

WILDLY IN THE ROCKIES

Chapter One

Bursting

Near the horizon, stringy clouds gathered in a bundle of strings, daring the sun to rent their grayness. The silent rays took that dare and cut through with ease, using reflective particles to turn the edges a brilliant red. Piercing, yet explosive, the light rays shattered the silence of the sky.

'The bombs bursting in air' from the national anthem couldn't have found a better example than the violently erupting colors being surveyed by Lynne Redding. She walked directly into the wind, enjoying the unseasonably warm air that slowly kneaded the clouds like fluffy bread dough across the blue spring sky directly above.

Inside the campus library from which Lynne emerged, bursting bombs existed in a different reality than words of a patriotic song. In the twisted mind of a stout muscled man, bombs were the most beautiful things ever designed.

A properly set explosive could work miracles. His family, well, he didn't really have a family--the group who recruited him really appreciated his ability to design and handle explosives.

The group had given him a mission, a secret mission. That mission was to get plans for a special kind of bomb. He feared his mission was exposed by the sloppily dressed co-ed whose loose shirt tail flipped his drawing to the floor. He looked furtively around to see if anyone else witnessed his drawing.

His big hands hovered protectively over his precious information. That stupid woman must be dealt with. His narrowed eyes followed her form as she strode down the wide steps.

A playful breeze caught at Lynne's denim clad legs and flipped open her oversized chambray shirt to reveal a bright tee shirt over her braless chest. She loosened her braid and flung the waist length hair behind her.

Leaning back, she slid her thumbs along the back of her neck under the thick mane, momentarily holding it off her shoulders while she arched her back to relieve the tenseness that always invaded her athletic body when

cramped in a two-hour test session. With a deep sigh she pulled her hands away and the gently waving hair cascaded to her slim waist.

Her work-study project was complete. All that was left was the final exam. Her footsteps were jaunty and she fairly bounced along the sidewalk, pleased that her resume now included a successful remodeling of a motel interior.

The air held an unusual warmth for early March and the sunlight punctuated the piling clouds with gold and red. Orange rays streaked toward the horizon. The vibrant changeable colors of the sky, as well as the taste of her own sweet success, filled her with a dash of pride touched with wonder.

She gripped the front opening of her soft chambray shirt, closing it against the sudden gusting breeze.

Her wide gray eyes drew in the spectacular expanse of vivid colors across her view of the horizon. Pausing for a moment, she treasured the scene as if to freeze the splendid colors in her memory for all time.

Silhouettes of birds flapped silently against the far-off billowing clouds. She envied the freedom of those winged specks in the distance. Impatience moved her forward but her eyes remained riveted to the sky.

She darted around the corner.

She crashed into a firm body.

Lynne was stunned and she was breathless, but the collision did not knock her down. She tensed in an effort to withdraw, her startled eyes level with a full beard.

Dark brown, the soft facial hair was carefully trimmed, outlined with lighter streaks on the square shape of the jaw. Straight thin masculine lips cut a horizontal line through the brown beard.

Her spreading palms, upthrust instinctively to protect her body, flattened against the silk of a shirt that did nothing to conceal a hard muscled chest.

She pushed back, stunned by the force of the collision, vaguely aware of loose papers bursting into the air around her. Slowly she released her breath, regretting her carelessness. She raised her head to apologize, her gray eyes rounding when her gaze locked to his.

The depth of the blue in his eyes was startling. Never had she seen a purer, more intense blue, even on her color wheel.

The blueness clouded with anger as the man's horrified gaze chased the loose papers exploding in the breeze as if by will alone he could restrain the paper storm. For a galvanizing instant his gaze flicked to her in censure, then darted with anguish to his papers tossing on the ground.

Lynne mutely lamented the chaos and swept into action. Her supple body swayed as she bent to seize the pages from the teasing fingers of the

wind. Capturing the fluttering sheets with one graceful hand and gathering them into the other, Lynne thrust haphazard handfuls into the stranger's hands while she looked around for more.

"I'm sorry...." she stammered, avoiding his eyes.

The bearded stranger uttered wordless gasps as he grasped the loose sheets, uttering husky expressions edged with annoyance.

Lynne retrieved the last of the sheets from the dust.

"Give them to me," he commanded.

The deep resonance of his tone tingled along her spine with the startling authenticity of a human touch. Lynne heard a gasp, not realizing it was her own.

She scooped and thrust rattling papers into his hands, alarmed at the sensual touch as she stared at his strong tapered fingers with neatly trimmed nails.

Lynne hovered around the papers, leaning in to cup her hands and arms against the gusting air. Wisps of hair clung across her face, partly concealing the rising color that drowned the freckles spattered across the bridge of her nose.

The annoyed man breathed sharply, anxiously patting the loose pages into a manageable package, unwittingly transferring dust to his coffee brown corduroy sports jacket.

Lynne stammered an apology, "I'm sorry they're mixed up. The wind...I'm sorry...I wasn't looking...the clouds...I'm sorry." She hovered nervously waiting a response as he straightened the papers.

"I...the colors...my work...." She couldn't believe she was babbling. Her gaze darted from the papers to the clouds and back again.

The last of the scattered papers was in his hands. Her discomfort heightened as she looked from the ground to the crumpled pile in his arms.

His displeasure was relentless.

"There. That's all of them," she anxiously insisted.

With a forlorn expression, he eyed the crumpled armful and fixed her with a look that laid upon her the entire credit for the mishap.

Lynne rebelled at the insinuation and glared at him with her firm chin raised in proud defiance.

"Well, it wasn't all my fault. You weren't..." She wasn't certain how to express her indignation but she questioned his part in the collision.

He flicked her a look of indifference, as if to exonerate himself of blame.

Lynne turned quickly, flinging her hair over her shoulder and hurried away from his arrogant rejection.

She walked briskly. In spite of herself she reviewed his image as she

marched toward the row of lilac bushes that edged the sidewalk. His nose was sharp with a slight curve to the bridge and his hair was styled in a feathered cut. He was older than the students, more mature, she thought.

Unbidden, she relived the impact of his virile male body.

She stopped abruptly in the middle of the sidewalk and seized her jaws in her palms. She was shaken by her physical response. The lingering pleasure was unnerving. Never had she been impressed in quite that way before.

She clinched her eyelids tightly and ran her fingers through her hair. She didn't like the way her senses had responded to that strange man.

Since early childhood she agonized over her mother, an intelligent creative woman dominated by the love of an authoritative man. Lynne was determined not to be dominated. Love like that was not love at all.

Lynne let Les into her life because he was a comfort but he did not arouse her nesting instincts. She was not going to be caught in the romantic trap and deterred from her career.

Slowly she resumed her steps but couldn't put the image of the bearded man out of her mind. She tried to regain control as she remembered the thread of anger that ran through his features.

"I wasn't totally responsible for the collision," she insisted, aloud, as if that would put him in his place. "He hadn't been standing still, either, probably wasn't paying attention to where he was going any more than I was."

She recalled him staring strangely at her as if preoccupied with other thoughts when she handed him the papers. Her straight thick eyebrows pinched together as she puzzled over the memory.

His image was pushed back when she heard a familiar voice break through the whiny engine noise from a machine maneuvered by a grounds worker.

"Hey, wait up," called Les Nelson, waving to her from across the clipped lawn. The faded logo of The Nature Conservancy billowed slightly on his worn shirt as Les loped toward her on long jean-covered legs. His dingy running shoes were tinged a yellow-green from the newly cut grass.

The clipped lawn reflected the yellow of the filtered sunshine. The noise of the edge trimmer at the sidewalk drove Les closer to Lynne so he could be heard.

He yelled above the noise, "How about going over to my brother's after dinner? He's got new slides he's going to show."

Lynne's nose wrinkled in distaste, "Not more diseased trees? Or is it insect-eating birds this time?"

"I know you aren't crazy about birds, but Wayne is one heck of a

photographer and I know you love nature." He gulped to catch his breath as he took her hand and pulled her down on a sidewalk bench.

"I don't know anything about birds," Lynne insisted, her eyes focussed on his clutching hand retrieving images of other hands gathering dusty papers. She shuddered and shook her head. She didn't want to talk just now. She didn't want to hold hands either and tried to pull away.

Les held on stubbornly and she stopped resisting but she couldn't look into his eyes. She hoped he didn't expect her to.

"You'd like birds if you just think about it. Look there." He pointed to a V of geese flapping high overhead.

Lynne watched the arrow-shaped formation undulate softly across the pale orange sky, "So they can fly and I can't. So?"

"So, some of them have been around for sixty million years." The theory that they evolved from predatory dinosaurs fascinated him but that didn't impress her.

"So have other lowly creatures." She didn't dislike birds. Actually she envied their ability to soar above the earth.

"They're the only living creatures with feathers. Think about all the ecological niches they fill." Les was an ornithology major. He couldn't understand how anyone could ignore birds.

The noisy edge-trimmer moved down the sidewalk nudging Lynne's thoughts back to the ground and recently scattered papers.

Sky-gazing caused her enough trouble for one day. She thought she'd better avoid bird-watching and cloud-gazing from now on. Rising from the bench she pulled Les up to her side.

"C'mon, let's walk." Lynne closed her eyes, thinking about what she was doing. She didn't want to reject Les. She felt safe with him, not one single bit threatened, so she grasped his hand a little tighter and hurried down the walk.

"You know, in a couple of months I'm going to do a bird survey," Les said.

"Oh, I didn't know you had a job."

"It isn't a real job--just a one-time count of birds in a special area," Les said, as he struggled to keep up with her, "but I'm going to like it."

"I've got to find a job, too."

"There's nothing you can do tonight so come with me and enjoy a free show. All the guys will be there."

"That's just what I need--a crowd around me to divert my attention." Her voice filled with a sarcasm that she had no excuse for taking out on Les. She squeezed his hand and stopped. The wind spilled her hair across her face and her curling fingers lifted it back behind her shoulder. Looking up into his face,

she softened her tone and tried to smile.

"I do need a diversion. I'm entirely too tense." Her knees were strangely shaking. She tossed her head and stole a glance toward the spot where she bumped into the stranger.

"I'll meet you at Wayne's at seven thirty," she said and walked off toward her apartment.

Later, Lynne scooped up the clothes she dropped on the floor before she showered. She plopped the clothes into the hamper and slipped into clean jeans and a faded yellow sweatshirt. No need to be formal with the 'bird crowd' as she fondly called Les's friends.

She gathered her hair into a pony tail and fastened it with a thick orange string. Wisps fell loosely around her face. She pushed them behind her ears with a futile shrug. Before the upcoming job interviews her unruly hair would have to be cut and styled. She wouldn't worry about the image of a business manager or professional designer tonight. Whatever that image was supposed to be!

"The time to be businesslike will come soon enough," she thought as she settled into the furry bean bag and paged through The Professional Woman's Journal. Articles of office do's and do not's were sandwiched among simple office settings. She shook her head at the tall thin beauties modeling dark suits with three inches of skirt peeking below jackets that hung to mid-thighs.

"Not for me. No way." she said under her breath, "Give me softly tailored skirts or slacks that let me move around."

Thinking about job possibilities and the places she might work was more interesting than clothes shopping. She tossed the magazine aside and looked around the room.

Miscellaneous items were already in boxes marked with "thrift store" or "throw" that lined the wall like spunky soldiers ready to march away. She mentally sorted through the list of things that was still to do before she could go off on a job.

She decided to get on with packing her modest collection of pewter horses. She carefully wrapped each one in tissue paper and tucked them into a heavy box in which she previously packed several horse-care manuals.

Her design textbooks would stay on the shelves until the school session ended. Her plants would go to the landlady who promised to save slips for new starts if she wanted them later. Her clothes would be the last to pack and only then would she decide what new ones she would buy.

"Maybe I'll work in a small town where I can really let my hair down." She said as she glanced at the clock. In her involvement with packing, the time had slipped by. She promised to meet Les at his brother Wayne's and she

would have to hurry.

Slipping her key into her pocket, she pulled the noisy old door snugly closed behind her. In the afterglow of the spring-like day, the smell of freshness struck her face.

Under tall sycamore trees that spread bare branches over the narrow street, she hurried toward Wayne's house only a few blocks away. Someone was practicing a lively piano concerto in front of an open window. A boom box on a broad shoulder glided past the hedge on the opposite side of the street.

Lynne looked at the porches on the old houses. They were empty, giving this residential street a lonely abandoned appearance. In the evenings before television was invented, people sat out on the porches. She thought how pleasant it must have been when people spent leisure time enjoying the evening air. The world must have moved more slowly then.

"How ridiculous," Lynne suddenly snorted out loud, "The world turns on its axis once every twenty-four hours and hurdles around the sun once every three hundred sixty five and one fourth days, the same as it always has." Just the same, she thought, people appear to move faster, at least their daily activities are accelerated.

Well, I'm ready for some acceleration in my life, she thought, as she turned onto the walk and met Les on the steps of his brother's home.

"C'mon," Les urged, "The show already started." He pulled Lynne by the hand and hurried her up the steps. He planted a quick kiss on her patient cheek before he opened the screened door and stepped inside.

In the darkened living room they looked around for a place to sit, careful not to interrupt the narrative about the slides that Wayne was emotionally delivering with his polished classroom gestures. The room was lit only by the light of the projector and a couple moved over on the long-pillowed couch to make room for them. Les pulled Lynne down close beside him.

Birds flashed on the screen. Most were species she could not name, although she had seen some of them.

"These are the same birds we saw last week aren't they?" Lynne asked.

"Sh-h-h. Just watch."

The photography was as magnificent as Les predicted. Birds were shown carrying material for nest construction or carrying insects or rodents to feed their young. There were hawks in flight and owls perching almost completely camouflaged among the foliage.

"Wayne gets the right shots to show birds that are critical to the health of certain trees," Les whispered.

Wayne was chided when a slide focused more on tree specimens with abnormalities than on the birds.

"You just can't resist showing some interest in trees," one of his graduate students remarked and all laughed at the obvious reflection on his major interest.

Wayne made no apologies. "A well managed forest depends on the right birds in the right places to feed on insects, as well as assist in spreading seeds," he said with an exaggerated lecture hall posture.

"I use these slides to hold interest in my lectures," he explained, "They're good tools to emphasize the points I want to make."

"And they certainly do that," a deep voice added, "The only more effective way is to let the students see the real thing."

Lynne was startled by the voice, puzzled at the familiar chord it struck.

"I make sure they get plenty of that, too," Wayne said, clicking another slide on the screen, "but students need to see many angles to challenge their thinking when it comes to problem solving."

"I'm glad I don't have the responsibility of teaching. I'm frustrated with students," the husky voice continued. The vigorous sound resonated within her.

Lynne craned her neck and leaned forward to identify the speaker. The egotism and selfishness of his spoken concept rankled her.

She remembered how curious onlookers continually interrupted her redecorating, particularly at the motel where renting of rooms went on as usual. Some parts of the job were put off for hours to work around the customers.

Interruptions added to the cost but the job got done without causing too much inconvenience to the paying customer, which was critical for the owner. She learned to work around those problems and thought others could do the same.

Lynne stretched around to get a look at the man whose baritone voice caused such a prickling up her spine. She shrugged in irritation at the stirred emotions that she had not felt before.

Frustrated that she couldn't see who was speaking, she leaned over to Les and whispered, "Curious people were always interrupting my work. You have to learn to cope with that." Les reacted quickly, leaning on his knee he whispered, "When a bird's gonna display a reaction you've waited for hours to document, you'd see it differently. You might never get another chance."

Lynne winced at the pressure his whisper forced in her ear, wondering at his words. She understood reactions of farm animals from her childhood--horses in particular, but birds? She never suspected that bird's reactions would be important. She could no longer concentrate on Wayne's slides nor his words.

"I'm going to get a drink of water," she whispered as she rose and went into the kitchen. She had enough science for tonight; bird studies she could do without.

Wayne's cat twined itself around her leg several times, coaxing her attention. She placed the glass on the counter, reaching down to stroke the long haired pet. The cat enticed her to the back door and Lynne held the door open to let it move into the night, waiting while its eyes became accustomed to the semi darkness.

Lynne lingered in the open door for a moment and then stepped outside and closed the door behind her, following the cat down the steps to be sure it really did want to be outside.

The moon shone down with a vengeance, slightly lopsided, shining on the mounds of shrubs, casting deep black shadows underneath. The mystery of the moonlight suited her mood as she watched the cat bound up the wooden fence and disappear over the top.

Lynne was enthralled by the monochrome scene and stood transfixed with the moonlight on her face, too wrapped up in the mystery of light and shadow to notice who opened the back door and stepped outside.

Expecting Les, when footsteps came close behind her, she turned suddenly and exclaimed, "Isn't it beautiful?"

The bearded face of the man she bumped into on campus loomed before her in the moonlight. Lynne's heart jumped several beats before settling down to rapidly pound at her breast.

Even with his eyes deep in shadow she felt his intense gaze imprison her. She stiffened, hoping he wouldn't hear her beating heart.

"What are you doing here?" she blurted. She was unnerved to find herself face to face with him after being troubled so long by just his presence in her thoughts.

"The same thing you are. Enjoying the moonlight." And his husky baritone identified him as the scientist who didn't want his studies interrupted.

His low confidential tone was so sensuous it made her tremble. In her confusion anger rose as a defense against the awkward feeling that flooded her senses. She held herself rigid to prevent her troubled feelings from showing.

"Well, I came to see Wayne's slides," she said, defensively, bringing her artist's training into focus.

She searched his face and his whole length for details with the impartial eyes of a designer. She saw an incredibly ordinary man.

What a dichotomy, she instantly reflected. The thick hair and heavy beard outlined against wide shoulders gave him a remarkable bearing, yet he was otherwise very ordinary. He held his shoulders back in his soft velour

shirt with a certain arrogance; his beard framed by the open collar. She couldn't deny, for someone who appeared so ordinary, he affected her in a most extraordinary way.

"I know what a good photographer Wayne is," she said, her voice edged with a tone meaning everybody should know it, too. She was irritated with the way her body heated against her will to this arrogant man. She recalled the pleasant effect on her body when she bumped into him.

"Oh, I thought you came just to bump into me." His wide grin brought a sensuous rift in the dark beard.

Had he read her mind? The self-importance in his tone made Lynne think he had. The humor he might have intended rubbed Lynne's fragile composure thin.

"If I'd known you were going to be here, I wouldn't have come," she snapped.

"Surely you knew I was the reason Wayne showed his slides."

"How should I know that? I didn't even know that Wayne was a friend of yours." She stepped off into the dewy grass to go around him and head for the back door. She wasn't going to put up with his arrogance.

As she brushed past him, his arms went out and crushed her against his muscular chest, pinning her arms against her sides. His lips came down hard on hers forcing her head back, levering her lower body to his hard male length.

Lynne struggled to get her hands against his body but she couldn't find the strength to push away. Of their own volition, her hands slid down to his waist.

He was firm and strong but his lips were softly seeking and she rallied no resistance to their quest.

After a wondrous eternity he lifted his head and looked down into her face, briefly curious, before he abruptly turned away.

Lynne was too astonished to move. She stood silent and still--angered by his audacity, stunned by her unbridled excitement.

In desperation, she pressed her fingers to her lips and held the kiss. That did little to cover the abandonment she felt when he thrust her aside and strode into the house.

He planned to stay in touch with Wayne, took his leave, insistent that he must prepare for tomorrow's seminar. Outside in the chill spring air, he snorted, disgustedly chiding himself for his childish actions.

'What's the matter with you, you old fool? Have you been without a woman for so long you'd rob the cradle? That woman is young and totally naive.'

But the recollection of her firm feminine body in his arms held no

admonition for his wayward actions. He could not bring himself to regret that kiss. Her lips were soft and yielding.

Should he have apologized for taking the liberty? No, he decided, to have lingered with her another moment would have only heightened her proud anger, or inspired him to kiss her more forcefully than ever.

He wanted to kiss her earlier when his arms were full of blasted papers. He hurried toward his motel, shaking his head in disbelief at the depth of his feelings. He remembered, vividly, her moonlit face in Wayne's backyard.

The kitchen door opened and Les called, "Lynne, where are you? Joan has hot chocolate. Are you coming in?" Joan Stegman was Wayne's live-in companion, an arrangement frowned upon by the stalwart upright University board.

"If you're looking for the cat, don't worry about him. He takes care of himself." Les moved out on the steps and peered into the yard.

Lynne clasped her forearms against her stomach, confusion washing over her. She felt the cat rubbing on her legs and she quickly picked it up and hugged it defensively in her embrace.

"I found the cat. I'll bring it in."

Joan was filling a carafe with the chocolate from a brown glass saucepan. Les glanced into the living room.

"Sounds awfully quiet in there. Did everyone leave?" he asked.

"Yes. Everyone has important things to do tomorrow. Wayne's putting his slides away. It's just the four of us," Joan said.

"Good," said Les, as he filled four speckled pottery mugs with chocolate, "Then we don't have to make a lot of inane conversation."

Lynne picked up her cup and walked into the living room. She didn't think she could make any conversation at all. Joan helped Wayne put away his equipment and Les took the empty cups into the kitchen. Lynne got up resolutely and said her goodnights.

Les was puzzled that she had left without him. He moved out into the night shadows, looking down the street in the direction of Lynne's apartment, wanting to call out after her.

He listened vaguely to the usual night sounds. Then he heard a muffled cry. He rushed toward a shadowed scuffle half a block away.

He yelled as he broke into a hard run, fearful that Lynne was part of the struggle he couldn't quite identify. At the sound of his voice a bulky figure hesitated, then rose up and ran off across the street to disappear into the darkness beyond. Les recognized Lynne as he breathlessly leaned down over her inert body.

"Oh, Lynne, Lynne," Les crooned with distress as he struggled to carry

her limp body up the steps at Wayne's house. He kicked vigorously at the front door and yelled for them to open the door.

He gasped, "Lynne's hurt. Help me put her on the couch. Call a doctor."

Lynne tried to sit up. Joan's hand pressed her down against the couch. "Lay still. You've been knocked down. Les brought you back to Wayne's. He's calling a doctor."

The world was spinning around her. Lynne recognized Joan. Wayne was there too. She remembered returning to her own apartment. The images didn't focus through her circling daze. She put her hand up to her throat and then to her head. Oh how that hurt! What was going on?

Lynne relived in slow motion her walk toward her apartment. She was just a few houses from Wayne's when she glimpsed a moving shadow in the scented lilac bush. She was grabbed by her throat from behind. She tried to cry out. A pain shot through her head and total darkness fell around her. That was all she could remember.

Les held her hands. He caressed her arms and his hands slid up on her shoulders. Joan placed an ice bag on Lynne's head. Skilled hands examined her. The room still spun slowly when she lifted her head. Les helped her to a drink of water. The coolness of the swallowed water stilled her spinning world but fear held her captive.

What would have happened if Les hadn't come to look for her? Joan watched Lynne with great concern. "I'll drive you home, Lynne, and stay with you tonight. Les, come along and I'll drop you off on the way."

Joan kissed Wayne goodnight. She handed the ice pack to Les, wrapped a jacket around Lynne's shoulders and led her outdoors.

"C'mon Les. Let's get this lady home."

Before Les got out at his fraternity house, he held Lynne tightly for a moment and murmured, "Take it easy. Remember what the doctor said about not going to sleep for a while." Over her head, he spoke to Joan. "You'll see to it, won't you?"

Joan smiled and nodded her assurance. Minutes later they climbed the steps to Lynne's apartment. She felt better when she was in her own room. Lynne leaned back in the brown velour recliner while Joan refilled the ice pack.

Lynne settled the lumpy pack against her head. The throbbing had stopped and the cold helped to keep her thoughts under control. Joan put some water on to heat and looked for tea.

"What'll it be - peppermint or camomile?" she asked when she found two boxes in the cabinet.

"Make it peppermint, the camomile makes me sleepy. And there are granola bars in the flowered canister." Lynne felt more like herself now that

they were alone. She hoped the tea would settle her stomach. "I'll be happy to have you stay for tea, but you don't have to stay the night. The bump is going down," Lynne said, trying to assure Joan who placed teabags into cups.

"You'll be all right, I'm sure of that. But there's no reason for you to be alone after the awful experience you had. I know Les wanted to stay with you but I don't think you need protection as much as you need someone to talk to." Joan paused to let Lynne talk about the attack.

Lynne's emotions bubbled over. "I felt so good when I left your place. I mean Wayne's. I was proud of myself for the good job I did this semester. I was excited about looking for a job. I was dreaming about making wonderful rooms for people to enjoy. I reached up to pick a lilac. Then I couldn't breathe. I tried to scream but I couldn't and everything turned black. Oh, if Les hadn't been so close, I don't know what would have happened." She shuddered and Joan went to put her arm around her.

"Oh, Joan do you think he will come back?"

Joan held her, reassuring her safety. "He's not out there now. Wayne talked to the campus police and they'll be watching for suspicious characters so I don't think that whoever it was will bother you tonight, if ever, again," Joan said. "There has never been an incident like that in this neighborhood but the police will watch for anything unusual."

Joan sat down to wait for the water to boil. She studied Lynne carefully.

The boiling teakettle insisted on attention. Joan filled the cups, and stirred the tea bags. The pungent odor drifted through the room.

Lynne's eyes showed some alarm. "Why would someone attack me?" She paused and looked at Joan thoughtfully. Then as if a new fact had just struck her, she asked, "Do you think that man knows me? And is angry at me for something I've done? I don't want anyone to be angry with me."

Joan was startled by the suggestion but answered quickly, "No, you mustn't think that. You're doing what victims of violence often do and that's blame yourself for the crime. It's not your fault that you were attacked. Whatever made the attacker single you out for violence, the blame is his, not yours."

Joan knelt beside the chair and took Lynne's hand. For a moment her thoughts dwelled on the attacker. Could the incident have been more than a random assault? The dreadful thought tugged at the back of her mind.

She encouraged Lynne to talk about whatever came to mind. They sipped tea and talked about Lynne's classwork, Les, possible jobs, horses, the outdoors, the sunset and many unrelated thoughts for several hours. Lynne felt at ease and decided she should go to bed.

"I'll be all right, Joan. You don't have to babysit me. My head doesn't

hurt at all and the bump is completely gone." She stood up and moved the chair so she could pull her bed down. Joan watched her carefully and decided that it would be all right to let Lynne go to sleep.

"Have you got an extra blanket? You get into bed. I'll do just fine right here," Joan assured her as she patted the big easy chair. In less than the time it took for Lynne to get into her pajamas, Joan pushed back in the soft recliner and fell asleep. Lynne gratefully tucked the blanket around Joan's shoulders before she crawled into bed. In a matter of minutes, she fell into a deep clear blue sleep.

Six blocks away, just off campus, cautious footsteps quietly belied the man's size as he stopped in the shadows. His faded suspender overalls revealed a bulky outline beside the rustling poplar trees. He furtively searched the street in both directions. He hooked his thumbs in his pockets. No one in sight. He paused yet another moment before crossing the street. He snorted with disgust.

He had failed. What would he tell the boss? He blundered when he allowed his bomb sketches to be seen by that woman. Why had he let it happen? No. He hadn't let it happen. It wasn't his fault. Her sloppy shirt whisked the paper off his desk just the moment he put it down. The woman was careless. He hated her sloppy shirt. He hated women in sloppy clothes. And when that one looked over his drawing, a look of instant understanding crossed her face. Was she deliberately spying on him? She knew what he was up to and he would be in deep trouble if the big guy found out.

No one must ever see his work. That instruction had made an impression on him as nothing else had. There would be no place in that elite group if he couldn't follow orders. He didn't want to jeopardize his standing. He spent too much time making his mark in the group to lose that now.

All his life he had a mission. He was good at handling explosives. When he was initiated into the group he vowed he would do his share to make the world a better place for the true leaders of the world.

His mouth sneered a defiance and his fingers curled. He recalled the softness of her neck against his hands. That thick hair got in his way. He could have gotten a better grip if his hands had been under the braid. Too late to think about that now.

He must get those drawings and the makings over to headquarters. His plans were so good that the big guy wouldn't think about anything but getting right down to business. He must move on.

He could come back and take care of that woman later.