

WILDLY IN THE ROCKIES

Chapter two

Flying

Lynne stood nervously watching from her window. She clutched the lace curtain as she looked down at the street. Since the attack she dreaded leaving her apartment. All the old houses on the edge of the campus were divided into student apartments where many strangers lived. Was one of them her attacker? She never felt threatened by strangers before. Now she felt threatened at the slightest glance. She wondered about anyone who passed her. Was it possible her attacker was someone she knew? She shuddered at the thought. She never was so suspicious or paranoid before in all her life.

A solitary robin trilled. A hornet bumped angrily against the screen. No other sounds intruded on her thoughts until a creaking board somewhere in the house emphasized the frightening silence. The odor of old wood hung in the air. Since she was attacked she was afraid to leave her apartment. She dared not go out alone. She couldn't be sure if something ominous still lingered. Would she ever be able to walk that street again?

Her eyes scanned the trees and bushes that lined the street. She searched again for something she might have done to cause the attack. She knew many people could get angry. Never had she seen anyone get so angry that they became vicious. Her hands clenched against her breast and her stomach twisted as she recalled Joan's admonition that a victim often manufactures blame where it does not exist. She took in a deep breath and wrestled to get her fears under control.

Lynne was relieved as she watched Joan's car stop at the curb and Les walked with Joan to the steps. They came to take Lynne to her weekly ride with the saddle club.

Les couldn't get Lynne to walk on the street with him but her fear gave him a welcome excuse to hover around her. He adored her and was unhappy that she didn't feel the same for him. He was anxious about her safety but he was surprised to see an alert deputy standing across the street.

"The police are really investigating the attack on Lynne. I wonder if they're getting anywhere," he said. "I expected the city police to tell the campus

authorities to buzz off." Les shook his head as he shrugged his shoulders and held the screen door open for Joan. "I'm surprised they're still here."

"Well, I'm not surprised." Joan quickly responded as she stepped into the musty entry, "When a person's knocked unconscious, it's serious. It certainly is a matter for the city police."

Lynne and Les talked to the city police after a complete search of the area where the attack occurred. Neither could give specific details about the attacker although Les described a large bulky figure that appeared to be a man retreating through the bushes.

Les spent most of his time these past few days with Lynne. When he hesitated to go up the steps to the second floor, Joan's frown was a silent question. He leaned against the flamboyant pink cabbage roses amid leafy vines that loomed around them like clutching aliens on yellowing wallpaper. The large design compressed the stairway walls into a narrow passage.

He confided, "Lynne's still scared. Does she have to go off on a job right away? She thinks she provoked the attack. She seems to think she made someone angry and it brought out the worst in them."

"Isn't that just a little melodramatic?" Joan asked as she raised her hand to knock on Lynne's door. That implication did sound dramatic but the idea that a deranged person was suggested didn't please her at all.

In a small airport building hundreds of miles away an expensively dressed woman struggled to pull the large bag off the circling baggage carrier. Her ankles teetered above her spiked designer heels. She stood up and looked at the huge bag with disdain. She swung her purse strap over her shoulder, picked up her overnight case and walked with determination toward the parking lot.

Peering into the darkness, her eyes narrowed in contempt. Where was her brother? Why wasn't he here to meet her?

She was not pleased to be back in this provincial little town. Across the gravel airfield serrated hills rose up into the inky blue sky. How dark it was. Boston was bright at night. How she wished she were back there.

Where was Edward anyway? The chill of the air this early March night cut through her fine wool coat and caught at her bones.

She shuddered less from the night air than the humiliation at the thought of the rejection by eastern snobs. With quiet determination she spoke to the headlights that wove their way into the parking lot, "I'll show them who's good enough for who."

A four wheel drive vehicle turned and slowed beside her.

"Where have you been? I told you I'd be in on the late commuter flight."

Margaret fumed at her brother, choking in the dust of his rapid stop when she opened the door and flopped in. "Well don't just sit there. Get my bag."

"And a pleasant hello to you, too, snooty big sister." Edward Worthington wasn't intimidated by her insolent behavior.

"Didn't they teach you to say 'please' in that fancy school?" He set the hand brake and turned off the engine before he got out to retrieve her bag. "I suppose it's the most expensive one in there," he mocked.

"It's the only one," she tossed her head in contempt at his foolish question. She got only the best during the years spent with her maternal grandmother.

Much of her life was spent with her grandmother because her mother considered ranch life too isolated for a young woman to learn how to cope in the world. She attended school in a wealthy suburb in the east where her grandmother taught at a private college.

Her grandmother did not approve of her parent's marriage even if her father was a wealthy cattle baron, which was, in her grandmother's eyes, nothing more than a dirty cowhand. That image intensified after her grandmother witnessed her father assisting the birth of a calf the first time she visited the barns, an experience her grandmother constantly reiterated in Margaret's presence.

After Margaret was given her first trip east, she convinced her mother that she would get a better education in the east and her grandmother welcomed the opportunity to expose her granddaughter to what she considered superior culture. It especially suited her grandmother to be accompanied by her lovely energetic granddaughter on her summer excursions to Europe.

Margaret's summer educators were tutors from whom she learned French, Latin and Spanish while being spoiled by servants in cheap villas on the riviera. Her parents weren't as wealthy as it appeared so she didn't get her every wish at home. Margaret was delighted to be treated much more regally in the company of her maternal grandmother.

"And what conniving little plan brings you back to your favorite dusty, smelly ranch this time, big sister?" Ed asked flippantly. He slid into the driver's seat and snapped into his seat belt after depositing her bag in the back seat.

"Buckle up," he commanded. As he brought the engine to life he turned and looked into his sister's harsh features. "When they buried Pete I thought I'd seen the last of you."

Margaret returned to the ranch one summer after being snubbed by the son of a shipping tycoon. She became fascinated with the suntanned and muscular Peter Chapman, when she met him at his father's funeral. His innocence and honesty were so refreshing. He took his father's death harder than anyone she knew. She showered attention on Peter.

He isolated himself on the ranch working to fill his days and lessen his pain. The only one he talked to was Margaret. Her adoration and praise replaced that which had been showered on him by his father and it finally brought him out of his shell. Emotionally that put him entirely in Margaret's debt.

Peter accepted his feelings toward Margaret as love and jumped to satisfy her every whim. When he asked her to marry him, her condition was simple: that she have an elegant home. She planned her western mansion to surpass in elegance and extravagance everything that had been denied her in eastern society.

Margaret's stomach caught at the irony of her loss. Acceptance had been so close. But close didn't win the prize. She learned that in her attempts to excel at school.

"I've got some..." She stopped in midsentence. She wasn't going to take her brother into her confidence. "This is my home as much as yours, Edward. I can come any time I want to."

"You can come and visit whenever you like, big sister, but you were cut out of all land ownership in Dad's will a long time ago. You hate this place and the work connected with it so don't put on your sentimentality around me."

Ed flashed her a determined look. He studied her profile surreptitiously. She was beautiful, but why did she have to be so selfish? Her world only turned around her. "What happened in Boston this time?" he asked with a quiet air of confidentiality.

"Nothing," she snapped.

Ed didn't believe that for a minute. "Oh sure. And you ran out here with your tail between your legs. Spare me that, big sister." He rolled his eyes and sighed helplessly. He didn't expect her to confide in him but he wished she would. She was the only family he had.

Margaret remained silent, staring out at the sage and rabbit brush flying past. A jackrabbit sprinted out and the vehicle hesitated violently, turning slightly to give the animal an opening into escape from grizzly death. Margaret clung to her shoulder harness as her body lurched forward with the motion. Peter's bloody and mangled body flashed before her eyes. She squeezed her eyelids and cringed. She regained her composure and glanced at her younger brother.

Ed accelerated smoothly with his eyes straight ahead but his voice was level and forcefully directed at her. "I hope you're not going to make a play for Koyl."

She remained silent, intent on studying the rough monotonous features of the oily graveled road.

"What's going to happen to my...the...Chapman ranch?" She futilely wished she could own the mansion of her design.

"You know very well," he admonished. "It's so deep in overdue debt from that awful house you insisted on having that it's near bankruptcy. The lawyers are trying to sell it. They expect Koyl to sign the papers any day."

Lynne rushed to answer her phone when she entered her apartment upon returning from her weekly ride with the saddle club.

The University Employment Center clerk announced, "You have a job offer, Miss Redding. The client put in a personal urgent request. You should respond immediately."

"Can you tell me anything about it?" Lynne's heart raced with anticipation.

"It's a dude ranch, I think. But I'll give you the phone number and the rest is up to you. Just get back to me when you make a decision."

Lynne could hardly believe a job offer so soon but what could she do on a dude ranch?

She jotted her questions before she made the call. She wasn't going to be hurried over important considerations.

A ranch manager spoke for the rancher as he explained, "This big house on the property has rooms that need decorating...a few month's work. The boss wants to move on to the business of getting paying customers."

Lynne's mind raced with decorating ideas. Her hesitation was met with a more revealing description.

"It's isolated here. Not all city folks would like it," he admitted, his voice sharp but apologetic.

"I was raised in the country and I like to ride, Mr. Daring, but surely that's not what I'm expected to do."

"It's like I said. The building is here and the boss needs a designer with knowledge of hotels and such," he reiterated, patiently.

"Let me think about it." Lynne didn't want to grab the first job knowing so little.

"The boss wants this job done right away. He thinks your qualifications are just fine. If you're not interested, I'll have to look for someone else."

"Oh no...I am interested...I'll take the job."

So arrangements were made for Lynne to fly to Idaho Falls. Jim Daring would meet her and take her to the ranch. She packed only her design manuals and her medium sized bag of casual clothes. A short term job in the isolated countryside wouldn't require anything more.

The next day, not far beyond a large neighboring ranch, a dusty car

pulled in and parked at a trailhead well inside the National Forest. With the pack settled against his back, the hiker locked his car and headed up the trail. He patted the pocket beneath his suspender that held his permit to hike for two weeks.

He sneered as he recalled the story he told the park ranger: "I've got some time to spend reflecting on my life. Thought I'd get some pictures while I'm here." He tenderly patted his odd shaped pack as if it contained expensive photographic equipment.

The park ranger noted the intended trail and waved him off as he warned, "Keep to the trail and use only the fire pits. Don't be careless with fire."

He had nodded his agreement and turned away. His amiable smile turned into a disdainful sneer. He looked back in contempt as he left the well worn trail after a short quarter of a mile and made his way carefully through the brush and rotting tree trunks.

Pausing to get his bearings, he looked off to his left and then his right only once. He smirked slightly when he spotted the sturdy fence border of the National Forest. Those fences kept cattle on the rancher's side but did not restrict agile men to either side.

The pack was guardedly lifted across the wires and settled with meticulous care on the other side. Precious was the stuff it contained. The bulky hiker sprinted over the fence and replaced the pack on his back.

He had another half mile to go but the ground was easier to cover. Grazing cattle made clear and easy trails. Before he came within a hundred yards of a wooded ravine, he twice whistled like a swooping hawk, then twice more and listened. A hooting owl called once and he proceeded toward the hidden camp.

The helicopter rose off the hard-packed clay at the small airport. Catching her breath as the ground fell away below them, Lynne stared at the skilled hands on the controls of the small helicopter.

She studied the face under the dusty brown hat typical of a working cowboy. His skin looked like leather, fine-lined and seasoned by years in the weather. Smile lines ran into the corners of his eyes like tiny rivers flowing into dark pools. He was a pleasant man with the bearing of authority.

Jim Daring, the ranch manager, met her at the airport and now she was on her way to look over the mansion where she was to decorate rooms for dude ranch guests.

Lynne's mind and body reacted with thrilling sharpness to the miniature scene beneath her. She was delightfully aware that she had a bird's point of view.

Her stomach surged when she went up on a ferris wheel but the thrill that swept through her as the helicopter gained altitude distracted her only a moment. The catch in Lynne's stomach was not caused by a fear of flying, it was the thought of the new job. She took a deep breath and composed herself.

"I've never ridden in a helicopter before," she said.

"You'll get used to it real easy. We have a lot of things to do and this machine is the way to get around in a hurry," Jim said.

Lynne liked the lanky cowboy. He made her feel welcome and almost a part of the ranch already. The sensation of climbing stopped and she felt as if she were gliding on a smooth level ride.

"Some things can't be hurried, Mr. Daring," Lynne said, leaning to watch the miniature trees roll past beneath them. She didn't know what the decorating job was all about but she wouldn't rush into decisions that caused mistakes.

"The name's Jim, Ma'am," he said as he took her measure with his friendly eyes. "This thing has to be hurried. There's a debt to pay and no time to waste. We need a house full of paying guests and we need them fast."

Lynne felt a pang of dread. Pressure to get a job done could make good results difficult. She pushed her fears aside. Her information was too limited just yet to jump to conclusions about the outcome.

"You see, this property was deep in debt when the boss inherited and he stands to lose everything if he doesn't get a steady cash flow pretty quick."

"I assure you, I'll do everything I can," she murmured, unheard over the throb...throb...throb of the helicopter blades. She strained to look at the details of the hilly terrain below.

Some details she could not see.

Across the hills a bullet shaped head appeared among the tall bluegreen sagebrush. A man stepped around the brush with a twisted look of disgust on his unshaven face. How he hated these stinking bushes.

Scanning the hillside, he headed around a boulder and moved furtively into the open space where he could breathe easier. Satisfied that he was alone he continued downwind from the hidden ravine. He pulled out a bag of loose tobacco and from the attached folder he fished for a cigarette paper with his grimy finger.

Taking one more furtive look around he walked still farther while expertly rolling the tobacco filled paper between thumb and forefinger. He had to get far away from camp because the boss refused to let the men smoke.

He was irritated when he learned of the ban on smoking. Damned unnecessary rule was all he could say. Who ever came out here anyway? He struck a match between his finger and thumbnail and drew a long satisfied

breath as the match ignited the tobacco. He dragged his breath in deeply and held the smoke in his lungs savoring the affect of the drug with his eyes closed.

The matchstick snapped between his fingers before he dropped it. With a stained thumb hooked in his denim suspender, he continued to smoke. He felt his heart beat hard under the heel of his resting hand. He looked without much interest at the bleak desert brush struggling in the harsh dry sand and saw no evidence of his camp. The hideout was well hidden.

This outfit was thorough. He was proud he'd hooked up with the militant bunch. They were proud of the job he'd done for them, too, when they saw how he assembled the explosives into neat little bombs.

He inhaled again and again, pleased by the gratification of the smoke. Surprised he could hear the increased beat of his heart, he pressed the heel of his hand harder against his chest and looked down to listen more closely. He realized the thrubbing was not his heart at all and raised his eyes in search of the real source of the noise.

A thub...thub...thub...cut his gratification. Fear struck him like a physical blow. For a frantic moment he thought of the boss's ban on smoking. In terror he worried he had given away the location of the camp.

He ducked under the brush, his heart pounding to escape his chest. He crushed the remainder of his precious cigarette under his bootheel.

With searching eyes he scanned skyward in every direction, scrunching his head furtively behind the skimpy branches. Holding his breath, he hunkered down, moving slowly until he could track the noise. He spotted a helicopter a long way off, dipping and turning near the horizon. He thought his chest would explode with the breath he withheld until he finally decided the machine was gone for good.

He waited until he could no longer hear the beating blades before he warily made his way back to the hidden camp.

Details of the wooded hills and valleys kept Lynne's attention as she mentally went through the questions that filled her mind. She dreamed of vacationing in the mountains, riding horseback on primitive trails, and catching glimpses of animals in the wild. She wondered if any of those dreams would happen here.

"Is the ranch up in those mountains?" she asked.

"Nope, it starts right down there. That tumbleweed line is the west boundary." Jim pointed at a fence plugged with brown weeds. He maneuvered the helicopter around the hillsides and down along the gullies to get a closer view. Clusters of trees huddled in isolated areas among scattered clumps of brush and stark boulders.

Lynne saw a solitary log building tucked among the trees.

"An old line shack for tools and shelter," he said in response to her pointing finger as he leaned to look across her to verify his description.

Lynne took a deep breath and studied the shapes and colors of the landscape. Her eyes searched the ground. Occasionally cattle were visible among the sparsely wooded hills that grew steeper and more rugged as they stretched upward toward the mountains. Her eyes sparkled when she glanced at Jim.

"Mighty pretty country, but it's rugged. Not the best range for cattle but not good for anything else."

"I can see why you need a helicopter."

Jim watched the ground from his side and circled the helicopter until he could see what had been on the other side. He took in all the details below. His concentration was contagious.

Lynne watched the shapes and textures as if she were going to make design changes in them, too. She pointed to a thin white ribbon winding among the trees and asked, "Is that water?"

"That stream flows in the spring," he said and dropped down to look at an open meadow near the stream where waterfowl scattered at their approach.

Lynne was amazed at the unexpected colors on their backs as she watched the flurry of wings. She frowned at their hastened flight. From above the birds appeared vulnerable, their flight not promising the safety and complete freedom as she once believed.

The helicopter swept over the trees. On an open hill, a large white building dominated the scene. It was a white scar in the gentle folds of green wooded hills. Beyond it, a clustered group of weathered buildings rolled into view. They appeared in miniature like an architect's model.

Lynne's eyes widened as she realized the enormity of the holdings that spread out below. At least a dozen utility buildings clustered in orderly positions protected by a U-shaped line of trees. Corrals identified the animal barns. Holding pens stood isolated further away from the buildings. Larger buildings, fenced and rimmed with bushes were shielded by other rows of trees. Pickup trucks were parked nearby. People appeared in doorways.

Lynne was not prepared for the spectacular ranch they were descending into as the thumping machine floated slowly to the ground.

When the helicopter settled in a large fenced area beyond a small corral, distant animals raised their heads and swung their ears forward in attention as if they were familiar with the unusual noise. Jim helped Lynne down to the hard soil swept clean by the rotating blades of the helicopter.

People hurried from the buildings toward the landing to gather in a noisy cluster near the fence.

"C'mon, they all wanna meet you."

A buxom woman made a remark to which everyone nodded agreement and laughed. The sound was not altogether full of humor.

Lynne blushed with embarrassment and put her hand to her braided hair. Was something wrong with her appearance? A man exploded with another flood of words and they all laughed again. Jim held up his hands as if to surrender.

"Enough. Enough. Let's take you one at a time," he ordered and, one by one, she met the ranch house caretakers, Maria, the buxom one, Stefano, mechanics, grounds-keepers, and cowboys. She would never remember their all names or their duties. She wondered if she would be here long enough to learn.

"You just settle yourself in here, Miss Redding," Jim said, as he set Lynne's small bag inside the ranch house room.

He paused at the door as he watched Lynne scan the room. "This was the boys' room when they were little," he added as if to explain the questions he saw form in her eyes. He touched his hat brim and turned to leave.

"Come into the office when you're ready to go look at the big house."

With a smile and nod of thanks, Lynne looked around the room. Uncurtained windows almost filled the end wall and she looked out upon an expanse of young grass with wooded foothills stretching far beyond. Bookshelves on either side and between the windows held worn books and shoe boxes and statues of bronc riders. They were trophies awarded for excellence: rodeo prizes for bronc riding, calf roping, and bulldogging.

Lynne picked up the statues. One by one, she read the engravings. Inscriptions bore the name of Peter Chapman. She squinted and tipped the engravings toward the light, looking for another name. The foreman said it was the 'boys' room, indicating more than one, but the only name she found was Peter, the younger brother killed some months ago.

"Who was the other one, and where are his trophies?" she wondered. Her gaze swept across the book spines with names of unfamiliar authors. She pulled one down to look more closely at the contents. The frontispiece was a color photograph of an eagle but the text was obscure.

As it lay loosely in her hand, the book fell open to a page holding a folded paper and she opened to see what was left within. Birds in various stages of flight or repose were drawn in pencil haphazardly across the paper. Printed in the corner were the initials, KC. That was the other son, then, an artist, and quite good at such an early age. She refolded the paper and put it in the book which she returned to its place on the shelf. Other features of the room drew her attention.

Broncos bucked on yellowed posters against one of the aging knotty pine walls. A double bed with dark corner posts dominated the room, its headboard an expanse of rich mahogany. The worn tan chenille bedspread

sported a cowboy clinging to a bucking horse outlined in dark brown. A steamer trunk richly embossed in tin stood against the mahogany footboard.

Lynne opened her bag and put her things into the closet, a small cavern in the wall, empty except for a battered hat on the shelf above the hangers. At first glance she ignored the abandoned hat. It was not in her way and she pushed it aside.

She never had a real felt cowboy hat and an impish thought struck her. She placed it on her head and it rested on her ears. It was much too big for her until she wound her plaited hair on top of her head and set the hat upon it. That would do. She would pretend it was her own--if she ever got to ride.

When Lynne entered the office, Jim was studying the map of the ranch that covered the wall opposite the massive oak desk.

"This is the Chapman ranch, Miss Redding."

"Lynne...please...call me Lynne." She moved closer to the map and was shown the location of the ranch buildings.

"Here's the western boundary, where you saw the fence all piled with tumble weeds. Here's the line cabin and the stream you saw runs along here." Jim proudly pointed out the features that she had questioned from the air.

"That looks like lots of land," she said, frowning as she stepped to the window. "You said this was a cattle ranch. I don't see many cattle."

Jim nodded. "Chapman's a scientist, not a cattleman so he sold off most of the cattle. He insists the land can be put to better use."

Jim pulled deep ridges between his eyebrows in a frown. He clinched his mouth into a hard line and shook his head skeptically. He gazed out the window at the wide grasslands.

"I couldn't imagine a better use for these hills than raising cattle."

The rolling hills were lush with spring grasses and spread out as far as the eye could see. He hooked his thumbs in his belt and turned to Lynne.

"But I'm a sensible man. Raising cattle isn't profitable any more. If we can work out something better, I'm willing to try."

"And 'something better' is a dude ranch, right?"

"No, the ranch will be a wildlife sanctuary," he said.

"But that mansion up on the hill looks more like a luxury hotel for tourists and I'm hired to make it so."

"That mansion is the reason the ranch is in debt. It was far too costly. Chapman hopes to recover the losses by getting wealthy dudes to come visit."

"Why did he build it, if it was more than he could afford?"

"Oh, his brother built it for the woman he was going to marry. She wanted some fine things, that woman did."

"So they weren't married before he died?"

"Peter was killed," Jim corrected, "Margaret Worthington insisted the house be completed before the marriage. But none of that matters now." He

smiled grimly, "Why don't you go up and have a look around?"

"Yes, I will. I want to see what has to be done before I meet with Mr. Chapman."