

Lorna's Route

Chapter Nine  
Dancing

"Don't you go to the Grange meetings?" Lorna asked Bill when he informed her that Len went every month. She could ride along, meet other folks in the community.

"Folks wanna meet yah," he insisted.

"That's very sociable of them, I'm sure," Lorna remarked, reminding him of her temporary position, "But hardly necessary since I'll be leaving soon."

"Mebbe so, but it'd be durn site more excitin' then settin' here, wooden it?"

"This place isn't exactly immune to excitement, what with rattlesnakes and stolen cars. I haven't found it dull," Lorna said, rather pensively. She busied herself at the kitchen sink, avoiding Bill's direct gaze.

The treasured excitement she'd found was in the old stone house beyond the trees, stoking fires in the dormant coals of her passions, causing flames to leap inside her at the smallest thought. She came deliciously alive in Rip's embrace that night and she had seen the souls of others shining from their eyes after such shared experiences. She knew hers would do the same whenever she let herself believe an alliance deeper than fantasy could actually happen. She knew her eyes would shine with the wonder of it and wasn't going to reveal the depth of her feelings. There was no future for her hopes except in fantasy.

Lorna expected Rip to attend the illustrious grange meeting and thought how good it could have been to be at his side. But instantly, she thought that would only substantiate the false gossip already circulating about them. Joyce implied they were the subject of idle talk as it was and after the hopeless interlude in Rip's arms, Lorna had no intentions of revealing her devotion every time she looked at him, in public or in private.

Len had come in from the barn and overheard what Bill asked of Lorna. He had reasons of his own for wanting her company.

"Lorna would you mind coming along with me? Joyce wants to send a cake and some other goodies to the meeting and I hoped you'd help me get them there safely. I won't be staying long."

Put that way, why should she refuse?

If she had to face Rip she would do so. Lorna was fully armored against his declaration in the aftermath of their passion. He had used her and

considered women as property, a concept she couldn't tolerate. Her thoughts hours later in her room reflected on the discussion of selfishness versus selflessness of sex.

She decided the question most asked by males: 'Was it good for you?' was a hope that the woman had not noticed the man's obsession with himself in the ultimate moment of satisfaction. How lovers deluded themselves, she thought, into thinking they were out to satisfy a partner when it was self satisfaction they sought.

She clutched, with smugness, the satisfaction she'd received from the passionate union, thinking she had conquered him after realizing Rip's satisfaction had equalled her own. How childish she had been for such a thought. But she loved him all the same, perhaps even more, for renewing the feminine sensuality she thought she'd lost.

There was no doubt in her mind that if she saw Rip she would wear her heart on her sleeve, so to speak, and in view of their turbulent reactions to each other, she would be surprised if he would give her a second look.

Her curiosity about the other folks who lived in this empty land would be better explored in Len's company, particularly since she was aware that someone had seen her car the morning she met Rip at Olson's country store. Her interest was piqued just enough to see if those who had seen her car would be bold enough to tell her so.

The large sheet cake Len picked up from Joyce was almost too wide to go through his truck's door. Baked in rectangular pans and joined to imitate the shape of the county, it was a colorful work of graphic art. No wonder he treated it with utmost care as he set it on Lorna's lap after she belted herself in his truck.

Outlined in a bold line of orange frosting, the cake was sprinkled with icons illustrating the variety of ranching and farming pursuits within the county: sheaves of wheat, potatoes, onions, asparagus, cattle--red and black, saddled horses, sprigs of mint, apples and clusters of grapes. The diversity of products from the land was remarkable. The members were proudly celebrating seventy five years of bonding through this organization.

The parking lot overflowed with dusty trucks and four by fours, interspersed with sleek sedans and station wagons that Lorna noted were a sedate gray, severe black, or stark white, with some fire engine red sports cars among them. It was no wonder that her green car had been so noticeable. But where they had seen her, she could not fathom. She had not seen one person, let alone one of these vehicles, anywhere during her drive on those curving graveled roads to Olson's store.

Len stopped by the back door and took the cake inside. Lorna held the door open for him, receiving curious glances that were replaced by interest in the safety of the cake, which quickly became the focus of everyone's attention.

Lorna stayed back, letting others clear the way toward the large hall.

Len carried his cumbersome burden through the kitchen to a long table on one side of the large hall, where it could be viewed and properly discussed by the milling crowd. Judging by the stacks of plates, napkins, and forks, the cake would be summarily devoured after being appropriately admired for a suitable length of time.

The cake was the center of attention, which gave Lorna the opportunity to study the assortment of folks that gathered at what Barb had described as a likely meeting of more local citizens than usually came together under one roof. Lorna was struck with a bedlam of noise, individual conversations mixed with strains of music, that assailed her ears.

A square of dancers dominated the center of the hall in front of a low stage occupied by men and women playing acoustic guitars, violins, keyboards and other accompaniment. The short multi-ruffled skirts of the women swirled and swayed as they followed the instructions of the caller, weaving through a pattern that brought matched couples together for a grand promenade.

When that ended slower music began inviting a less structured dance where couples could make up their own steps according to their mutual desires and the moods those desires imposed. Men chose partners and the couples streamed on the dance area like rivulets filling a pool, turning and mixing smoothly in a docile whirlpool of color.

The pool was filled from the horseshoe shaped area around the dance floor, where people gathered in small groups, to greet each other and choose dance partners. To Lorna, it was a delightfully lively scene. Cowboys in fringed and beaded shirts and expensively suited men, some with paunches, mixed with women in flowing skirts and ruffled blouses, and occasionally, stirrup pants, tightly hugging trim long legs. Lorna's apricot colored pants suit seemed too severe and businesslike. Except for the stone washed blue jeans of young vivacious women, her slacks were the only pants on any woman in sight.

No matter. No one noticed her.

Lorna caught her breath in covert delight to see a tall familiar figure greeting others near the open double front doors. Her delight diminished when she observed Rip's worn clothing, so out of place among the immaculately pressed pants, bright new shirts, and Western cut jackets adorning other men. Had he dropped in on an errand from some field work before getting dressed for this celebration?

He caught her eye and broke off his conversation with a curt nod of his head and moved resolutely toward her.

She turned to the table in an attempt to stop her heart from skittering all over her insides. She rearranged stacks of plates and napkins to occupy her hands as she tried desperately to compose herself.

Rip's disheveled image wasn't what she wanted to avoid. She was so accustomed to seeing him in working clothes she would have greeted him anywhere. Anywhere, but in this crowd of curious folks who circulated

speculations about their friendship. The anonymity with which she had studied the folks around her had ended, evaporated like so much water from a boiling pot.

Until Rip entered the hall Lorna had gone unnoticed, a condition that changed the moment he nodded recognition at her from across the room. His surprised companions at the door followed his determined direction with curious interest. His progress through the crowd held their attention. And by the certainty of his steps and his frequent glances that marked his route to her, the aware members of the crowd rapidly identified her as the owner of the prominent green car.

She had not been noticed when she entered the back door in Len's wake. She had entered unannounced, as any other citizen in the community, unidentified and, at the time, unknown.

Rip's glance was a discharged arrow to her, the targeted bullseye, and her anonymity had ended. She turned her back on Rip, hoping to send a message of disregard and dissuade him from coming to her but she discerned from his expression that she would not avoid his company.

Rip's hand was on her elbow within seconds and he turned her to face the cake, commenting on Joyce's artistic success, his voice coming from behind her, as he, too, faced the cake and the wall. He thrust a napkin into her hand in the first gesture of assisting her with refreshments. Instead of following through with a glass of punch, he leaned to point out a clever icon for an excuse to bring his head to the level of hers with his mouth closer to her ear.

"I want to dance with you," he intoned, grimly hushed for her ears alone.

A request? Rip asked for a dance, not demanded one?

Lorna glanced at him, withholding the real question going through her mind, knowing that now she held the spotlight of every pair of eyes in the large and crowded room. She pretended an air of gay frivolity to cover the intensity of Rip's attention.

"It is indeed a lovely cake. Joyce is talented and well informed about the community," she announced, quickly chucking the napkin into her pocket as Rip pressed her forward with reserved dignity and broke a path through the crowd to the dance floor.

To resist him was to cause a scene, the outcome of which she couldn't speculate. Not that she wanted to resist. Not at all. What she disliked was being the epicenter of the curious eyes around them. At this moment she had an aversion to deal with the questions of the people whose inquiring eyes examined her so openly.

Everyone was friendly, and in Lorna's view, exchanging routine conversation was something she was good at and if given a choice she would have done so. To be held in this man's arms so publicly was to be placed in a spotlight where she could not participate in small talk with anyone except Rip. And in her current frame of mind that seemed far more formidable. Given the

stage of her emotions, small talk with an estranged lover was beyond hope.

She would have chosen to be in his arms in private. Rip gave her no opportunity to make the choice. He nodded to those who stepped aside and Lorna resolved to paste the most affable smile on her face in passing.

"Is this dance such an ordeal?" he growled in muffled tones, noticing her grim acceptance as his hand took possession of hers, turning her around to pull her close with his arm on the back of her waist.

Lorna murmured, "I'm afraid to look at you." She kept her eyes averted, trying to remain expressionless so the onlookers wouldn't guess at her adoration.

"For god's sake, why?" He jerked her hard against him and whirled around with the music, as if to press a satisfactory answer, then slowed and pulled away to give her space and let her answer.

She finally looked up, wide eyed, and turned away from his gaze. It was no use. She mustn't let her soul shine forth in the glance at his strong rugged features. Regardless of how he'd used her she loved him still.

Her heart swelled and rumbled, vigorously trying to thump its troubled message to him through her ribs. She couldn't tell him how insecure she felt in this crowd. Like a shy clumsy teenager, she withdrew into a shell of reticence, sure of her desire to become invisible, unsure of the avenue of escape. Inadvertently she clung impetuously to him and interrupted his rhythm, causing him to misstep.

"Are you ashamed to dance with me?" His voice was harsh with accusation, deftly performing a double step to regain his balance.

Ashamed? Lorna couldn't believe he had come to such an outrageous conclusion. She glanced at him and was appalled at the hurt that sped to darken his steel blue eyes. In the next few beats of the music, Rip delivered her to the edge of the dance floor and released her.

He stalked away with a grim look, drawing the surprised stares from those nearby. She was poised to stop him but in the crowd she couldn't move quickly enough to catch his arm. She couldn't move at all.

Lorna closed her eyes to hide the confusion and remorse that filled the emptiness that came with Rip's rebuff. She stepped back as folks began to press toward her, introducing themselves, seeking a closer look at the woman intruding in the community. They showed an open curiosity to verify rumors about Rip's newest interest and the latest subject of local gossip. If Lorna had known what these people really wanted to know she would have turned and ran.

But she chatted amiably with each who stepped forward, succeeding in hiding her feelings, knowing that others standing nearby listened to the exchange with their biases, keeping their opinions and criticisms to themselves. Their questions were of Barb's recuperation and her ability to take over the care of her children. But many were curious how Lorna compared

country living to city life.

Lorna soon tired of the innocuous small talk and worked her way across the room, hoping some other item would have their interest by the time she returned from the ladies room.

The marked door swung inward toward a wall shielding all fixtures from prying eyes. The lavatory occupied the space immediately behind the shielding wall. Female voices continued conversing loudly from their separate privacies.

Glancing at the line of doors, Lorna couldn't be certain which stall was empty so she strained to identify the occupied stalls. Unaware of Lorna's entry, the discussion continued.

"Can you believe that Rip Woodall? The richest rancher in the county and he shows up looking like a tramp in those worn out clothes. What's he trying to prove, anyway?"

"Doesn't look like he dressed up for that city woman any more than he dressed up for Dorothy."

"I wonder how long she'll put up with that?"

"Long enough to get her hooks into his money, I'll bet. You know Dorothy took a..."

Lorna was mortified. Her hand flew to cover her indrawn gasp as their statement solidified her with the coldness of reality, shriveling her into the frozen depths of a humiliation she had never felt before.

A rattle of the stall latch brought her out of her misery long enough to know she must not stand around to hear more. She left the ladies room and hurried through the kitchen, smiling stiffly at the workers, saying, "I think Len's waiting for me."

Len wasn't at the truck but Lorna got in, as much to wait for a ride home as to escape accusing eyes. She fidgeted nervously, her hand coming upon the crumpled napkin she'd stuffed into her pocket moments after Rip's request for a dance when he came to the refreshment table. She had been unsure of his emotions much more than she had been of her own and had handled the encounter badly.

It was too late to undo her actions. She was not ashamed to dance with Rip. She could never be ashamed of him. How could he have jumped to such a ludicrous conclusion? How could she have acted so immaturely?

She loved him! She should not have been afraid to let him know.

Now she was aware that at least two women marked her as a gold digger. Mary often joked about finding a sugar daddy, a rich old man with nothing but money to spend on her. Lorna never considered such an arrangement.

Was Rip's grubby appearance his way of defending his money and his status? Flaunting destitution to keep fawning women at arms length? He thought himself big and ugly, as well. He'd made a big issue out of the fact that women didn't fall all over him. Had he been deliberately grubby so none would try?

The richest rancher in the county, they'd said. No wonder she couldn't see where he fit into the ranch operation. He was the owner. He could do what he pleased, direct activities, make ultimate decisions, put everyone in the place he chose for them.

And where had he placed her? In the ranchhouse of his foreman? In his book of conquests? In his bed! Had he placed her everywhere but in his heart--the only place she wanted to be?

Did he consider her a gold digger? That was the most humiliating aspect of this whole affair.

And perhaps an affair was all it was. He had waited for her to come to him, making it a true conquest on his part, even as he declared that the passionate satisfying union had made her belong to him. He had used her to satisfy his lust. And put the gold digger properly in her place!

Oh, lordy, she groaned, I've been more naive in this mature relationship than I ever was in childish relationships when a virgin.

She wiped her sweaty palms on the crumpled napkin before depositing it in the trash bag hanging from the knob of the glove compartment below the dashboard. In stuffing it in with the other refuse, her eye caught a strange streak inside the festive napkin. Curious about the uncharacteristic marks on what she thought was a fresh napkin when Rip had thrust it in her hand, she smoothed it, carefully unfolding the filmy tissue.

She gasped in awe at what she found.

Inside was a penciled heart pierced with an arrow, crudely printed with 'I love you' along its shaft. By its crudeness she knew it was a spontaneous show of his affection, an affection so deep it burst forth in a shy primitive manner with childlike honesty.

Lorna clasped it to her breast, dazed at thought of Rip's objective. He had prepared that message before she got to the grange hall, had planned to inform her of his love, in private, yet in the most public arena before the entire county.

In her haste at his insistence, she absently crammed it in her pocket for later disposal, not in the trash can by the table as she so easily might have done.

Earlier she chided herself for acting like a besotted teenager and that recollection made her smile. With this primitive message, Rip had reverted to elementary communication. Both were acting like inexperienced lovers.

Had they simultaneously gone to the most primal expression of their emotions? Were those emotions so dormant that they felt they had to awaken them by starting over at the very beginning?

When the prize of treasured love was in sight, they had reverted to the primal core of human desire and reacted in the most primitive way. Overcome with shyness like children, unschooled in lover's protocol because they had been without rapturous love for so long a time.

Lorna was assailed with a deeper self consciousness when confronted with Rip's effort that she could remember ever experiencing. She was old enough to have put those emotions to rest. Long experience had made her wary. Be careful of those emotions, regardless of how strong they are. Could they be real? Could her body be responding to Rip like a first love? Was such a thing possible at her age?

Lorna had had to reconstruct her own erotic actions in Rip's embrace, not that they were buried beyond retrieval by his skillful hands.

She fidgeted at the memory, impatiently awaiting Len's return. She must find Rip and renew what had already been consummated.

Rip had left the hall. He was hurt beyond description by what he thought was her embarrassment to be seen with him. She must find him and explain. But the apparition of the community's suspected motive for her interest in Rip, the richest rancher in the county, rose up to haunt her. Could she face him after learning that?

Where was Len? He had planned to deliver the cake and return to the ranch. She kept watching the back door of the grange hall. There was nothing she could do but wait. She wouldn't go inside that hall again if her life depended on it.

When Len finally came, he carried a covered dish to the truck, explaining the piece of cake with the loading chute icon he was bringing home to Barb.

By mutual agreement it was a silent trip back to the ranch, with the two occupants of the truck caught in their separate thoughts, each accustomed to respecting the silence of the other.

Lorna went through the things she must tell Rip, explain why she was afraid to face him, describe how she became shy among his neighbors, reveal the way she discovered his identity.

But the way he'd left her--hurt and coldly angered--would he give her the chance to tell him any of those things? How would she feel, disclosing her feelings to him a second time? Over the years she had learned to guard against rejection by others--learned it was safer to retreat than stand and fight if the planned retreat ultimately served her cause. Something deep within her was not retreating. She felt a welling up that told of a fight to come.

There was nothing for her to do but try. And during each daily task she waited for the opportunity. Rip didn't come to visit Barb the next day, or the next. Lorna grew anxious. He would avoid her if he thought she didn't want to be around him but why should he avoid Barb? That wasn't like him at all.

The shrill trebling of a doorbell startled Lorna as she wiped the countertop. She recognized the sound but no one had ever stood outside and rang Pederson's doorbell before. She grasped a tea towel and wiped her hands as she went with quick curious steps to see who was at the door.

Dorothy Lewis pulled herself up before Lorna and threw out angry words, "Where is he? He doesn't answer my calls. His door is locked. What have you

done with him?" With that she pushed Lorna aside and entered the living room, straining her head to examine every corner there and toward the kitchen.

Lorna was shocked into silence. Rip was the only 'him' they had in common. She could give her an earful of what she had 'done' to him. But that was none of Dorothy's business.

Never once in all her racing thoughts, had Lorna given a thought of Rip's turning back to Dorothy, but she was immensely relieved that he obviously had not gone to her for solace.

"If you mean Rip, I haven't seen him for days," Lorna admitted, assailing the angry woman with all the indignation she could gather.

Dorothy glared at Lorna for a long hard moment, disbelieving what she said. Lorna heard Barb's door open, not surprised that Dorothy's ravings had disturbed the convalescing woman.

"Come in, Dorothy. I'm pleased you came to call," Barb announced, firmly cutting through the antagonism.

Dorothy's figure appeared to deflate, as if a very slow leak pierced the thick skin of an loosely filled balloon. She huffed over her shoulder at Lorna and holding her hand out she went to Barb.

Lorna retreated to the nursery, relieved that Barb was recovered enough to move about and receive her guests, this one totally unexpected for a totally unexpected reason.

In the overheard conversation at the Grange Hall, it was said that Dorothy took a trip. Lorna hadn't thought about it before. Dorothy's whereabouts were as far from her mind as they had apparently been from Rip's. At least it would have seemed so, if she had thought about it sooner.

Then where was Rip? Dorothy had been to the stone house. And found it locked? The door Rip declared was always open? The thought of a lock brought on a feeling of foreboding and she tensed. The bright world she once hoped for darkened further. Lorna wasn't going to be needed by the Pedersons much longer. And sadly Rip didn't need her either.

Yet she pushed that thought away. Rip may not need her and may not even want her but that was not true for Lorna. She needed Rip. She needed his love and passion and, furthermore, she wanted his companionship and approval.

The thought filled her with yearning. Where was he? Was he as traumatized by the turn of events as she was? If he couldn't bring himself to talk it out, did he even care? He had been tight lipped before, his emotions locked within, difficult to decipher. He kept them from others, why not her? Could it be that he cared too much?

She would have to find out. But he wasn't around to ask and she didn't know where he had gone.

Bud still commanded attention and Lorna bent to the task. More and

more, Barb ran the household, although her muscles were not completely restored. She could not carry the lively baby but enjoyed intimate moments with him in her attempts to change his clothes and fix his formula.

Lorna tucked Bud firmly beside Barb and gave her the baby's bottle.

"Are you getting tired of constant visitors?" Lorna asked, not specifically alluding to Dorothy's visit. The door had slammed behind the widow Lewis some time ago.

"I scarcely get tired of them at all," Barb admitted, smiling brightly. "Even Sarah's jumping on my bed doesn't bother me any more. I do miss Rip's visits, though."

"Hasn't he been in to see you today?" Lorna made an attempt at innocence about his absence. She knew very well he hadn't been in to visit, not today, or yesterday, or the day before that.

"No, and he won't be. He went back to his rodeo circuit."

Lorna gasped, unable to hide her shock.

Barb's eyes peered at Lorna. "Didn't you know?"

"No," Lorna replied, sternly, "I'm surprised. He was so anxious to find that Edsel of his. But then his actions always were beyond my understanding."

"From some of the things I've been told, I thought you two had come to a real understanding." Barb tipped her head and studied Lorna with narrowed eyes, absently aiming Bud's bottle toward his mouth.

"You couldn't have been more wrong," Lorna quipped. "I didn't even know he owned this ranch until someone mentioned it at the Grange meeting."

Barb flashed rounded eyes at Lorna and a disbelieving frown crinkled her forehead. "You didn't?" she asked, her action stilled.

Bud snuffled and squirmed impatiently when the nipple on his bottle remained so tantalizingly within reach but too far to grasp. Barb had forgotten the bottle, lost in thought about the implication of Lorna's revelation. Bud gathered his limited resources to put up a fuss that could not be ignored.

"Oh, sorry, baby." She placed the nipple in Bud's mouth, assured herself that he was in control and looked back at Lorna to return to her last remark.

"It's not something we announce. It doesn't even affect us much. I don't suppose we mentioned it. Rip turned the operation over to us a few year's ago, had no interest in managing it anymore since he had no son to inherit."

"He mentioned Brad's death," Lorna admitted, strangely gratified that he had shared that pain with her.

"He did? Then you are privileged. He hasn't spoken of that for years," Barb revealed. "Len was a runaway from foster homes and Rip took him in when he was sixteen, same age as Brad. Raised them as brothers. Rip's the father Len never had. He taught Len as much about ranching as he did his own son."

"The admiration and respect are quite evident," Lorna conceded, "Rip status wasn't something I questioned, although he appeared to be a seasonal

ranch hand of high regard."

"You can't imagine how wonderful he is. Compassionate. Astute. When prices were good and the economy was riding high, he made sound investments. He turned the land over to us and found other interests and prefers to wander with the rodeo circuit."

"So that's where he is now?" It was more a statement than a question.

"Yes. Bill probably knows precisely. He keeps in touch."

Rip's absence made it impossible for Lorna to confront him. Her disappointment must have made her sound weary. Her shoulders sagged almost imperceptibly.

Barb's interest returned to her baby. She did not perceive the genuine source of Lorna's dismay. "You must be tired of this baby care. What would you have been doing this past month if you hadn't come to our rescue?"

"Oh, traveling, I suppose. I didn't have anything arranged at the time, though I seldom make long term plans."

"I suspect you travel a lot in that lovely car of yours."

"Yes, I drive to visit my children. Two of my boys live out of state, requiring a trip of several days, but Mary and I often go on tours together. Then we fly or bus. It's fun."

"And have you something planned, after your Pederson adventure?"

"No. I was at rather loose ends before, which was why I happened to be at Olson's for gas the day of Rip's return--the day you were hurt. I'm so glad you're going to be all right."

"Len will be freed from ranch work for the next few days. You can leave tomorrow, if you like."

There was very little fanfare when Lorna announced that she was leaving. She was discouraged beyond description when Bill insisted he did not know Rip's exact destination. He had gone off to the rodeo with a load of stock headed for Missoula and that's all he knew for sure. Rip left a schedule of rodeos with Len as he always did so he could be reached in case of an emergency.

"Surely, he'll be back soon," Lorna insisted, "Winter's coming. Rodeos have to end sometime...."

"Thay's jest gittin' in full swing," Bill informed her, sympathetically, "Run 'most a' the year. What's yer in'tres, anyway?"

He slapped his hat against his thigh, realizing too late that Lorna had lost her heart to his friend.

"Lord a mighty, yer pining for the big ug'ly galoot. As bad off as he is, ya are. I'da stopped Rip if'n I'd knowed that."

"What do you mean, as bad off as he is?"

"Din't zackly know it then, but Rip run off eatin' his heart out fer ya. 'N at's god's own truth."

For all the good that does, Lorna thought. I can't stay at the Pedersons'

until he decides to return. She would have to go back to her apartment.

Then what? She would think of something. Her fancy green chariot awaited her directive. What she needed was a copy of Rip's rodeo schedule. An idea took form for what she would do with a combination of the two after she returned to her apartment.

Her last drive on the country roads going to the city was slow and sad. She was in no hurry to leave although plans for a special trip were forming in her mind. Rip's rodeo schedule was in her suitcase and the route would become the itinerary for her next trip, a very important trip with consequences she could not foretell.

She slowed her progress even more as she approached the curve where Rip's truck had hit her car. She pulled to a stop at the crest of the hill, more visible to traffic both ways than where the collision took place. It was at this very place she had stopped to search the countryside for signs of civilization the day she met Rip at the country store.

Many poignant memories assailed her mind. The good ones thrilled her. The adverse ones depressed her. They were all critically entwined like the tangled brush she viewed below her.

A strange look came over Lorna's face. In her examination she sought to penetrate the brush, searching for the metal she recalled seeing on that first stop. Rip's brochure showed a picture of a car that was that color, that type. She stared with narrowed lids, her forehead wrinkled in a thoughtful frown. It had been immediately below where she stood but she couldn't see the metal she was so certain she had seen before. She decisively got into her car.

Holy smoley, how intense she was! You'd expect she had a bull by the tail.

Lorna WAS intense. She dug in her memories of the day she was lost in these empty hills, remembering a spot she'd thought was metal, never doubting that machines of one sort or another had been dumped into the ravines, pushed off the edge to get a useless piece of junk out of the way. She'd seen many early automobiles discarded that way in gullies of uninhabited country. The value of the scrap never occurred to her until Rip mentioned hauling it away. Lorna had completely forgotten the glimpse she'd had when she was preoccupied with the fear of running out of gas. She wanted another look. Could it possibly be his precious Edsel?

Lorna drove to the base of the canyon and took the right turn on a trail of bunchgrass beside tall spreading sagebrush. An eroded gully formed a ditch on the other side, sculptured sharp and knifelike by powerfully driven water. She wouldn't take her car into that jungle of sharp jagged brush. She couldn't take the chance of getting stuck in the unpacked soil.

She understood more clearly now the tremendous force of the rainstorm Len described and the damage like that on slopes in the wheat fields. Though the ditch was only about twelve inches deep, a great deal of soil had been

displaced, but Lorna doubted it would have covered a car. She got out, determined to investigate the pile of brush, resolute in reaching her goal, and walked into the towering sagebrush.

The eroded gully twisted across her path. She looked up to judge where she was in relation to the vantage point she'd had from above. There was no hint of the jumbled pile of dry tumbleweeds and blown sand she'd looked down upon. The uneven canyon floor and tall sagebrush obscured her view. Wagons had never traveled in this direction. She had to find her own path, twisting and turning where there was least resistance.

Lorna ceased momentarily, thinking that this was rattler country. Rip's description of the rattler striking only when startled was consoling. She was wary but the thought of Rip's words were reassuring. She continued through the sagebrush, impatiently toward an uncertain goal. Could his Edsel have been pushed into this ravine? If it had gone off the curve above, it would be irrevocably damaged.

She hurried forward at a near run, dodging the clumping brush, jumping the jagged ditches torn by the ravaging storm water, the loose sand filling her canvas shoes, the harsh branches tugging at the fragile fabric of her orchid pants suit. Her throat burned, her lungs ached, her anticipation consumed her. Could she find the place? She gasped for breath and looked up to get her bearings once more.

Lorna found the right spot. But the mess of tumble weeds and dead brush tangled in the live pungent sagebrush was far more formidable than she could penetrate. Could she get even a glimpse of a hidden car?

She grasped a loose tumbleweed and pulled. The spiny stickers stabbed her hand and she let up on the pressure but her reflex had dislodged enough debris to see a headlight and a small area of green metal.

"It's Rip's Edsel, all right!" she shouted, jubilantly. She put off her return to the city and left word of her unexpected discovery.

"I couldn't see enough of it to tell if it's damaged," she told Len. "The sand was washed around it but it's mostly covered with brush."

"I'll uncover it," he assured her, "and let Rip know it's been found."

She listened to the suppositions with mild interest. If someone had driven the car off the road a body might be still inside, injured and undiscovered.

"How gruesome," Lorna shuddered.

"If it isn't damaged it couldn't have gone over the cliff," Len disagreed, "That's a big heavy car. Surely a roll over that embankment would make a total wreck. I think it was driven into the canyon. It could have been stashed there during the day when the ranch was deserted."

"If'n that storm cum 'n tore the gully, it couldn't of bin drove out easy," Bill added.

"Would it simply be abandoned?" Lorna asked.

"The thief might have planned to come back and drive it away after dark. It would have been more difficult to identify a pair of headlights. Then with all the mud it was impossible right then." Len recalled the possibilities.

"And even moreso when the water left a gash in the road and the soil hardened. That meant more work than a single thief wanted to do." He imagined the aftermath of rain and sun.

Lorna left the hypothesizing to Len. He would see that it was returned to the ranch to await Rip's return. That was out of her realm now. She had another search to attend to. She only hoped it was as successful.