

Lorna's Route

Chapter Seven
Promising

Lorna placed the last of the bottles in the dishwasher and latched the door to start the wash cycle. She had settled Bud in his crib for a nap and had time to enjoy a cup of coffee. She tried not to look too pleased that Rip had waited for her to complete her tasks. He had made a fresh pot of coffee while she was putting Bud to bed.

"You've seen Barb. Do you think she will be able to manage everything?" It was a question whose affirmative answer Lorna was not anxious to hear.

Len said he was going to start taking over. Lorna wasn't sure what that meant. He had shared the doctor's reports indicating that Barb could no more take over Bud's care than she could handle the cooking or house cleaning.

Lorna had seen Barb only once, when she met her at the hospital but they had daily phone conversations. Lorna encouraged Sarah to call her mother and chat about her activities. Occasionally Lorna held Bud to gurgles and coo at the humming receiver to Barb's delight.

Barb's apprehension with the child care arrangement was no secret. Her's was not a personal dislike of Lorna, simply a mother's anxiety over the separation from her children, and some guilt at not being able to care for her own. Barb had never before left her infants' care to others except for very short periods.

"I wouldn't think so. Len will have to do any two handed stuff, all the things you're doing."

"Then you think they'll want me to stay a few days longer?" The question had a poignant ring that Lorna had not wished to reveal.

Rip studied the dregs of his coffee and got up to rinse his cup at the sink. He had to know how she felt about leaving. He faced the window as she did and he tipped his chin to look at her.

"Do you want to?"

"It's not that. I was only thinking of the baby."

"Yes, it's always the baby. They're already much in your debt. I imagine they'll want to manage by themselves." Rip wasn't going to second guess the Pedersons. They would make their decisions and he wasn't going to interfere. Where did that leave him?

"Of course, it's best if they do." Lorna expected that they would. She stayed because they asked her. It wasn't her place to question their decision. Where did that leave her?

"You'll be able to return to civilization. You'll be happy about that." His remark bordered on derision, a challenge to reveal her opinion, a dare to admit the truth. He was pounding at her. It was the old moth again ramming itself against the bright bulb in a desperate desire to be noticed, to be taken in, to be consumed.

"You won't let me forget that, will you?" Her question was a statement that brought a flush of embarrassment to her cheeks. She was defensive. It was the enchanted romantic in her that was struck with the irony of her presence in this place, at this time, with this man. She had become far more intrigued with the derelict she had transported than she had been with the open countryside through which she drove.

But his attack stung just the same. She could not fathom Rip's changeable attitudes that included appreciation and sometimes awe, overshadowed frequently by an irritability that bordered on hostility. Or the mockery in the statement he just made. She was thoroughly confused.

Rip's personality took on a momentary reversal when they left her car at the repair shop. He became mellow and supplicating, nearly pleading for Lorna's sympathy and approval, and especially her company, while he searched for his stolen car. She could not define the change any more than she could imagine what brought it about.

She was hurt that he again taunted her, forgetting her earlier analysis of his hard shell of protection. She wanted his respect, or at least his friendship. Time alone would tell if they could become close companions. Face it, woman, companionship isn't enough. Lordy, she didn't have much time.

Lorna felt her need intensely and chided herself at the futility of possessing an emotion reserved for the young and the beautiful. Yet it was a bold and restless yearning that had emerged within her and had welcomed Rip into her life. She would go home soon and be beyond his sarcasm.

"Why should I let you forget it? It's what brought you here." His voice was flat, but his gaze secured hers with the accuracy and finality of a pin through the thorax of a green butterfly. It was more of a challenge than an accusation. It penetrated with a deep desire. His concentration struggled to pull a more revealing commitment from her. Hope flared when her gaze faltered.

"I don't understand you." Her voice fell with her gaze but her eyes bounced back to his with a shake of her head. What she saw in his eyes was not what she heard in his tone and she stared wide eyed, wanting to know which she should believe, knowing which she wanted to be true.

"Nor I you," he murmured solemnly, "and that puts us both in a bind." Then his eyes were shuttered. "We'll have to wait for the Pedersons' decision."

Lorna put Bud in his crib and freshened up just minutes before Sarah came dashing through the kitchen, resonant with joy, "Mama's here! Mama's here! Lorna come see! Daddy brought Mama!"

Len brought Barb by ambulance from the hospital because she was unable to get into the truck, still bandaged and stiff on her left side. Her injuries were far from healed but her pain was diminished and the doctor was confident the healing would continue to progress satisfactorily.

No one spoke of Lorna's departure. She realized that packing her bags was premature. She would wait until she was dismissed, an employee or not. Barb would rest better at home with her family as long as she had someone around to help when she needed it. She would need help to get in and out of bed. Len was prepared to help in every way.

He was adept at changing diapers and helped Barb in and out of bed but he soon discovered the men needed his supervision more. His duties kept him away longer than he expected and Lorna continued to care for the baby. She laid Bud beside Barb whenever he was awake.

"We'll figure out a way so you can feed him, too," Lorna assured her. She laid Bud beside Barb for his daytime feedings which was one of the most satisfying times the new mother had. That lifted her spirits as nothing else, and made her determined to do everything she could to get well and take over his care altogether.

When Barb allowed it, Sarah climbed up beside her and chattered about everything she could think of. That first day it was Lorna's snake.

How the overgrown reptile came to belong to Lorna was becoming part of a legend steeped in Sarah's fantasy. The fact that Lorna hadn't really seen the snake strike at her didn't change Sarah's relating of the story.

"It 'most poisoned Lorna." Sarah's innocent seriousness absolutely verified that as fact.

"It's very big. A long monster." Sarah's arms stretched wide and looked far beyond her reach.

"Uncle Rip's catching it. They're going to put it in the 'falfa to trap gophers. How can a snake do that, Mama?" Sarah's certainty faltered and curiosity took its place.

Sarah was on her knees against Barb's right side, her mother's right arm caressing the vivacious child, preventing a backward fall.

"They catch them and eat them, Honey." Sarah's exuberance bounced the bed and brought sharp pains through Barb's leg.

"You'd better go and check on your kittens. Mama has to rest."

Sarah slid off the bed, prepared to race to the barn. A look of panic came over her and she turned back to her mother.

"Can it eat kittens, too?"

"I don't know, Honey. We'll make sure there are no snakes around the barn, anyway." Barb settled back against her pillows, her pain obviously wearing down her patience.

Lorna urged Sarah out of the room, "Go ask Bill." Then to Barb, she said, "Let me help with those pillows. Are you going to take some pain

medicine? You look like you've had all the excitement you can take."

"This is so much more tiring than I expected," Barb admitted. "But how can I turn my own child away? I've missed her so."

"Len will take you back to the hospital, if you don't get the rest you need. I'm sure you don't want that."

"Oh, don't let that happen...please," Barb pleaded.

"I'll play the heavy and limit Sarah to visiting hours," Lorna promised. "Maybe she'll accept it if we pretend she's living in the hospital with you, instead of your being home with her."

Barb murmured a weary, "I hope so. I know you're anxious to get back to your own home, Lorna. I'll try to take control soon." and took her pain medicine.

"Then relax and rest."

A nurse came daily to change the dressings and check Barb's progress. A physical therapist came twice a week to demonstrate and teach Len the kind of exercises needed to restore Barb's muscles. Although the words were not spoken, Len, and everyone else, expected Lorna would continue to care for Bud. And regardless of Len's desire to take over his responsibilities, the one who took it most for granted was Lorna herself.

Barb was animated, happy to be home, and talkative. She demonstrated while she explained, "I can lift my arm but the bandages aren't much protection and I can't bear to have it touched. I can't lift Bud at all. I could steady him if you put him in the car carrier beside me so I can play with him a few minutes before he gets his bottle."

But by feeding and entertaining Bud, Barb freed Lorna for other tasks, which Lorna looked for willingly. Len was not cut out to be housebound with his invalid wife although he wanted to help her when he could.

Although meats and main dishes were sent up from the cookhouse, Lorna fixed simple meals for herself, Barb and Sarah. Bill again took his meals with the farmhands. Sarah now preferred to eat with her mother, considering a bedside tray table an exceptional treat. Lorna restricted the lively child from Barb's bed with that ploy so mother and daughter were both happy with the arrangement.

Joyce arrived late one afternoon with her boys, both of whom were a little older than Sarah. They were all sent off to play and Joyce sat down to visit with Barb. Lorna brought them glasses and a pitcher of iced lemonade, reminding Barb that Bud would waken soon and be ready for his bottle.

"Thank you, Lorna. I don't know what we'd have done without you." Barb repeated that statement many times in those first few days and she meant every word every time she said it. Lorna smiled, pleased that she was appreciated, but she knew that if she hadn't been here, they would have managed. People always do.

"Joyce, Lorna figured out how I could feed my baby with only one arm

although my left one is getting stronger and I've been able to steady him more and more." Barb continued explaining her condition and Lorna withdrew from the bedroom, closing the door behind her, a practice she'd kept from the day Barb returned from the hospital.

Rip visited Barb daily, with an uncanny ability to time those visits when Lorna was occupied with Bud in the bathroom or nursery, managing to slip in and out without speaking to her.

With unaccustomed misgivings about her own feminine appeal, she assumed Rip was avoiding her, the undeserving overbearing female that she was. He was not merely considering the well-being of the recuperating woman, although Barb was the recipient of his company, Lorna felt a sting of criticism by his action.

Nevertheless she was an independent, free acting woman, and wouldn't change that, which probably made Rip's rejection her own fault. She had solicited protection that day at the rockpile. In her fright she momentarily became a passive female, falling victim too readily to Rip's charming protectiveness, responding to his teasing like a besotted teenager.

Lorna couldn't change that now. The daily routine was established and soon she would leave the Pederson's and take up her own life. And with a pang of regret she knew how empty her life would be when she took up where she'd left off.

How could she conceivably live the way she had the day she filled her gas tank at Olson's country store? Her entire perspective on life had irrevocably changed that day and she wouldn't change it back if she could.

But she couldn't go on like this much longer. Her attachment to the baby was deepening and there was no future in that. She had grown to like the bustle and solitude of the farm and there was no future in that either.

Lorna was unaccustomed to the torment that assailed her mind. Her restlessness was overwhelming and she sought escape in reading best selling novels she discovered in the limited space beside the more often used videos. She found little solace in the interesting plots, when the leading characters could only find satisfaction in marital bliss. Wasn't there more to life than that?

For that reason she gave up on the novels of Helen Van Slyke but even Arthur Hailey, through his profound insights of hidden power inside various industries, inferred that coupled life was sweeter and marriage inevitable. As true as that may be, happy endings did not always happen. Those were figments of vivid imaginations and not real life, after all.

Lorna found some solace in doing what she could to relieve the frustration Barb had in trying to help herself. Barb had only to try a few simple chores to discover how impossible some things were to do with one hand. She could wash her face and brush her teeth, but when she wanted to peel an orange she could not hold and peel with the same hand. She resorted

to using her teeth and it wasn't a pleasant experience. The rind was sharply bitter. So Lorna peeled her oranges, cut her meat, buttered her bread and became indispensable in those simple ways.

Barb's height was more than Lorna expected as she discovered the first time she helped her out of bed. She was big boned and her body lean and muscular from the work she did, inside the house and outdoors, when doubling as a farmhand. She was a perfect match for Len.

"You and Len make an attractive couple. You're both so tall and comely," Lorna told her one day as she stood beside Barb.

"Thank you. Len was one man my height didn't intimidate. In school the boys that I could look straight in the eyes didn't want to date me. When I worked at the Union Bank, I could tell that men were actually threatened by my height. Towering above others can be very powerful in human relations."

"You mean like the bully in the school yard?" Lorna asked.

"Exactly. Although some people want to be dominated. Rip dominates Dorothy and she seems to come back for more," Barb informed her. "Does he try to intimidate you?"

"No...Well maybe he tries, but intimidated, I'm not." Lorna made a face, wide eyed, frowning as if astounded.

"I thought so. He praised you so highly to Len the day you came but since then he's been defensive and contentious. I guess you didn't fit his idea of a proper woman." Barb settled back on the bed, flinching when she moved to quickly.

"Well, he acts quite cantankerous when I do see him so he's not trying to make me over. You can be relieved on that score," Lorna assured her.

"Then you've noticed him? I thought perhaps you defied him, or just ignored him. I think his problem is that he is afraid to face you, afraid you'll reject his advances."

"I'm almost a foot shorter than he is. Are you telling me I intimidate him? A man like Rip?" Lorna puffed in disbelief.

"Something's bothering him. He's taken on a different personality since he returned. Len thinks he's taken--I think that's the word he used--yes, Len thinks Rip's taken with you."

"I think he's imagining things," Lorna denied, color rising in her cheeks. If Rip was 'taken' with her, just what did that mean? She covered her discomfort with the task at hand.

"It's time for Bud to wake up. Are you ready to feed your son?" Barb grinned at the way Lorna managed to change the subject.

Lorna was on her way to the nursery when Joyce called and entered without knocking, "You-who, anybody home?"

"Go on in, Joyce. Barb needs a diversion." Lorna didn't want to continue the discussion about Rip's feelings, or her own. She was attracted to Rip far too much but if he thought she should change what she was, the friction would

remain.

Lorna looked in on the baby. Her schedule was changing as he began to sleep longer between feedings, more noticeable since she was supplementing his diet with cereal and fruit. Lorna found herself judging the times when Rip came to see Barb and if he was as attuned to Bud's schedule as he indeed appeared to be, he would be coming soon. This time she planned to be in his way so he couldn't avoid her, if that was his intention.

She had no sooner come to that decision than Rip made his appearance. He broke his stride at the sight of her. Lorna quivered inside, but with a calm exterior, she was prepared to open an innocuous conversation.

"Haven't seen much of you, lately. How is the search going?"

Rip appeared unflappable. His faded worn jeans were his trademark. Today the checked shirt he wore was once some tone of blue. He clenched and unclenched his fingers slightly, a giveaway of an inner agitation. Lorna had seen that very reaction when he held his coffee cup in Olson's store that first unforgettable day. He was not as composed as he would have her believe.

He put his hands in his pockets and stood hipshot, measuring her. The car was far from his mind.

"Can you get away for a few minutes? I'd like you to see what I've done with the rockpile."

"Joyce is with Barb. I'll ask her if she'll listen for Bud. I'll be right with you."

They went quickly, hand in hand, like clandestine lovers, Lorna thought, between the buildings but not in the direction of the rockpile. Her heart raced and not from exertion. He led her toward an opening in the row of tall poplar trees.

"I didn't see this before. I looked for an opening. I was curious about what's on the other side," she admitted.

"Now you know, it's right here. Remember that." he commanded, with a look that was significant. The secluded building came into view.

"Why, it's another house," she exclaimed, "Whose?"

"It's the original home built when this was a cattle ranch. Too small for Len's family. I stay here when I'm around."

"Is that where all the farmhands stay?" Lorna hadn't seen the bunkhouse she'd heard of.

"No, I'm here alone." He took her to the front where the basalt rocks formed a low rock wall. Lorna smiled widely at the arrangement, a formal barrier between a narrow lawn and the sagebrush hills.

"It's very nice. Will that be an invitation for other snakes?" she asked.

"Not with the cement I've put there." The rocks were held together with cement, leaving no entry for snakes or any varmint.

Rip continued to lead her toward the front door of the house and Lorna began to suspect he had something else on his mind. Was her imagination

making wishes to satisfy her body? She began to resist his pull.

"This isn't really about rocks, is it?" But she haltingly let him lead her through the door and push it closed behind them.

"You bet it isn't," he said as he stood around to face her. His big calloused hands lay lightly on the points of her shoulders and he looked deep into her eyes. The blueness was keen and bright, and overflowed with questions. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I'm a desperate man," he began, "I can't stand having you over in that house and not be able to talk privately to you." He breathed deeply and let it go emotionally with his next words.

"I want to know how you feel about me--if you feel about me at all."

He swallowed and went on, "I want to know what makes you tick, Lorna. Find out if you're really the untouchable woman you appear to be."

Lorna stood passively under the weight of his hands, her face upturned without expression, a docile and submissive woman. He frowned. This placidness wasn't like her. And to his surprise, he didn't like it. She remained unmoved.

"God, I even want to take you to bed." If she needed to be shocked into answering him, he figured that statement ought to do it. But she didn't say a word. He saw a plethora of emotions spread across her features. Am I so despicable to her, he fretted?

Lorna listened to his incredible plea with a swelling heart. But an affair? He didn't say what he felt about her, just offered a roll in his sheets. Could she settle for that? Fool that she was, she probably would. She delayed her answer to enjoy the erotic scenes going through her mind.

In the seeming eternity he waited for her answer, rejection spread over Rip's features, like thick syrup flowing down a stack of hotcakes.

He thought, I've made a fool of myself. She is untouchable and independent. I'll be lucky if she doesn't kick me in the groin and lay me low. He dropped his hands and started to turn away.

She touched his muscular forearms to stop his pivot, and threw her arms around his shoulders, bringing him to a dead halt.

"Don't walk away from me," she echoed a statement he'd once made to her.

This has got to be unbecoming for a sensible mature woman, she thought, but she held him firmly. "We do have to talk and I won't talk to your back."

His arms locked around her and they didn't talk for a long time, impossible as it is to talk through heavy kissing. Even to stop for breath, they didn't release their death grip on each other.

"That means you feel something for me, doesn't it?" he whispered, anxiously tugging her body against his hard quivering frame. The jubilation that spread across her features jolted him.

Lorna 'felt something' for him for sure. A something she defined as new found love, deep and wide as love she'd ever felt before.

For him to describe the emotions of the past few days in such a simple statement as 'feeling something' was like a making a target draw its own missile. What a bombshell to explode at her age! Its power was profound.

"You bet, cowboy, but I'm not sure where we go from here." And Lorna's heart ricocheted with the truth of it. She really didn't know.

Rip's thoughts were decidedly much clearer.

"There's a big bed in back," he indicated with a jerk of his head. "We could start there."

He put his hand on the back of her head and held her steady for another kiss. He wasn't going to force, or push her to his bed. She would have to come voluntarily. He could wait, because now there was a ray of hope that she would come, if not this minute, later.

A sexual union would bind them but more important was her approval of him. He indulged in the exhilaration brought on by her acceptance of his declaration. She was not repulsed as he had feared. She was open to his attentions and he loved her beyond description.

The door burst open with Sarah leading Joyce's boys. "Where'd you put Lorna's snake, Uncle Rip?" she demanded. "You promised I could see it. Where is it? Al and Joey want to see it."

Lucky for that little girl she didn't see the exasperated look in Rip's eyes. For the first time since she was born, Rip felt like throttling her.

So much for a quiet interlude, thought Lorna. Their bodies separated with reluctance, their eyes locked with promise.

"The door is always too open," Rip remarked, rolling his eyes skyward. He took Sarah's hand and herded the excited children out. There was nothing to do but appease the children.

Lorna had her own responsibility. She found Bud stirring, making up his mind to get attention, gurgling to the bright world about him, preparing to put on a louder, more adamant display, if he had to. Lorna left him to make his decision while she fixed fresh formula. She went about the task automatically, her mind on Rip's declaration and her decision to share his bed.

She put that thought on hold while she prepared Bud for his sojourn to his mother's arms. Joyce watched with interest how Lorna tucked him beside Barb's left side, raising her left arm up and out of the way.

Barb leaned into her baby, laying her right forearm on his length, holding the warm bottle upright to feed him. Not exactly the embrace she would apply with two arms, the snug arrangement pleased her very much.

"She's going to heal fast with that incentive," Joyce confided to Lorna as they walked to the door.

"Yes," Lorna agreed, "I give her another week and she'll be able to take over his care completely."

"Are you anxious for that to happen?" Joyce asked.

"It's a job I'll be willing to give back to her," Lorna said. "I've helped as much as I can. It's time to leave."

"Is that what you want?"

"That's why I'm here at all, Joyce, you know that."

"Maybe that's why you stayed the first day, but was that the only reason? Don't answer that. It's none of my business."

"I don't understand what you're getting at, anyway," Lorna insisted, "When there's nothing more I need to do, I'll go home. Shall I call Bill and have him send the boys to the car?"

"Please do that." Joyce waited at the door while Lorna contacted Bill over the intercom, nodding to Joyce that they would be on their way. Joyce lingered on the deck.

"It's a pity Rip hasn't been able to find his Edsel. He insists on your help."

Lorna frowned, "He did?"

"Are you going to do that? That means you might be here long after Barb heals."

"I haven't thought that far ahead," Lorna admitted. Had Rip broadcast plans that included her? What's with that man? Asking her to help find the car was one thing, but telling the community she would stay and help was something else. He was going to hear about that!