at the desk of the garage where the damaged parts of her car were to be replaced. She approved of the neat office and through the glass door inspected the dark cavern of the workspace, cluttered with tools and devices of a modern body shop. She stepped inside for a closer look.

Rip's conversation with the mechanic could not be overheard although he had no reason to keep his instructions from Lorna. He watched her enter and admired her style, somewhat disgruntled she always wore pants. He wondered unhappily if she owned a dress. In the next moment he was pleased that she was with him in her wheat colored slacks and brown striped cotton top. They harmonized with his tan cord pants and brown checked shirt.

A burst of pride swept through Rip's frame at the mechanic's nod of approval when Lorna appeared in the bleak assembly area.

Lorna beamed at the male admiration. She knew she was no raving beauty but she was attractive, and wise enough to appreciate respect when it came her way. She smiled and nodded at the mechanic in greeting. His greasy hands prohibited her usual impulsive handshake.

"I'll get to your car in an hour or so," the mechanic assured her and she brightly smiled her appreciation.

A flame of jealousy shot through Rip's frame. Instantly he swung away and quietly snorted at his spontaneous reaction. She had done it again! Brought out the surly response he had determined he would not make in her presence. He growled his disapproval.

What was that all about, Lorna wondered? Why should he get upset at the mechanic's remark? She followed Rip out of the garage with a shrug. She was getting used to his petulance. After his spontaneous kiss, his roguishness was almost endearing. Would it surprise him to know that she was beginning to appreciate his real character? Did his gruffness conceal a vulnerability he refused to concede? He appeared to nourish a harsh exterior around his softness like a bird builds hard calcium to protect the yolk of its egg.

Perhaps Rip's shell was protection from disappointments but it also was a barrier against love and affection. Lorna didn't realize that somewhere deep inside, her predatory nature began to seek a weakness in that shell. Her own

primitive quest through the maze of desire was more pressing than her rational mind could perceive.

Rip's thoughts were on a target of his own and now that Lorna's car repair was out of the way, his goal was to recover his stolen car. His intention was to begin the search today. Lorna had forced her company on him by refusing to let him bring her car in for the repairs.

Well, if he was stuck with her that was one thing but his search wasn't going to be postponed by this dominating female that graced his side, regardless of the pride her presence brought.

"I have to get some information from the car dealer over there," he gestured. "Would you like to wait in the truck? Or come along? "

Lorna swept her open hand toward the showroom he indicated, pleased at Rip's civility, however strained it seemed to be.

"I'll walk with you. Are you planning to buy a car?" she asked. What a pleasant change to carry on a normal conversation, she thought, in view of the hostility that he usually exhibited.

"No, there are already too many vehicles on the ranch," he answered. And it's a good thing we don't feel compelled to repair every little dent they get, he thought. I'd go broke very quickly if we did.

He greeted the salesman with a friendly handshake and introduced Lorna as a visitor at the Pederson ranch. She was struck by the salesman's sly appraisal as he limply took her hand. She bristled at the picture of intimacy he implied as he tied her to Rip with his smug glance.

Rip was known as a loner and knew perfectly well folks would raise eyebrows in curiosity at Lorna's presence at his side. He could dispel that notion at once with a few words explaining why they were in town but he didn't care what people thought.

No, don't kid yourself, Woodall, he chided himself, let them hold romantic thoughts. I like the idea. Nothing will come of it but it feels good. He declined to give the car salesman an explanation except to put in the request he intended.

"Carl, I need a picture of the Edsel wagon I bought from you."

Carl's chin dropped with surprise. He hesitated, searching his memory, mentally counting the years.

"That was a long time ago, twenty five years at least. I'm not sure I kept a brochure that long." Carl smelled an opportunity for a sale, so he decided he'd better dig into the files to appease this wealthy rancher. He hustled into a cubicle glassed off from the showroom floor and pondered the row of filing cabinets along the rear wall.

"I hope he has it. I'm going to need it." Rip offered Lorna an explanation for his request. He wanted her to understand.

More than that he wanted to make amends for the ludicrous display he put on this morning. It was something he couldn't explain. He had no excuse for kissing her. He fully intended shaking some sense into her. Now he couldn't remember why.

Even before the kiss, his body parts betrayed him. The kiss was an impulse that felt so right. Her docile acceptance, no--her willing participation--in that kiss, had changed his whole outlook. Maybe she did see something in him after all. Woodall, you damned fool, shape up. She's amusing herself. Why else would she have anything to do with an ugly galoot like him? But he was really attracted to this woman, to hell with her motives. If she was just playing, he could play, too, and let her have her fun.

He panicked at the puzzled expression on Lorna's face, afraid for a moment she read his thoughts. Then he remembered the picture he wanted and added, "Nobody remembers what those cars look like."

"Why is that important?" Lorna could understand Rip's nostalgia but could see no relevance in procuring a picture of a twenty five year old car.

"Mine was stolen some time last spring. The theft was not important to the sheriff. He issued a report on the state's wire and no clue ever turned up. I mean to look a lot deeper. I want that car back."

"Is it valuable?" Lorna was aware that Edsels were only manufactured a short time. She remembered how the design was ridiculed and withdrawn from the market.

"Considering today's prices, it isn't worth a lot of money. But it's valuable to me and I'm going to look for it myself." He offered no more explanation. It was his property and he wanted it back.

A ruffle and slam of a filing cabinet preceded Carl's triumphant declaration, "Here it is. I do have it after all."

Rip's excitement radiated with a brilliance that amazed Lorna. She strained on tiptoe to get a peek at the glossy pictures that animated the brusque man at her side. He paged through until he found the particular one for which he searched.

"Here. This one." He tipped the page down so Lorna could see the long sleek four door station wagon. The country squire design was supreme elegance, a mark of unrestrained size in more extravagant times.

"Mine is exactly that green with that simulated gray woodgrain along the sides."

"That blonding effect was a popular wood finish at the time," Lorna recalled. The finish on her kitchen cabinets brightened her home back then.

Rip continued paging through the brochure, bringing to mind other memories.

"Carl, I need to have this. My Edsel was stolen and it might stir some

memories if I find witnesses at the time of the theft."

"Be my guest. Just give me credit if you find that old car. A nice news story is good for business."

Rip's attention did not stray long from the brochure but his hand pressed Lorna's elbow, "Let's get started." He half led, half pushed, Lorna toward the door.

The ingratiating salesman followed closely.

"It's about time you got a new car, isn't it, Mr Woodall?" Carl was ever the pushy salesman.

Rip waved the brochure and nodded as he held the door for Lorna.

"You come back, ya hear? I can give you a real sweet deal," Carl called toward Rip's retreating back.

"Now what?" Lorna inquired, as they settled in Rip's truck.

"I guess you have to get back to Bud. I'm going to make the rounds of every house and farm in this part of the country to show what was stolen, talk to everyone I can find. The sheriff didn't do any local investigating."

"What do you expect to find out?" Lorna couldn't imagine what good that would do.

"Somebody might have seen it being driven away. Most everyone in the country notices an unusual car."

"I didn't see anyone when I was driving the day I found Joyce's store. That's why I was so sure there were no people for miles around. Your car could have been driven away, easily."

"That's where you're wrong. Your car was noticed. When it went into Pederson's and folks found out I'd come back, they accused me of being senile and buying such a fancy green car." Rip smiled in a crooked boyish way when Lorna gasped.

"They didn't!" At his serious nod, she added, "They couldn't have seen my car."

"Oh, your car was seen all right. I was asked why I was cruising all over the country before I showed up at the store."

"They called you senile for buying a fancy car?"

"Well, not really," he admitted, shyly ducking his chin, "What they said was: I had changed my style when I chose that green car. I've only bought trucks since the Edsel."

That description vindicated Lorna and she studied Rip as he drove, his left hand resting cavalierly on the steering wheel, his right arm impersonally stretched along the back of the seat, his hand so near her shoulder.

Rip quickly became immersed again in his search plans as he explained, "When Len first told me of the theft, I checked with every vintage car club in the country and every Edsel club in the world, thinking the thief would sell it to

some collector but there wasn't even an inquiry of those groups."

"How could anyone drive it away from the farmyard without being seen by the farmhands, or the Pedersons? Was it inside a building? How did the thief get the key?"

"The key was always left in the ignition. The battery was disconnected anyway. But about someone seeing it--there was a celebration in town called Pioneer Days. That's one day no one wanted to miss and Len assured me that everyone did go into town. He had several itinerant workers but they were all accounted for. But that's about the only time it could have been driven out of the yard without being seen. Len couldn't figure anything else. I want to find it."

Lorna was impressed with Rip's determination. Joyce had remarked that perhaps the car meant more to Rip than anyone imagined. His commitment to the task proved it.

"Anyone as determined as you are is sure to be successful," Lorna encouraged.

"You're the first person to think so," he lamented, and beamed an appreciative glance her way.

Rip's intent was to visit each farm within an hour's drive, showing the picture of his Edsel, hoping that someone would have seen it when it was driven away. In a flash of insight, Rip suddenly had an entirely different picture of the theft. He struck his fist on the steering wheel and shook his head.

"It could have been taken away in a truck," he exclaimed, "and not be seen at all. I never thought of that before."

"Wouldn't a big truck have been more easily seen, and mentioned?" Lorna asked. "That would mean it took more than one person for the job."

"You're right," Rip agreed, returning his attention to the road when Lorna grasped for a hand hold as the truck lurched and bounced over the ruts. "It would take a cattle truck and that would most certainly be noticed. Every rancher knows who's shipping cattle."

Lorna wasn't as certain of Rip's success now as she had led him to believe earlier. Admittedly it was something like searching for a needle in a haystack, except this search had to begin with finding the haystack. And Lorna was the first to admit that finding the first clue didn't look to be an easy task.

But if he did uncover a clue, then what? Where did he go from there? Of course, knowing how decisive he was, he would deal with that when the time came. She gratefully pushed it to the back of her mind and concentrated on undulating to the rhythm of the bouncing truck. She was relieved when they finally reached the wider graded road and the truck settled down for a

smoother ride.

No matter how gloomy the prospects were of tracing Rip's car, Lorna's spirits lifted when she allowed herself to look at the softly rolling hills, shrubs peeking from ravines, grasses ruffling in the wind, birds flitting on the road. The scene was a tranquil one and looking at it made her smile, feeling free and happy to be viewing it. In the sweeping look she made of the open panorama, Rip's complacent smile stopped her.

"Nice scene, huh?" he asked, flicking his gaze at the road to stay on track. "You really like the wide open spaces?"

"Just give me a home where the buffalo roam," she grinned.

"How did you end up in the city if you like the country so much?"

Lorna had to stop and think about that. "I didn't know it was here. Never saw this country until a few years ago. Job hunting is why we came. Now I don't expect to leave."

She put a stilling hand on his arm. "Can we stop so I can enjoy the view from here?"

What Lorna wanted was to assimilate the temperament of the land and think how the pioneers, the immigrants that came through, might have viewed it. She stood on the edge of the road, overlooking a wide canyon where she could see the winding path they would use to reach the crest of the hill beyond. Rip identified the different types of shrubs and plants that dotted the slope below them. She saw remnants of barbed wire fences rusted and fallen.

"The committee that worked on the Oregon Trail Commemorative found much trash in many ravines," she lamented, "I'm glad there's none of that here."

"There was aplenty, before Uncle Sam needed scrap iron for defense forty years ago," Rip verified, "We pulled every rusty machine and car body out and sent them off to war. Thought we made a fine patriotic move at the time. It didn't take us long to see how much better our community looked with a clean landscape." Rip faced Lorna with a grin wide with pride. He frowned when she didn't acknowledge his statement. Her face radiated a fascination with the panorama before them.

Lorna hadn't noticed the view from this part of the road when she came on her solitary drive. It was breathtaking. She could literally see for miles from the vantage point. Her imagination caught by the bigness and emptiness of it.

"What would it have been like to be the first person to see this?" It was a rhetorical question, one for which she didn't expect an answer. "What do you suppose the immigrants thought when they came upon this?"

"I suppose Clark's journal expresses that best, but many people were here thousands of years before the immigrants, or even fur trappers. And

because those first Americans lived in harmony with the land, I'd like to think they appreciated every foot of it, probably much more than I do and that's a whole lot."

"Do you think it was always like this? So open and spacious? So harsh and challenging?" Lorna gazed across the hills, her thoughts seeking an imagined past.

"I'm not completely sure of my geology, but the climate changed the terrain during glaciers and floods. Survival couldn't have been easy. Survival wouldn't be easy now without the amenities of our civilization." Rip's intellectual discourse revealed much past thinking about the land, but he watched Lorna's fascination with the new found facts. She had a natural for the land and he was stirred in a strange way.

This was his land, his parents had claimed it and taught him to love it, and it made him proud. The unusual city woman beside him confounded him. Everything about her seemed to radiate a compelling appreciation for the land as he had ever seen. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. Bringing her with him didn't seem like such a good idea, now that she was here and affecting him so profoundly.

"I suppose I'd better be getting back. Bud and Bill aren't too compatible." Lorna suddenly remembered, shaking Rip's thoughts. "Are you going to visit any farms today?"

He was good company when he wanted to be. She marveled that he hadn't shown his arrogant side for hours. Was it a red letter day, or what?

He stopped the truck at the corner of the picket fence and reached across Lorna for the door handle.

"I'd be pleased to have you go with me," he stated, hesitantly. He heard her indrawn breath and shoved the door wide open, backing away, nervously awaiting her response.

"There's Bud I must think of," Lorna quickly reminded him.

"I know. But diapers and bottles can be packed, just like any other supplies." He slung his left arm across the steering wheel, propped his right elbow on the back of the seat, and leaned close to her, searching her eyes intently to find the purpose of her excuse. Was she being conscientious? Or was she looking for a gracious way to refuse his company? Rip's uncertainty was unnerving.

Lorna pressed herself against the back of the seat and searched his eyes with her own. His expression implored her to consider what he said, and for once there was not a trace of sarcasm or arrogance in his features, nor in his tone.

"Why? Won't I be in the way--slow you down?" If he didn't become overbearing and make her angry, the outing could be a pleasure, and a

welcome change in her quiet days. Rip might even be fun to be with for a day. Her gaze dropped to think of the possibilities.

"I can't get much slower than I've already been," he grinned, sluffing off her excuse.

"Carrying Bud around is a big responsibility. And I'm sure Bill won't look after him any longer."

"Barb had a backpack she carried Sarah in when she was that small. Against her stomach as I recall. Wished I'd thought of that when my son was little."

"You have a son?"

"I was married. My wife died when she fell from a horse. Brad was killed ten years ago." Rip's memories had grown less painful with the passing years and he always shied from mentioning them. He suddenly wanted to share the good ones with Lorna. He observed the compassion that flashed across her soft features. Of course, she must have lost someone, too.

"I see." And what she really did see was a lonely man reaching out for her approval, for her encouragement, for her companionship. She sensed his reluctance. He was a shy private man who didn't reach out easily. Lorna wasn't out to be this man's buddy. Her eyes held his in a steady gaze.

"Will you come then?" He spoke with quiet urgency.

"I will go with you tomorrow, if Len has no objection. Not today. I need more time to plan for an outing with a baby." Her eyes pinned his with an openness that implied the possibility of further development.

He dropped his right hand to her arm, gently, but firmly, and grinned. "Just remember--you don't need to make any special plans. I'm no baby."

Lorna grinned mischievously, charming him with a brighter, more promising smile than he had ever hoped to receive.

In his exhilaration Rip abruptly released the clutch in high gear and stalled his faithful old truck as he watched her little pink-clad feet carry her up the front deck steps.

"Things warmin' up between yah, looks like," Bill commented from his rocker, startling Lorna out of her fantasy, as she reached the deck.

He observed them drive up in the truck, Lorna realized, and probably concluded far more from the exchange than she dared to imagine.

"He surprises me no end," she mused, listening as Rip restarted the engine he'd stalled.

Bill rocked quietly, with Sarah at his feet, her nose close to the page of a coloring book, so intensely concerned with covering Mickey Mouse's shorts in bright red that she looked up only briefly to acknowledge Lorna's arrival.

"He's going to make enquiries about his missing car. Asked me to ride along," Lorna said, in a curiously pensive tone, "Can't see that I could be of any

help. And besides, I'm here for Bud. He still asleep?"

Bill nodded affirmatively.

Lorna could pump Bill for information, but was not quite sure where to start. Rip's personal background had to be kept off limits or Bill would suspect the depth of her feelings. She wondered if Bill already speculated on Rip's feelings, deducing a developing intimacy from the close attention Rip had shown Lorna in the truck just now. Some things she couldn't bring up without first examining her own position. She was an old fool to have such romantic thoughts. Some things she couldn't talk about in front of Sarah.

Her gaze followed the truck as Rip drove along the picket fence. She didn't draw her eyes away until he disappeared behind the corner of the house.

"What does that old Edsel mean to him?" she asked. "Do you know?"

"Ya wouldn't know it was twenty five year old if ya'd 've seen it. Kept it spankin' new, he did. Looked like it was clean off the 'sembly line, it did. Don't think it's mysterious. He's just proud, that's all. It's his prop'ty 'n wants it back."

Possession was something Lorna could understand. Several of her own things she selfishly guarded.

"Are ya goin'?" The rocker stopped with Bill's question. When Lorna didn't answer immediately, he added, "Have to take Bud with ya. I'll go find the harness." He rose arthrically to his feet, levering himself from the rocker with his hands on the armrests.

"What harness, Uncle Bill? Is she taking a horse?" Sarah's remark indicated how closely she had been listening to the conversation, regardless of her concentration on her coloring.

"No, Sarah, m' girl. These days folks wears harness, too. C'mon. Ya can help find it."

What they brought to Lorna some time later was a pouch on shoulder straps that held an infant against an adult in safety and comfort, easing strain on posture, freeing hands for other things.

"Yer mama took ya out in that when you 'uz no bigger'n Bud. Easier'n pushin' yer stroller in the dirt." Bill explained to Sarah, giving Lorna insight to ways she could get out of the house and still look after Bud.

"Just a backpack," Sarah commented, not much interested in it, now that she learned what it was all about. And infinitely more satisfied in knowing that she had been important before Bud's arrival.

Bill left then, with Sarah chattering that they were late looking after the kittens in the barn.

Lorna bathed Bud and sat down to feed him, thinking she ought to try out that baby carrier before she actually committed herself to taking him out for a day of sleuthing with Rip. She had to adjust the straps to fit her

shoulders, evidently Barb was taller than Lorna realized.

Twice she put the baby in the harness and took him out to readjust the straps before it felt right. She was ready to take the baby for a walk. More to the point, she admitted a little guiltily, she was ready to explore the buildings beyond the house, an investigation she had looked forward to since she first came nearly a week ago.

Often she looked at the many buildings beyond the screened porch as she sat outside the kitchen to read and wondered what they held, what purpose they had. Were they filled with machines? Or farm produce? Or cattle feed? What lay beyond the tall poplars to the right of those buildings?

If this interesting devise that held Bud really worked, she would get her exercise, get Bud into the fresh air, AND answer some of her questions about the operation of this ranch.

She took the steps carefully. As snugly against her stomach as he was, Bud wasn't an easy load and she had no intention of endangering him with a fall. The back yard was dry and sun baked, therefore bare and lacking growth of any kind, making for easy walking. The crunch of her footsteps on the packed surface was a companionable sound in the lonely silence.

She decided not to go to the barn where she supposed Sarah and Bill were, although, perhaps Bill would give her a tour and better definition of the things out there than she would deduce for herself.

Nevertheless, she wanted to explore on her own. If necessary, questions could come later. She wasn't out to research ranching, or farming for that matter, so accuracy was not important.

However, Rip's sudden show of friendship, his implied affection, had warmed her to her toes. Recalling his admonition to remember 'he was not a baby' jolted her womanhood. She was dismayed at her willingness to escalate his offer of assistance in a car search into something romantic and sexual, which her dormant passion recklessly wanted it to be.

Flies buzzed her and Lorna recalled the cutting of the beef in the kitchen, when gathering flies had driven the butchers indoors. She was glad she'd thought to bring a flannel sheet to throw over Bud, ostensibly as sun protection. Brushing away the insects was impossible so she draped the sheet from her shoulder completely over the reclining baby. She wasn't fond of having flies creeping in her eyes, either, but she was on a mission of sorts so she patiently flipped her hand across her face to brush them off as she walked around the buildings.

The sun was bright and Lorna felt the heat; her burden wasn't the lightest pack she'd ever carried. Tucked against her chest, the baby's weight required a posture and muscles different from those stressed by a backpack.

Not a breath of air flowed between the buildings, although the leaves

tinkled and danced on the tops of the tall trees. Visions of coolness in the shade beckoned. She walked optimistically around an open shed looking for a likely place to sit and rest, noting the conglomeration of boxes and gasoline driven machines inside.

A weathered building of field stone and basalt stood on the other side of the tall poplars, but she couldn't decide what it might hold. Thick evergreens shielded most of it from view. She wanted to rest in that cool shade and looked for a place to sit.

A pile of basalt chunks carelessly piled near the trees spilled over the bare hard ground. Tall weeds found refuge along the perimeter of the pile, the seed heads nodding like approving sentries guarding the rim. She spied a rectangular stone to take into the shade where she could cool down for a few minutes.

When she leaned to pick it up, a whizzing blur startled her and she instinctively sidestepped, tripping on a stone that gave under her weight. Fearing for Bud's safety, and disgusted at her carelessness, she could not muffle the shriek of dismay as she stumbled.

Protectively wrapping one arm around the baby, she braced against the hard ground with her other hand, stopping her fall. She scrambled upright and turned to see what had sprung so frighteningly toward her.

"What the hell?" Rip's voice split the air.

His arms were around her, dragging her away from the rockpile. Bud squirmed in her protective arms and she observed him closely, assuring herself he was not injured when she jumped.

Rip's eyes held such deep concern that Lorna faltered and swayed toward him. He grabbed her by the shoulders, and looked down her full length, asking, "Where did it bite you?"

Lorna frowned and slowly turned to look at the rockpile. The long body of a snake slipped around the rocks. She was dumbfounded. She stared at the rattling end of the tail as it disappeared. Rip's hard calloused hands punished the points of her shoulders. She winced at the pain. He was demanding an answer.

"Where did it bite you?" he repeated, harshly. "We've got to treat it immediately."

Lorna was speechless but she shook her head vigorously. "I didn't get bit."

"I heard you scream."

"That's when I stumbled. I was afraid I'd crush the baby."

"Lorna, are you sure?" Rip's concern for her kept his voice to a whisper. "That's a big rattler. It could make you very sick."

"Wouldn't I be collapsing by now if it had bit me?"

"Of course. Of course, you'd know if it bit you," he murmured and pulled her into his arms, slightly sideways to avoid squeezing Bud between them, leaning his face toward hers to be sure.

Lorna's gaze fastened on his face, so browned by the sun and the wind, creased with strong male lines in his concern for her. There was something oddly compelling about the blunt ridges of his prominent cheekbones, lean cheeks and thick brows. Especially in his distress over her situation, his features were outlined by hard uncompromising lines, carved by experience of handling disasters without the luxury of time to dial 911. She felt safe and secure in his arms.

"What were you doing out here?" he asked. After savoring the feel of her safely in his arms, he kept one arm firmly on her waist, waiting for her answer.

"I came out for a walk. Had to try out this baby carrier. I wanted to be sure I could use it, get the feel of it before we took Bud out tomorrow." A thrill shot through Lorna the instant Rip's arm tightened at the prospect.

"Len's bringing Barb home tomorrow. She'll want that baby to stay close to her."

"I'll have to stay, too." She raised her eyes, filling with regret. "Maybe some other time." Their eyes locked solemnly at the promise.

"I'll walk you back to the house." But first Rip resisted, saying, "You better let me carry Bud. Your shirt's too dusty to be holding a child."

He pulled a wry face at Lorna when she looked up at him in surprise. At his silly expression she remembered complaining about holding the baby against his dusty shirts and laughed.

"Just for that, I ought to faint and make you carry us both."

"I don't think I could do that. But you can lean on me as much as you want." He pulled her against his side and chuckled with pleasure.

Sarah came dashing from behind the shed and called, "Uncle Rip, we heard a scream. What did you do?"

Lorna tried to move out of Rip's embrace with a whispered warning, "I think you've got some explaining to do. I'll bet Bill is coming, too."

Rip was unconcerned. He caught Sarah and carried her a few steps toward the rockpile.

"Sugar, see that pile of rocks? There's a great big dangerous snake living there. Lorna came close to getting bit and I don't want that to happen to you. Do you understand? You are to stay away from this part of the yard. Do you promise?"

"Uh huh." Sarah craned her neck and looked around the rocks. "Can I see it, Uncle Rip?"

"I'll let you see it when I catch it. But you must stay away from here until I call you."

Bill came to stand by Lorna, piecing together the drama in his own way, assessing future actions.

"We could use that feller for a trap in the alfalfa. How big is it?" Bill was mentally calculating the size of the rattler.

"All of six feet, I'd say. Wouldn't you, Lorna?" Rip asked as he carried Sarah in one arm and put the other around Lorna's waist to support her as they continued toward the house.

"I'll have to get it out of there. Those rocks will have to be moved, or at least spread out so they aren't a temptation to the snakes."

"Are you going to kill it?" Lorna asked. "Don't tell me you eat snake, too."

"That one would make a fair sized meal, but no, I'm not going to kill it. Like Bill said, we need to get rid of the gophers in the alfalfa field. A snake will get them better than any trap."

"You said it was dangerous, yet you'll keep it around? I don't understand."

"We have neither the time, manpower, nor money to stay ahead of rodents so it makes more sense to let nature handle the problem in its own way. Out in the field snakes don't bother us. It wouldn't have struck at you if you hadn't startled it."

"I didn't think to be courteous and cough and scratch at his door like the Indians used to do to their friends, but, then, I can't think of that wiggly reptile as a friend, either." Lorna laughed at the idea.

The ease with which she now bantered with the crusty man beside her made her wonder what it would be like to spend hours with him in his truck. Could this kind of reprieve continue? What had happened she could not explain, but she liked it. Yes indeed, Lorna liked it very much.