

Lorna's Route

Chapter Ten Catching

Curious how indelibly some people leave their mark on you, Lorna thought. Over long associations it's understandable, but of those people recently known, especially for fragmented moments, you would expect impressions to soon fade and recede beyond the grip of memory.

Only recently known. Rip fit that category. Lorna had shared with him exclusive fragmented moments during one short month. Now separated from him for almost as long, the fragments were still as vivid as stained glass, brilliant and resplendent, in glowing technicolor. And she couldn't get him out of her mind.

Lord knows, I tried, she insisted to herself as she put away the last of the dinner dishes. In truth, she hadn't tried very hard to get Rip out of her mind. What she had done was try to reconcile herself to the fact that she had lost him through her own juvenile actions.

The memories themselves were too precious to be purged. Rip's image loomed before the surroundings in which she found him, unalterably printed on the land. She pondered over the scene beyond her kitchen window, across well manicured lawns of the neighborhood, green from daily watering, colorful with clumps of pink and purple asters contrasting with yellow and copper colored chrysanthemums. Her vision abruptly ended at the city dwellings.

Returned to her own apartment, she yearned for the view of openness that seemed to reach forever into the brilliant sun. Her mind's eye hopelessly sought endless rolling hills, yellow with stubble after relinquishing their bountiful harvest, ravaged to a shabby brown under a relentless harrow.

Her obsession with the rural view went far deeper than landscape. She yearned ultimately to retrieve a lover, a companion, a mate. When she thought over her feelings carefully she admitted an ambivalence about clinging to the hope of a union with the rugged man. Tying herself to a man, any man, after being so long alone was risky. But she had become a physical wreck in the ensuing mental struggle to accept the alternative.

When Rip left the ranch so abruptly the week before Barb resumed the full care of her baby, Lorna wore herself to a frazzle, her anxiety channeled into getting the house perfectly cleaned and in order before leaving. It was a self appointed task, Barb did not expect her to do it, nor did she ask it.

Lorna's chagrin over the gold digger image she was so unfairly given had faded, where Rip's image as a thrilling lover had not. She lost her appetite

grieving over his abrupt departure and weariness numbed her thoughts about the cranky man whose life had so deeply marked her own with memorable moments.

Perhaps the quality of the moments shared accounted for the burr-like proficiency with which they stuck in her thoughts. She quickly relived the recalled pleasures then resolved to put them aside when she opened the door to face her friend.

They settled in the high backed cushioned chairs at her dining table with the worn card deck between them. Lorna counted out a small pile of the beans she used for chips from a ragged sandwich bag while Mary shuffled the cards and cut the ace of hearts to win the first deal of their private weekly poker marathon.

"It's a long drive and I don't think you should go alone." Mary told Lorna when reminded of her impending visit to her son, Patrick. "You brood so much lately and that's not like you. Are you sure you're completely rested from that babysitting job? That took more out of you than you realize. Really, I'd be happy to go with you. I can take the train back."

"Thank you. You're a dear, but that's not necessary. I'll stop often. I'll be just fine."

"But why are you going across Montana? That's going the long way." Mary had succeeded in getting Lorna to reveal her route when she mentioned that she would be starting immediately. Her son's Hawaiian trip for which she agreed to housesit and care for her grandchildren was more than two weeks away.

Yes, thought Lorna, to cross Montana was taking the long way around to Patrick's. Did she dare confide in Mary the real reason for her circuitous route? She had mapped out the shortest way to pursue the rodeo schedule she was really out to follow in her search for Rip.

"I've not driven that route before and I'll enjoy the change of scenery. I decided to take the extra time so I won't have to push myself."

In the past she had driven the thousand miles to her son's home in Lincoln, Nebraska, but never by such a northerly route which would add five hundred miles to the trip.

Mary would question her motives quickly enough when Lorna's stops coincided with a visit to the rodeo in town. There were other reasons why Lorna didn't want Mary's company on the trip. Or why she couldn't tell Mary her real plan. Some things Lorna didn't understand herself. She was surprised at the lengths she now intended to go to apologize for her inability to be straightforward with Rip at the dance.

She was, above all, self conscious about her motive for pursuing Rip. If he loved her as his primitive message stated, she would only be recovering the point where their relationship was ripening between them before they parted in error. If the napkin message was a fluke and he regretted his part, she had to

know. Bill's remark that Rip had 'run off eating his heart out for her' gave her some hope.

At any rate she was apprehensive about the outcome. Mary would understand Lorna's reasons for wanting to privately face Rip, but would she approve of Lorna actually following rodeos to seek him out? Even if she did, she might encourage more confrontation than reconciliation.

Lorna couldn't risk that at all. Rip's arrogance often triggered Lorna's displeasure as it was. Made her downright angry was what it did. She would have all she could handle to control her own temper without her friend's added irritation over a man's intrusion into their routine.

Lorna had remarked on Rip's sudden departure from the dance and the Pederson ranch without mentioning Rip's wealth or her acquired label as gold digger. If Mary suspected there was more to the farm stay than Lorna related, she hadn't pressed for details. If it came to nothing in the end, why belabor it?

No, Mary's presence might affect the outcome and there were already too many wild cards in the deck. She had never been more sure of the course she was taking. Her life involved high stakes and she had less time than younger women to take charge of the deal. When you are over sixty, you have to bid high just to get in the winning pot. At least Lorna wanted to see the hand through to the end. The cards she held were all she had. Maybe they were all she needed, provided she made one last lucky draw.

Rodeos on the schedule Lorna studied reached across Montana, into Indian Reservations mostly. Lorna learned Rip's involvement went deeper than providing bucking and roping stock. A sum matching the prizes won by Native Americans went into their local College fund to pay tuition for bright needy students, making him a benefactor beyond anyone dedicated to rodeo promotion that she'd ever thought existed. Bill had bragged about that attribute to defend against Lorna's allegation of Rip's intractable interest in rodeos.

Rodeos were a complete mystery to Lorna. Advertising on TV showed rodeo contestants competing in the arena but that was the exciting part to entice a paying public to come watch the competitions.

Rip's place was not in the arena. He would be found somewhere between the dusty boisterous competition and the slick advertising from the box office. How she would go about looking for Rip once she got there, she didn't have a clue.

The first rodeo delivered Lorna the information needed to make her first, and to her the most, momentous decision that would make her subsequent inquiries much simpler and easier.

The skeptical eyes of those encountered in her search behind the scenes held her aloof--in the crude office where the focussed action centered around ticket sales to the grounds where the rigs that held the participants coagulated.

Rodeo folks were not hostile but not open to revealing the information

she wanted without undue questioning and superfluous explanations. Many volunteers who worked through the crowds didn't know the names of the rodeo itinerants that worked with the horses. After a round robin of directives from helpful workers she finally discovered the name of the man responsible for the stock at this rodeo was not Rip Woodall.

Perched in the top row of the highest tier of covered bleachers seating, Lorna observed the spectators in the open benches and ruminated over her tedious success. Every male wore a hat, brimmed and crowned in some style that reflected the action of the west. Cattle baron or cowboy, no head was bare. Hats were absent from females, some hung by strings along their backs, thrown off to reveal heads of Dolly Parton hairdos, elaborately exhibited as a badge of femininity.

Well, if that's what it takes, thought Lorna, finger combing her short unhatted hair, I'll never make the grade. I'll never fit in. She recalled the women at the Grange dance were not hatted nor endowed with steamed and harried tresses but nevertheless they fit in with the crowd as she had not.

Lorna scrutinized. Inspected. Investigated. Noted a variety of clothing as well as shapes and sizes. The young and slender wore jeans and some wearing them who were not so slender were challenged by their seams. Women who wore shirts and matching skirts were particularly striking. In comparing the various fringed and beaded western cut shirts or the wild rodeo related appliques on more informal tee shirts, she saw a blending of a homogenous group.

To her the entire setting was a foreign location. She had felt less out of place walking the trails in Nepal than she did here. Was there something she could do about it? The heat of the day was getting to her. She shifted to fold her program in half and fan herself as many others had begun to do. She smiled apologetically at the woman on her right whose skirt she disturbed as she wiggled on her narrow spot of hard bench, futilely realigning her backside into a more comfortable position.

At that moment Lorna realized what was wrong.

Her clothes were out of place! She couldn't have advertised her difference more aggressively if she had worn a sandwich sign across her shoulders claiming ignorance of rodeo protocol. No wonder the rodeo managers gave her a skeptical eye, often with an attending evasive answer. Her appearance broadcast the impression she was an outsider asking favors and received none, just in case she was an outsider up to no good.

Lorna found it difficult to concentrate on the announcer's humor or the antics of the resident clown and his wayward mule. She intended to watch the contests and learn what she could about this strange event that was part competition and part circus. It was an all American phenomenon began as entertainment for rural folks where circuses and theaters never came. It had risen to the status of community builder, promoted to keep nearby folks

involved in the pride of their locale, hyped to bring in competitors for prizes of money and fame.

Before the last steer was bulldogged--and she wanted to know where that term originated--Lorna was weaving her way down the steps. She was going on to the next city and buy herself a new outfit. If clothes counted for something, she could look like she belonged.

Tucking her credit card into the spacious pocket of her new split skirt, Lorna turned and surveyed her new image in the plate glass store window. The choice had been an easy one. The floral design cinched her decision. High fashion or not, Lorna liked to wear flowers. The toughest part of the purchase was to stave off every pricey suggestion made by the clerk. She turned her hips slightly to get a distinctive view of her new image.

The two inch elk skin fringe at the hem of the divided skirt swept her legs just inches above her ankles which gave her a strange fluttery sensation that made her want to twist and twirl to swish the hem against her legs. The material was a heavy cotton twill that matched the rich creamy tan of the fringe. The shirt was cut from the same material with yoke and cuffs fringed to match the hem of the skirt. The yoke was slightly off white profusely covered with a serene design in the varied red tones of the Bitterroot, the Montana state flower.

The flat crowned straw hat was uncomfortable pressed against her head. The leather hat band brought out beads of perspiration and she hadn't yet been out in the sun. The airy straw, she thought, would be far cooler than the wool Stetson, aware as she was of the need to protect her skin from harmful sun. She lifted her chin and turned her head at a rakish angle. Some image, she agreed. The new outfit lifted her spirits.

Lorna's brow wrinkled with one small doubt as she surveyed her shoes. She chose an ankle high copy of the lower part of the traditional western boot in the same creamy leather as the garment fringe. Boots with the high cowboy tops were a part of the costume she wouldn't accept. Maybe that was a mistake. But then again, maybe no one would notice.

Lorna had quicker results in getting answers to her queries at the next two rodeos but neither produced Rip Woodall. At the last one, the answer to her parting question held an important clue. Rip was the stock handler who had taken a truck load the day before. Lorna now knew his immediate whereabouts. She would catch up with him very soon.

Her anticipation was hard to contain. She got the verifying information in minutes. In such close proximity to a public place with the crowds milling about, it seemed impossible there could be a spot as silent and secluded as the stock pens where she was sent by a rodeo official whose eyebrow jerked imperceptibly while his eye roved down her fabulous western dress. She accepted a lift to the sorting runs then wound her way behind them, straining to take the next turn around the eight foot high wooden fences, choosing each

direction with care until she saw him.

He stood hipshot with a hand on the top rail of the corral behind the bucking chutes. There he was, big as life--he was life--and Lorna's heart jumped. One hand rested on his hip, hanging by a thumb in his pocket. He intently observed the enormous Brahmin bull confined in the pen, cocking his head to estimate the animal's power for future reference.

Lorna didn't move. From beneath a hat brim pulled rakishly low, her eyes absorbed the dusty worn jeans concealing lean hips, the faded green shirt loosely hung on wide shoulders, the scuffed boots at ease deep in the straw mixed dirt. She savored the familiar image, hoping that this moment would mirror another time, another place, recreate exciting passion. She held the pleasant thoughts that came to mind.

But her eyes riveted on him and, as one can feel another's stare and looks to find the source, if it exists, Rip began to turn, his gaze sweeping as he did. His hand automatically went to his hat brim, tipping it slightly in his normal salute, a warm smile touching his lips in admiration of the feminine vision she provided.

"What can I do for you, ma'am," he asked pleasantly, stepping forward to hear her answer while he concentrated on her face.

He halted and took a minute to register her image and corroborate his suspicion. Under the burning darkness of his gaze she stopped breathing.

"Lorna?" His eyes narrowed with incredulity. He returned his hat to the normal ridge on his head with a two handed jerk, and she could almost hear stone grind against stone when he set his hard jaw. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought if nothing else, I ought to say 'goodby'." Her senses quivered with anticipation.

"You came all the way for that? Is it so important to throw your rejection in my face, you made a long trip to satisfy yourself on that score? You are colder than I thought." His features were immobile, his eyes a glaring blue.

"You didn't give me the opportunity before you left the ranch." She pulled the grange napkin from her pocket and between clenched hands, held his heart shaped message before his eyes.

Rip's face contorted most painfully and he turned from her. "Real live kid stuff, huh?" he growled, clenching his fists at his sides.

Lorna held his arm, demanding in a quiet pleading voice, "Did you mean it? Does it have any meaning now?"

"What difference does it make? You made it plain you were ashamed to be seen with me. Wouldn't look at me."

"Rip. Listen. Please. I couldn't look at you without love pouring out of my eyes. I was so in love with you I was afraid to let you know because I thought then that you despised me. When people called me a gold digger for going after the richest man in the county, I thought you...that night in your

bedroom... Oh, I don't know what I thought. At the time I was so confused. I didn't know how you felt about me. Later when I read this message, I knew how foolishly I acted."

Rip's stony features remained hard and unrevealing, his eyes unreadable in the shadow of his thickly shading brows, his lean and solid length unmoving, suspended, and like a sieve filtering thick cream from off milk, her confession was slowly processed, the rich tidbits turned over to be consolidated in one golden treasure.

"Dorothy called you a gold digger?"

"No. Not that I know of. Women at the grange meeting did." Lorna tensed. What brought on that question? Why didn't he acknowledge her outpouring of love? Why didn't she throw herself into his arms? Her every atom strained to do so. It took all her inhibitive training to prevent it. She searched his face for some relenting sign. Did his wide mouth soften just a little?

"I'm surprised you didn't punch them out." A tiny upturn at the corners jerked a muscle along his jawline.

"Why would I do that? Before they called you the richest rancher in the county, I had no idea you had any money at all."

Rip squinted and cocked his head. "Did that change your attitude?"

"Well, of course. I thought that's what you thought and were mocking me--using me--when I...when you...when we..."

He stared at her in mounting disbelief and watched her gaze drop before he heard her say, "It's bad enough to get old, but when I lost my ability to be honest, always afraid I'd make a fool of myself, I really hit rock bottom."

Rip's fingers clenched, fists tightened and relaxed, but he said nothing. He stared into Lorna's eyes with such intensity she thought he could see into the depths of her soul. She hoped he could because, if so, he would see the love with which he was regarded and he would be assured.

He made no outward move but Lorna watched a myriad of emotions chase one another across his features. He shuttered his eyes from her.

Lorna's hopes for a reconciliation plummeted. Was this it? Was this the end instead of the beginning on which she'd spent so much energy these past few days? She couldn't give up so easily. She wouldn't leave until she forced words of admission from him. One way or another, she had to hear him say it.

"I had my pride, too. I thought you played me for the fool. No man's going to put up with that." His chin came up and his eyes confirmed his words.

"You told me once you had to know if I felt anything for you. Now I know how I feel. I don't know what it means when you run away from me. I want to know." Her voice held a quiet urgency.

"I'm not young either," he admitted. "I thought I had better control of myself. You gave me such odd feelings my knees quivered. You scared the hell

out of me. You still do."

"You can't mean that literally."

"Believe me, I hate admitting it, but I can't remember ever having my knees turned to jelly before."

"My stomach lurched when you appeared but not from fear."

"You argued with me at every turn,"

"You kept making demands, ordering me around."

"There were things I had to ask for."

"You didn't ask, you demanded, and that made me angry. Everything else about you excited me in a way I'd never felt before. My pride wouldn't let me admit how you affected me."

"I couldn't hide the affect you had on me. Len saw it that first night when we caught you in Barb's nightshirt. I felt like a silly school boy."

"That night in...your...bed?" Lorna hadn't been able to figure out what took place in his thoughts after the wondrous coupling.

"You argued again and I thought you regretted the whole beautiful time."

"You avoided me so I thought you regretted it."

"Nobody ever had much to do with me except for my money. I decided that's the way it was with you."

"You accused me of being ashamed of you. Then I thought it was because you had no money or position. What else would I think you meant?"

"I haven't operated the ranch for a lot of years. I suppose I did look down and out."

"I thought you were a wandering cowboy, hitting rodeos, making a poor living at it."

"Well, I'm not your ordinary handsome cowboy, after all."

Lorna was astounded. He was back to that! His own face, the very essence of himself was what he thought was rejected. He described himself as ugly when they collided on the road and Lorna didn't think so then, but she hadn't told him so. She felt at the time he was baiting her and to cut his arrogance she didn't defend his looks. Her car had just been trashed. She justified her pride and stopped short of contradicting him when he called himself a big ugly cowboy. That outburst gave her food for thought many times since.

"You're certainly not my ordinary cowboy." Lorna reached out and touched his sleeve. She said 'my' with a possessiveness he could not mistake.

Rip's hand came up to her shoulder where the creamy fringes twisted and trembled under his caress. He tipped his face, his eyes pulled at her with the inspired hope of ages in the blue depths. The space between them grew more narrow.

"What? No argument about ordinary?" He deliberately had not used the word 'ugly' as he had once before, almost believing the protest he had heard her make then.

"I take it you won't go so far as call me handsome." He teased. He believed her declaration of love. It was so uplifting and unbelievable he had to extract some complement of his physical prowess. He so suddenly surmised she would comply.

"I know how I judge handsome." Lorna's hand went to Rip's face, fingertips lovingly traced his jaw, her voice pensive and cajoling, "I know what I like. I like what I see. I like what I feel."

"Me, too." He slowly scanned her outfit and added, "What made you decide to wear a dress? I didn't recognize you right away."

"It's not a skirt, it's split, but pants just the same."

"It's hairs you're splitting. Looks like a skirt to me." His thin cheeks softened, lines crinkled at his eyes, teasing a challenge.

"That's the idea." Her smile widened, refusing to take up the fight. The challenge would not result in confrontation because each completely understood the real challenge was to accept the love of the other by wholly giving their own.

They stood like that, his hand on her shoulder, her hand on his jaw, afraid to break the contact, afraid the love they felt was more than they deserved, afraid they had too little time.

When Lorna stood still no longer, Rip reacted to her cue. Her hands went around his neck and his arms went around her back and they came together with a silent primal force of a man and woman now absolutely certain of the deep abiding love they shared.

A crisp bellow and a scrape of horns on the heavy board fence, punctuated by impatient stomping hooves, pulled the engrossed couple out of their entwined preoccupation. Their arms loosely held around each other's waist, they turned to observe the agitated Brahmin bull.

"Don't get your tail in an uproar, fellah," Rip scolded the restless ton of beef crouching to spy through the slit between corral boards, "You'll get your grain soon enough."

To Lorna he said, "Don't mind him. He's jealous of the delectable portion in my arms." His embrace tightened to emphasize her importance.

Lorna glowed at the complement. Her gaze caught Rip's before he once again addressed the bull.

"I won't have time for you anymore, old boy. I'm going to feast on the prettiest, cussedest, sweetest little thing that ever grew up in the city." He set his chin, clamped a wide thin smile on his mouth, and slowly shook his head as if he couldn't believe his good luck.

Lorna thrilled that her gamble had turned out so well. His strong arms held her securely, with a promise never to let go. She was alarmed when he pushed her back and scanned her full length once more.

"You didn't throw away your yellow suit, did you?" His eyes showed a skeptical alarm.

"No. I thought you didn't like it. What makes you ask?" Her frown deepened with each word.

"You looked like such a delectable ear of corn. I wanted to eat you up the first time I saw you by the door of your bright green car. Wanted to peel off the husk and lick off all the butter." He hugged her tightly again, the desire in his eyes was overwhelming.

"Sounds like a splendid idea, but I didn't bring that suit," she lamented, "Sorry. You'll have to make do without it."

"I'll think of something. I'm good at improvising." He arched her hard against his body, meeting her lips fully with a sweet and tender promise.

It was a kiss to which she responded with all her consciousness. It held, for them both, the promise of fulfilling times ahead, where they would share love and companionship, no longer afraid to demonstrate their feelings in whatever remained of their lifetimes.