

Lorna's Route

Chapter Eight Savoring

Lorna learned from Sarah that her snake was now Rip's prisoner in a wire basket in a corner of the machine shed, therefore, it became Rip's snake and no longer the monster it had been when it struck at Lorna. Now it was a prisoner whose status would soon be raised to benefactor when released in a predator's paradise, a hungry reptile among industriously destructive gophers wrecking havoc in an alfalfa field.

A story from a book did not create the exciting interest for Sarah that the snake engendered so Lorna accommodated the imaginative child with a fierce tale of an innocent snake whose placid life was disrupted when his house was broken by a clumsy witch. The snake was not mean at heart and only in self defense struck a glancing blow at the last minute, sparing the witch a dreadful injury. Sarah's dissenting frown at the reference to a witch changed to sweeping approval over Lorna's flowered frame, knowing that it had turned out as told.

Lorna further embellished the story by elaborating on the capture of the huge reptilian creature by a clever and powerful giant who placed it in a cage within a huge dark cavern filled with straw. Broken hearted at losing its home, the snake coiled upon itself and kept a frightened vigil without the blink of an eye.

A princess came by and--Sarah giggled at her place in the story--took pity on the starving creature. She begged a cunning gnome to trick the giant into releasing the talented snake in a far distant kingdom where it could recover its dignity by arresting thieving varmints that were robbing the kindly king.

Utterly absorbed in picturing herself and others around her in a fairy tale fantasy of her very own, the tired little girl drifted contentedly to sleep.

The house was ominously quiet. Len took Bud and sat beside Barb to talk. From a padded lawn chair on the screened porch Lorna watched the silhouettes of nighthawks sweep insects from the air. Her thoughts moved through Sarah's snake adventure to the ultimate conqueror and recalled what Joyce had related about Rip's exaggerated statement.

Lorna was at once embarrassed and angry at the presumptuous man. He had gone too far when he told Joyce that Lorna was going to find his Edsel.

With a look of assurance toward Barb's room, knowing Len was there

with the baby, Lorna decided to find Rip and tell him exactly what she thought of his gossip. She hurried down the steps to the row of cottonwood trees, finding, after some difficulty in the deepening shadows, the opening in the dense growth. Her night vision was quite good and she was pleased with her boldness. She would let that arrogant man know what she thought of his loose tongue!

Her resolve changed as she approached the door of the dark stone house, when she vividly remembered the few moments she had in Rip's arms on the other side of that door. The door which he made a special point of leaving open. A compelling urge forced her on.

Was she really going to give him hell for what he said to Joyce? She had been annoyed, over much, perhaps. She faltered before the silent stone building. Could she face Rip with anger and resolution? Indeed, could she face him at all?

Even as she opened the door and waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the lamplight, she knew the truth. She may have used her rising ire as her excuse, but that wasn't what brought her here. She hoped, although perhaps subconsciously, to take up the scene at the point where Sarah interrupted. Did she really expect they could?

She slowly stepped inside.

The door latch clicked loudly in place behind her, the revealing sound of the lock announcing her arrival. Lorna's gaze swung to the bedroom door.

Rip stood in the subdued lighting of his room, his body poised in expectation, with not a single hint of surprise. How could he have known she would come? He was bare chested and bare footed, clad only in his worn jeans, halfway prepared for bed.

Lorna faltered at the sight of the broad flat muscles of his naked chest. She found it unnerving in an exciting way and she froze against the closed door. She had accepted the invitation to his bed and was amazed at her audacity.

She forgot she came in anger and was dismayed that she was not prepared for the intimacy his halfclad form invited. Could she fulfill the sensual reputation of a desirable woman? Could she regain the knowledge she once had to satisfy a lover? Her lungs swelled in alarm at her inadequacy. She was trapped by her rashness and surprisingly afraid to move.

Rip's elation at her sudden appearance drained away at her hesitation. She had come. And that alone had given him an ecstatic jolt. She had come through the darkness, through the small break in the trees, through his door without knocking.

But she came no farther. Fearful and with misgivings, he advanced, his hands open, held loosely on bent elbows at his sides.

"Welcome back," he murmured softly. He must not frighten her away. He must hold her, at least put his arms around her, if nothing more. He must

reassure her. But of what, he did not know. He had to reassure himself that she was here, that she had come willingly, sought him out on his turf. Would she play by the rules? He didn't remember courting rules and maybe she didn't either.

Rip's forward movement alerted Lorna of what had passed before.

"I came because of what Joyce told me--not--" Lorna stopped short of denying the implied intimacy that surrounded them, pulling them together by forces unseen but as real as a whirlpool in a raging river.

"No matter. You're here." He came slowly, deliberately, extending his arms a little with each advancing step.

She stood stark still but every atom in her short tense figure swayed expectantly toward him like shards of steel drawn by a powerful magnet.

Then she was within his reach and he clasped her joyfully to him.

For one instant he cherished the beat of her raging heart against his own throbbing chest, then his hands explored and adored her. With them he devotedly stroked her entire body.

Lorna felt her sensuality rekindle and her dismay melt away under his hands. Her confidence in being an erotically adept woman returned. The trumped up reason for coming was forgotten.

They met as man and woman, lost in the present, found in primitive emotions, fed with potent desires. Nurtured with delicate movements and sustained with total seclusion, they searched for fulfillment with complete abandon. Their movements were tender, and at once, dubious yet assured, lingering yet precocious. Time itself stood by and approved.

In the aftermath, during the last hard breathing moments, Lorna was silent. But the enchanting culmination of this long awaited experience couldn't still her lips for long.

"You lost me," she revealed, breathlessly to his ear as he laid spent upon her.

"Say what?" he asked in alarm, raising on his elbows.

"You sent me off," she murmured, her green sparkling gaze bathing his rugged features in blatant adoration.

"I saw you close your eyes. You thought of someone else?" he frowned, accusingly, as pained as if she'd struck him.

"No...no...no! I was alone with myself in a rapture that shut you--everything--away from me." She tenderly cupped his sculptured jaws in her large square hands.

"That was selfish of me, wasn't it? To feel the pleasure of you so intensely that I couldn't think of anything else."

"If that don't beat all," he complained, collapsing against her, pressing her to the sheets.

"Don't be angry. You brought on that primitive detachment with your hungering tenderness, your driving need. I could only think of myself." She

clasped her hands on his clenched jaws more tightly still and pulled his face closer to her own.

Rip was silent and thoughtful when he rolled off, keeping her firm satisfying body close to his side. She watched him intently, waiting for him to understand what complete fulfillment he had given her, even as he strove to satisfy his own passion.

A dawning overtook his sun browned features.

"You know, to be honest, I was pretty involved in my own pleasure, instead of thinking of you." His eyes shielded an old recollection before his eyes returned to hers. "Always thought it was right for a man to satisfy himself."

"And did you?" she asked, making a face of impudent teasing.

"Indeed I did," he breathed softly. "In that moment, though, it was you, Lorna. You were responsible. I was indescribably satisfied but only because of you. That's why it was so special. And maybe that's why I satisfied you." He tenderly stroked Lorna's salt and pepper curls, his hand curled on her neck in sweet possession.

"You're mine now, you know that?" Rip's voice was stern and commanding. He recognized a tenseness flood her body.

"I'm not an object to become property simply because you want me," she warned, pushing to make a small space between them. "If I'm yours it's because it's what I want."

"You're splitting hairs. It's the same thing."

"No, it's not," she insisted. "Mutual excitement and satisfaction don't constitute ownership."

"I think you're a damned cantankerous female," he observed, a note of gruffness edging his husky tone. "But I guess you know that too."

"It's what you deserve." Lorna felt his inflexible constraint. So this is where we will always differ, she thought, and she reached for her clothes.

"You're going to leave? Just like that?" Rip's words were flat with conviction.

"Len doesn't know I left." Lorna informed him as a matter of fact.

Rip heard in Lorna's words more concern for her job than for the passion so recently shared. The care she lavished on Pedersons' baby had forged the only connection in their lives, and what a fragile connection it was.

He had been elated that she came to him, a reaffirmation of her earlier statement that she felt something for him. Now the passion she so nobly described seemed a sham. Why? Had he read her as if he only were a bull anxious for a rut with no concern about the receptor? Maybe so. She accepted his invitation. She had made the final move after all.

How could she say she didn't belong to him? What old fashioned concepts did he have that were so wrong? But she had said "If I'm yours, it's because it's what I want."

Before she walked away he was sure of what he wanted. He thought it was what she wanted, too. He'd shared an intimacy with that independent female that renewed his vitality and now that very renewal scarred his heart, and inwardly he wept, knowing that the memory might be all he would ever have.

Lorna stepped into the cool night feeling the finality with which the desert had surrendered the sun's fierce heat. The change had come with the speed and certainty of a shutoff valve on her gas stove flame. And a coldness sat upon her spirit like a glacier laid upon a mountain crevasse, heavy and unyielding.

Rip only wanted to possess her. How that stung!

She went to him in anger and his gentle loving reception wiped away every resentment she thought she harbored, so instead of anger, she received him in rapture and shared glorious moments in his embrace, completely in his sphere, wrapped within him and wrapped so thoroughly around him.

The memory made her tremble with reverberating ecstasy. She held the thought while retracing her steps across the yard and around the stone house. Pushing aside the cottonwood branches that obscured Rip's passage to Pederson's back yard, she recoiled.

With a sweep of her arm against the leaves, the full impact of the symbolic sweep with which she discounted Rip's passion brought a gloom far darker than the deep shadows between the trees.

In the kitchen by the overhead cabinet light of the stovetop she put on a pot of water. Strong tea brewed properly in boiling water would help her sleep, help still her troubled mind. She could never reconcile the difference she had with Rip's concept of belonging. Yet, she did belong to him. She saw that days ago, not admitting it readily at first, just a flash of truth, now and again.

The boiling kettle whistled and she brought it to the counter to fill the pot to steep. Her reflection accosted her in the blackness of the window glass and then it shimmered and disappeared under the haze of the rising steam that clung in opaque beads upon the shining surface.

As she stirred the camomile teabags in the pot, she watched her reflected image slowly reappear as the steam evaporated. It was with the same slow clarity that comes with the cooling of steam from a window that she had come to the full realization of her love for Rip.

The feeling of exhilaration buoyed her spirits then, even under the cloud of undesirability she feared had come with her aging, and it pained her now to see how naive she had been to run to his bed. For his gratification, yet! She poured her tea, forgoing the preferred sugar, knowing how tough it was going to be to get to sleep without getting hyped up with refined means like sugar.

Len came from the bedroom with Bud in his arms. "I think this little guy is ready for a full night's sleep with his bedtime bottle. Don't you think so?" At Lorna's nod and tight smile, he added, "Will you fix the formula? I'll get him

dry and comfy for the night." And the attentive father went on to the nursery without another glance at Lorna's strained features.

He did call back a moment later, "Is there some extra tea? I think Barb needs a cup."

Lorna poured a mug for Barb and hurried with it to the bedside when the baby's bottle was prepared.

"Len thought you needed this," Lorna said, hesitatingly holding the mug for Barb's approval. "Are you feeling worse? Are your injuries bothering you more than usual tonight?"

"No, I'm stiff from the physical therapy and..."

"And?" Lorna urged Barb to explain. The injured woman had not confided in her before. In fact, Barb still harbored a coolness toward Lorna that was pushed aside as a resentment of her invalid state that neither woman could alleviate. Healing takes time.

"I still can't take over Bud's care and Len spends time away from the work where he's most needed. It depresses me more each day."

Lorna put the steaming mug on the bedside table, letting the camomile fragrance pervade the air. She had been depressed by her own troubles but she would get over that with no one to feel the effects except herself. With Barb it was different. Her attitude affected Len and Sarah, both of whom shared her perspectives and reflected her moods.

"I feel a little depressed, myself. Let me get my tea," she said, returning to the kitchen with a resolve to put her own problem aside and let Barb's be expressed.

On second thought, perhaps that invalid should see someone else's sorrow, however puny it may be, before she could stop feeling sorry for herself.

Lorna would not reveal her sorrow. She couldn't. It was unexplainable in the light of a relationship that had existed because of Barb's injuries, certainly not her fault, certainly not within her realm to repair.

Reparation fell under the jurisdiction of the two consenting adults, and for the moment there was a mutual consent to separate. A separation, Lorna reflected ironically, caused by foolish ideals set in stone by society in the minds of those adults decades ago. It would take a master like Michelangelo to chip the superfluous layer away from its essence. This was far from the cause of Barb's depression and knowledge of it wouldn't lift her depression.

From what had been described by Bill, Barb's injuries might have been a great deal worse. She might have been killed.

"It's no wonder you're discouraged," Lorna said, "You're used to a full day's work so I'm not surprised. I thought the physical therapist would have you up and working your muscles more than you do. When Gertrude first came she had high hopes for a rapid recovery."

"She works me hard and I ache until she returns for the next session." Barb complained.

"Len helps you exercise between times, doesn't he?" Lorna began to suspect where the real trouble lay. "Your muscles won't recover unless you keep trying. Len works with you, doesn't he?"

"I won't push her like Gertrude does," Len inserted from the doorway, "Maybe I'm just a pussy cat but I don't like to see her hurting. She's in pain too much as it is."

Lorna was not surprised by Len's admission although his size alone would indicate he could be brutal. The nature of a man could not be judged so easily. It was impossible to tell from a man's appearance who might be a bruiser and knock his wife around and who might be kind and loving. Lorna knew very well Len's gentle side by the manner in which he attended to his children.

He overcompensated with tenderness and compassion out of respect and concern over his own innate power to bruise and injure. He refused to inflict pain of any kind on the woman he loved, misunderstanding that his refusal to follow the physical regime compromised her recovery.

Lorna faced Len purposefully.

"Gertrude insists it is important to push and force those muscles. An injury makes it a painful thing, but without the workout, her muscles will not regain their normal strength." Lorna had to point out the obvious. Gertrude must have stressed the same points with Len. She had heard those things spoken to Barb so she wasn't telling either of them anything new.

"Well, I won't do it," Len insisted. "I won't risk damaging her even more."

"Then have Gertrude come more often," Lorna suggested.

Barb reached out to Len with a mixed look of tenderness and sympathy. Her extended fingertips drew him to her and they briefly shared a gentle kiss.

Without taking her eyes off her husband, Barb straightened against her pillows and set her chin.

"I'd better quit complaining and work at this myself," she resolved, then her gaze swung to Lorna, "I'd appreciate it if you'd join Gertrude and me in the morning."

Barb did work at muscle building with greater fervor after that. Lorna learned what help she needed in the flexing of her knee and elbow so Len was no longer present to suffer her spasms of pain that occurred. He was reluctant to give up his role but with the incurred medical expenses this was no time to slack on the work that would pay the bills. He no longer came to the house during the day. He retained the rewarding task of bringing Bud to Barb's side morning and evening.

Lorna wasn't sadistic and did not enjoy inflicting extra pain on Barb any more than Len did. However, she saw a determined woman pull herself out of a depression, fiercely obstinate in her decision to override the weakness with which she had cringed from pain in the past weeks. Lorna had to give her credit. Barb made up her mind to develop her injured muscles while they

healed. Develop them so they could heal. And heal they did.

Lorna could see improvement daily. She told Mary of the progress. "At the rate she's improving, I'll be coming home sometime in the next week."

"You don't sound all that excited," Mary noticed.

It was true. Lorna was not excited about going back to the city. She could already feel the loneliness of her single existence. This episode Mary had called an adventure ruined Lorna's contentment with her solitary life, a life filled with a round of committee meetings, volunteer work, and charity luncheons.

How hollow those activities looked to her in retrospect. It was what she had to go back to and she didn't like it much. It was where she had once belonged with total satisfaction. Well, the definition of the word 'belong' was recently used in a far different context and her sense of its meaning would never be the same.

Lorna wiped her open palms wearily across her face. She was willing to return the children's care to their mother as soon as possible. Len's decision to take over Bud's care relieved Lorna of part of the burden, a burden that was much more tiring than she had bargained for. She supposed a rest in her apartment was what she needed, regardless of the unwelcome solitude.

For now she relaxed on the back deck in a lawn rocking chair she favored and studied the dry and hardened yard. It was as barren as her life would be when she returned to her apartment in the city.