

## Wildly in the Rockies

# Chapter three

## Stumbling

An uncanny feeling swept over Lynne. She felt as if she stepped into a textbook photograph of an elegant early twentieth century mansion. She read about architecture like this. This building was too grand to fit into these remote rolling hills.

According to textbook accounts the Hearst castle didn't blend into the California countryside, nor did the Dunsmuir castle blend into rugged Vancouver Island. They were built as blatant statements of great wealth--a vivid contrast to the environment--and so was this.

Lynne was amazed at the grandeur of the room beyond the foyer. Certainly this elegance was not expected at a cattle ranch. Would guests be as overwhelmed as she? In her study of the hotel business she learned that a large percentage of rich people would be thrilled to vacation in such a luxurious setting.

She moved slowly up the circular stairway, surveying the elegance from each step. A door opened above her and Maria stepped out onto the balcony.

"Hello." Maria's voice held a sharpness when she called, "Did you change your mind about staying in the ranch house?" Maria tightly held an armful of towels against her ample stomach while she waited for Lynne to reach the top of the stairs.

Lynne ignored the scorn she detected in the housekeeper's tone. Her eyes swept down the stairs and across the terrazzo floor. Lynne was dazzled by the opulence.

"The elegance amazes me."

Lynne calculated the extravagance and shrugged at the thought of it. She moved past Maria into the mint green room at the end of the balcony and there she caught her breath. The instant coolness of the color titillated her as she sunk into the deep pile of the luscious minty green carpet. The floor length brocaded drapes swept aside by a corded swag emphasized their cool satin elegance in the same green shade.

A puffy down comforter spilled out over the queen-sized bed like a sumptuous mound of pale green pistachio ice cream. An overstuffed winged chair reflected several deeper tones of a matching green in the ferns of

expensive woven damask. Small throw pillows of black fabric in a variety of shapes and textures drew her eyes like exciting punctuation marks in a text of erotic love scenes.

Lynne passed through the side door to a dressing room that opened into an expansive bath. The huge black corner tub rose out of the delicate pale green carpet like a chunk of obsidian protrudes from foamy seawater at a rising tide. Matching towels hung on the gold bars.

"Such extravagance. Are all the bedrooms like this?" Lynne asked. She looked around again in disbelief.

"Not quite," Maria answered with a hard emphasis. "This was fixed up by Miss Worthington for her own. She could overlook the ranch buildings from here." Maria almost sneered. "I think she was going to spy on us."

Maria's hand went immediately to her mouth in regret. "Oh, Mr. Koyl thinks she is a nice lady but her pretty face never fooled me. She's a slick lady from magazine ads for expensive clothes. Her sprayed hair all pulled back and done up tight to her head and her eyes lookin' right through you. Gives me the shivers."

Putting aside Maria's description of Margaret as none of her affair, Lynne was enchanted by the elegance of the room in which she stood. She wondered how she could describe it properly to entice tourists to pay the outrageous price it would have to bring. She put off the thought to go on to the other rooms.

Maria's lips spread into a thin smile. Lynne could see it was clearly forced. Maria's dark eyes continued to appraise Lynne through narrowed lids.

Lynne was troubled and distracted from her purpose for being here. She bristled under Maria's hostile scrutiny. Maria said something out by the helicopter that made the others laugh. Were they making fun of her? Lynne didn't want to let that bother her but now Maria's sideways scorn rankled her.

Lynne agreed to do a job no matter how uncomfortable she felt and she knew she must get on with it but something unsaid needed to be aired. She studied Maria carefully for a moment.

Lynne put her hand firmly on the housekeeper's arm. Her eyes bore into black hostile eyes and she asked quickly, "What's wrong? What have I done to you, Maria?"

Lynne was so forthright that Maria blurted, "You're another Margaret Worthington to finish Mr. Koyl." A look of horror filled Maria's face as if she regretted speaking her fears. She tried to pull away.

Lynne held Maria's arm in a punishing grip. Her gray eyes widened and her voice was low and deliberate.

"Is that what you think?" Lynne asked. She understood the undertones going through the minds of the people who relied on the Chapman ranch for their livelihood. Now she was aware of being under suspicion before she arrived. Jim explained how ranch was dragged into debt with the expense of

this building.

Her expression softened as she realized the threat she had become. It was imperative to correct the misconception.

"I was hired to turn this mansion into a moneymaker. If it works, Mr. Chapman will keep his ranch and you'll have your jobs. If it doesn't work, who knows what will happen? But let me tell you, I will do everything I can to make it succeed."

Lynne shrugged her shoulders and she released Maria's arm. "Mr. Chapman wants to keep this ranch as much as you want him to. He'll need your help no matter what happens." Lynne's eyes snapped. She was angry to think that she was looked upon as a gold digger. To think there was something between her and Mr. Chapman was so ridiculous it was laughable. She didn't even know the man.

Lynne turned away and gathered her temper. She was in control when she faced Maria, "It will be up to Mr. Chapman to speak to you about his plans." Obviously Maria didn't know what was going on.

She would have to see about that. If this ranch was going to succeed, he was going to need the help of everyone around him. She vowed not to be an obstacle. She could better judge how much she could do when she learned more about his expectations.

She didn't have the slightest clue about the real hurdles that lay ahead when she walked down toward the ranch house.

The hills across the gently sloping valley wore a bright green mantle of new spring grasses. Horses and a few cattle dotted the landscape around tall pines. The ranch buildings were arranged on a slight slope and most were sheltered from prevailing north winds by the rows of trees that circled around the north side.

The ranch hands centered their idle activities in the bunk house but it was the main dining hall, which housed the ranch kitchen, that supplied the fuel to keep hard working men in tiptop condition. Behind that building was a two-story house for the ranch manager and his family. It nestled under towering trees, guarding it from hot summer sun and harsh winter winds.

The rambling ranch house with thick cedar shingles, where Lynne was to stay, contained the office and was once the home of the Chapman family. Lynne looked at the comfortable building. Her heart longed for just such a fine looking home.

*Don't go soft, Lynne reminded herself, You haven't begun to make a career for yourself. Remember the independence you want. It will take long hard work to make enough money for a place like this and don't you forget it.*

Grape-like clusters of purple florets hung in profusion along thick gnarled vines of wisteria clinging along the eaves. Crocus blossoms, with color spent, were withering away among the low tight mounds of early pink phlox. Lynne cherished the sweet fragrance of Lilies Of The Valley that wafted on a

gust of air.

A climbing rose was out of control on the trellis at the end of the white picket fence by the open gate. She reached up to move a trailing stem out of her way. The sharp end of a thorn broke off in her finger. As she clenched her fist the broken thorn was driven deeper into her flesh.

"I'd better see if I can find something to get that out," she murmured.

She turned to the door and reached for the knob.

The door flew open and she found herself face to face with the bearded man that left her that moonlit night in Wayne's backyard.

The look of disbelief in Lynne's eyes was reflected in the deep blue eyes she remembered so well. Her voice had little force, it was hardly a whisper.

"What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" The smile lines around his eyes deepened in mockery. He regarded her with wry amusement.

"I work here..." she said, boldly raising her chin.

"And just what are you working at? Oh, wait. Are you Lynne Redding?" His eyes narrowed at the coincidence.

Lynne's confidence faded. She held her breath and slowly a recognition flooded through her.

"You're Koyl Chapman!" It wasn't a question. It was a certainty. She hadn't heard his name that night at Wayne's. How could she have known who he was?

But why did he sound uncertain about her identity? Obviously he hadn't tried to find out who she was. That's how important the moonlight kiss was to him.

Why did he hire her? What kind of game was he playing? What was she to do?

She twisted her fingers together, flinching as she pressed the imbedded thorn. In her confusion, it was easier to concentrate on the pain in her finger.

Koyl moved toward her, squinting at the finger that held her attention. She stared at him warily, silently fighting to control the rising heat sweeping through her. She didn't want him to touch her. She stiffened and leaned back, pulling her hands against her chest. Koyl's eyes darkened with concern at her instinctive action and he caught sight of blood on her finger.

"What's the matter, Miss Redding? Have you already sustained an injury in my employ?"

Lynne tried to pull her thoughts together, unconsciously pinching her finger as if she could dislodge the rose thorn. She hastened to explain, "I pushed a rose bush back and connected with a thorn. It's not serious."

She looked up at him and added, "I didn't know who you were." She pinched her finger to show him the puncture.

Koyl's chest swelled with pleasure a moment before he reprimanded himself. Apparently she was older than he thought but he couldn't risk

showing his delight at seeing her again. Now she was no longer simply a woman who intrigued him, she was his employee with a critical job to do. He would have to keep his distance.

He leaned to look at her upraised fingertip as he carefully explained the happy circumstance. "I didn't know your name, either. I was given a resume and recommendations clearly showing Lynne Redding had what the big house needed so I hired her and now I'm glad I did."

He motioned her to follow into his office. "Come and let me fix that." With a wave of his hand he directed her to the big leather chair.

"The thorn's still in it."

"I'll take it out. Sit still, I'll be right back." He disappeared into an adjoining room.

Lynne was still in shock. She had pictured this man in pleasant memories but never expected to actually see him again. Yet here he was and he was her boss. He was handsome and arrogant. She must be careful and not let him affect her too much.

He returned with a leather case and a small white box. His wide shoulders strained against the knit fabric of his blue shirt. His slender hips smoothly folded under him when he crouched down beside her to put the box on the arm of her chair.

He opened the leather kit and removed a tweezers. His clean blunt nails gripped her finger.

She stiffened, closing her eyes tightly when she recalled those fingers taking dusty papers from her. She held herself motionless when the tweezers pressed into her flesh. She refused to flinch in the hands of this arrogant man, even if every cell in her body poised to quiver at his touch.

Koyl tightened his grip to steady her finger. Fine hairs coated his wrist and crept past his watch band onto the back of his hand, tanned from hours in the sun. He concentrated on removing the thorn while Lynne tried not to concentrate on the fragrance of his masculine scent.

Her eyes opened very slightly to take in his virile features.

Finally, he raised the tip of the tweezers and looked with satisfaction at the thorn he removed. His hands were soft, yet firm, and very warm. They handled the tweezers with the ease of an impersonal physician.

"What are those?" Lynne asked, looking at the shiny instruments as he carefully replaced the tweezers in the leather kit.

"Surgical tools."

"You're a doctor?" Lynne was told he was a scientist. From the drawings she found in the old textbook, she decided he was an artist.

"No, I use them to dissect birds."

Lynne drew back with a look of dismay at having dissecting instruments used on her. Then her forehead creased as she said, "Oh, you're an ornithologist, too."

Koyl's eyed her suspiciously. "What do you know about ornithologists?"

"Wayne's brother, Les, is studying birds, that's all."

"He's that skinny fellow clinging to you at Wayne's?"

"He's not skinny. He's very nice."

Koyl only grunted while he dabbed antiseptic on the puncture and reached for a self-stick bandage.

Lynne felt suddenly cold and strangely abandoned. She was treated with as much emotion as a dead specimen. She squirmed a little, but couldn't help but study the coarse texture of Koyl's brown hair as he bent his head toward her, holding the adhesive bandage. He peeled off the protective paper and applied the plastic strip.

He pressed it lightly against the puncture without touching her skin with his fingers. She had the impression he didn't want to touch her.

"There. Now, let's get up to the big house." He said. He straightened up and moved toward the door. Lynne rose to follow, and stopped at the knock on the door.

Koyl opened it and was greeted by a blond young man who offered an amiable handshake.

"I don't know if you remember me. I'm Edward Worthington." The blond man was uneasy when he addressed his austere bearded neighbor.

"Yes. Good to see you," Koyl smiled, but remained strangely reserved.

"Glad to see you plan to stay. Rumors had you selling the place." Edward said, waiting for some response. When none was forthcoming, his eyes moved and clung to Lynne, leaning against the soft leather chair.

His gaze swept from the top of her head past her pastel blouse and snug jeans to her sneakered toes. Lynne remained calm under his scrutiny and flashed a curious glance at Koyl.

She frowned when Koyl's initial smile faded and his natural squint narrowed as he glanced from her to Edward. Her lips held a friendly smile in check while she politely waited for an introduction but Koyl made no move to comply.

Edward stepped toward Lynne. "You must be the architect of this new venture."

"Hardly, but I'll do everything I can to make it succeed." She smiled broadly at the exaggerated compliment, "I'm Lynne Redding." She extended her hand for a friendly shake.

Edward took her hand and pulled her toward him, covering her hand with his. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

Lynne was faintly amused but distinctly curious over the easy formality of this sunny-faced young rancher. He was what she perceived to be an ordinary rancher who loved what he did and appreciated his life for what it was.

She smiled and immediately felt Koyl's disapproval. She withdrew her

hand and stepped back to the leather chair. Why she so timidly reacted to Koyl she didn't understand and immediately regretted that she had done so.

Edward paused at her withdrawal and looked from Lynne to Koyl. He sensed he had interrupted something personal and squirmed.

"Look, I just dropped in on my way to town. I'm glad you're here to stay," Edward nodded, growing steadily more uncomfortable under Koyl's hard blue glare.

"I'll be around later. Anything I can pick up for you in town?"

At Koyl's negative shake, Edward touched his hat brim and left.

Lynne turned to Koyl with surprise.

"Are you that rude to all your neighbors?" she asked, not understanding a reason for such abrupt treatment given to a casual visitor.

Koyl glared at her. "It's none of his business if I stay or go, that's all." He picked up a pad and pencil.

"You were going to get to work on the big house." His deep voice was firm and demanding. Lynne stiffened at his impersonal tone. She frowned and dug her fingernails into her palms before she lost her temper. The big house was the only reason she was here at all.

She planned to do more than give a verbal description, which was what was apparently expected at the moment. She needed time to have the report neatly organized on paper.

Koyl was appraising her intently with his deep blue eyes, showing no patience. His nearness caused a tingling she didn't understand and couldn't control. Embarrassment heated her from the inside out and she fought and gained outer control at least.

She mentally ran through the things she thought were needed when she was looking over the rooms in the big house. She hadn't taken notes.

He waited for her to speak.

She closed her eyes for a moment and set her mouth into a grim line. She collected her thoughts, recalling the moment she stepped into the big house. Concentrating on her visit to the mansion she began to describe her first impressions.

"It's an elegant building. Guests will feel like royalty when they stay there." She paused to decide how she would describe the rooms and Koyl interrupted.

"But you didn't want to stay there. What if my guests feel the same way?"

Lynne thought Koyl was mocking her. His expression was one of defiance. She just couldn't stay in that big house.

"I...I...I didn't want to be up there alone," she admitted. "It's a cold and lonely building, all unfurnished like it is." Lynne's eyes held Koyl's with a sincerity that brought some softness to his voice and a mirror quality to his eyes.

"I was afraid of that, but I have to see the place for myself," he said, rather quietly. Then with a jerk of his head, he said, "You know I've never seen the inside of that place?"

Lynne shrugged, and unable to put her surprise into words yet unwilling to let him call the next move, she opened the door and walked out, murmuring, "Then it's about time you did."

At the little cafe in town the coffee urn gurgled and the waitress poured herself a cup of the fresh hot brew. She sat in the corner by a window to rest before the locals came in for their noon sandwiches.

She looked over the tables, reassuring herself that each checkered oil cloth had been thoroughly cleaned and the sugar dispensers filled. She sipped her coffee with pleasure as she turned her attention out the window and absently watched the sparrows chirping in the poplar trees.

The door opened and she was pleased to see Cal Willison walk in. Not that he would rescue her in an emergency, but at least he was a pleasant man with which to chat.

"Hi Cal," she called cheerily. "Ready for the usual?" She hesitated only a moment before she getting up. She reached for a clean cup and the coffee pot.

"You're always right on the ball, Tillie," Cal announced as he swung his leg over the stool at the counter to watch her fill his cup. He was five foot six and usually covered with trail dust but his clothes never looked worn. Reportedly he bought the small ranch alongside the Chapman spread some time within the last year but no one thought he was doing much serious ranching.

So far he hadn't hired any hands that anyone knew about. He told her he wasn't married. He was always ready to kid around with her about inconsequential topics. Tillie never could draw any information out of him with direct questions.

Today she decided to have another try. Only this time she decided to feed him a tidbit of information to get his reaction. "Did you hear about that Chapman and his dude ranch venture?"

Cal's hooded eyes revealed no special reaction but he suggested, "If he can pull that off it ought to bring some excitement into the community."

"Well maybe he won't. The fancy house he's got out there is in awful debt. He wasn't so lucky to inherit that." Tillie decided she wasn't getting anywhere with this method either.

Cal looked at her and shrugged, "Every man has to make his own luck."

If that was so Koyl had better start making his. He led Lynne toward the mansion on the hillside.

After seeing the inside for herself, she saw wonderful possibilities in the entire scheme spread out in her future.

To Maria the possibilities held by the future were more ominous. She moved a stack of plates unto the warming oven. She sniffed again at the thought of the trunk she was supposed to give to the new boss of the Chapman spread. She remembered the scene she witnessed when she was a child.

Her mother was the cook for the older Chapmans and Maria grew up in the bunkhouse kitchen. She began helping her mother, Lolita, at an early age.

One day when she was alone in the pantry just off the kitchen, Mrs. Chapman came running in calling for Lolita. Mr. Chapman stormed angrily behind her warning his wife not to run away from him.

Maria pressed herself against the side of the pantry door and held her breath in terror. Mr. Chapman struck at his wife and she stumbled back out the door. His voice was harsh and deliberate. "I insist he answer to me."

Maria had seen Mr. Chapman's temper turned on his horses but never against people. She didn't know how long she stood frozen to the spot out of fear as she listened to Mrs. Chapman's smothered cries of distress recede toward the ranch house.

When Lolita came in and found Maria in shock, she related what she had seen and her mother made her swear on the Holy Rosary that she would never tell another soul about it as long as she lived.

And she never had. She never saw Mrs. Chapman again. Lolita took meals to Mrs. Chapman in her room. Eventually Mrs. Chapman became ill and soon died.

Sometime before her death Lolita was entrusted with this trunk for Mr. Koyl. It was to be kept secret until it could be delivered directly into his hands. Mr. Koyl went away and then Lolita died and the trunk was left for Maria to guard. She forgot about it until Mr. Koyl came to his brother's funeral.

Now it was out of her hands and the implication of its dire secret gave her a fearful sense of foreboding. Some things should not be told. But even after what she witnessed she knew she must keep the promise given to her mother, which was ultimately a promise to Mr. Koyl's mother.

She hugged her arms to her stomach and rubbed her elbows. She stood at the kitchen window and watched her boss and that young woman walk toward the big white building that was a complication for them all.

"We might as well go in the back door," Koyl said, leading the way to the door through which Lynne had recently come.

"That's the stairs to the servant's quarters," Lynne said, hoping to discourage his entering there. The grandeur of his 'big house' would be lost to his imagination if he did not enter through the front hall as she had.

She wanted him to see the possibilities as a grand resort, where she was hoping to lure the rich and famous who would permit, even welcome, the excessive fees he must get if he was going to meet the interest on his present debt. The setting and the decor were splendid advertising points, but those

points weren't visible from this rear entrance.

Ignoring the disapproval in her remark, Koyl continued toward the rear door.

"Not at all what I expected." Koyl frowned as he paused inside the door and looked up the narrow stairway.

"They aren't very elegant. These should be used only in an emergency," she stated, glancing sideways at Koyl, curious about his reaction.

"They were probably built just for that. They certainly aren't practical for daily traffic." Koyl nodded and waited for Lynne go in ahead of him.

Lynne assured him, "They were used many times a day. This mansion is designed like those in the early nineteen hundreds'. The stairs were there to keep the servants out of sight. The narrow space reflected a disdain for servants."

Koyl shot a surprised glance at her. "That better be changed." Whether he meant changing the attitude toward hired help or building better stairs, Lynne wasn't certain and she wasn't going to ask. She paused and looked at the stairs from the bottom to the top, envisioning an easy way to replace them with safer ones.

"That won't be a simple project." She decided to consider the possibility of building better stairs.

"I wouldn't advise such a major remodeling job. For the time being, when the rooms above are rented, these stairs will serve for the required fire escape. A sturdy hand rail won't be expensive to add." She marveled at her professional manner that surfaced in spite of her inner nervousness.

To remember he was her boss should have made her immune to his virility, to the masculinity that sent her heart soaring, but it only assured her of his continued presence. She could work beside him, work for him, but she must not let him see how easily she became unnerved at his nearness.

She proceeded him up the narrow steps, clinging to the wall for balance, trying to manage the ten-inch risers between the narrow pine treads with some dignity.

Koyl followed several steps behind and she was painfully aware that his six-foot height put his eye level even with the back pockets of her snug-fitting jeans.

At the top of the stairs she showed Koyl the kitchen-dining area and the full bath between two bedrooms, explaining, "This arrangement will be just right for youth groups."

Koyl's gaze turned to each feature she explained in the plan and his eyes returned frequently to her hips, causing her to wonder what he saw. Discomfort with his masculine presence warmed her ominously as he filled the space that had seemed so much larger when she was there alone. The need to escape rushed through her.

She crossed the kitchen to the opposite door that led to the stairs and

the second floor balcony. She looked back to see why Koyl was so silent behind her and found herself pinned by his intent stare.

He peered deeply into her eyes, almost through her eyes, to consider the depth of planning she had just revealed. He looked at her with amazed respect. Before he could shield his admiration, the realization of her maturity and intelligence brought a raw pleasure to his gaze.

Was she imagining things? She had never flinched from admiration before.

Her business-like shell evaporated. She trembled. Her athletic body tensed and to avoid revealing her own confused emotion, she bolted toward the front stairs.

Too suddenly Koyl sensed his indiscretion and turned to retreat through the door they had entered.

They sought opposite doors but the paths to get there crossed, and at that crossing they replayed an earlier collision.

Lynne's body pressed against the hard length of the body she hadn't been able to get out of her mind. She gasped to catch the breath that was forced from her. Koyl's arms closed around her and her hands rested on his waist to steady herself.

She looked up into the face of her employer. Although her heart leaped as it had before, other things were different. This was her boss she faced and she was starting her first real job. Guiltily she started to push away.

"I'm sor -," they both breathed softly.

They remained silent and completely still as each searched the features of the other.

Koyl's expression was so intense that Lynne hesitated. She was puzzled by a look flashing in his eyes that he quickly shuttered. She felt no movement in his chest and although she sent a questioning look at her hands, her palms against his chambray shirt gave no answer.

Sensing his tenseness, she tried to be flippant, hoping a little extra time would quiet her beating heart.

"At least I didn't scatter your papers."

Still he didn't move.

The licking flames of the incredible fire that surged through her heated senses were suspended by the leaping fury of her pounding heart.

She leaned back, tipping her face upward, her hips thrusting against his briefly as she pushed away.

Koyl's face lowered, and her senses reeled. She clung to his shirt, waiting to be whirled from the face of the earth.

At the first tender touch of his cool moist lips, Lynne knew she must run but she couldn't move. His lips only teased, then swiftly demanded for one eternal moment, before he hesitated, sliding his hands to her shoulders, pushing her resolutely away.

She plummeted back to earth from the incredible heights to which she soared when she felt his body stiffen. She opened her eyes to his tight smile and was stunned by his amusement.

She shoved back and a shock chilled her with the quickness of the blast of winter wind. Her eyes went wide with the realization that she had invited that kiss.

No, her involvement went beyond invitation. Such a brazen act! How could she have done such a thing?

"Oh, how awful," she clasped her hand to her mouth and closed her eyes, desperately pressing the taste of his lips into her own, greatly horrified at her loss of control. She had thrown herself at him like a willful love sick woman.

She stepped backward, her eyes filled with regret. What would he think of her now? The line of his mouth hardened. She looked at him in dismay. She'd been the object of his angry look before.

Koyl stared at her, angry at himself for acting on a whim, for it had been a whim to take another sample of lips he had known briefly in the moonlight.

He thought of a sparkling wine he tasted once that enticed him back to sample again and again until he was so drunk he couldn't stand. Lynne was enticing. He thought he couldn't get enough of her. Maybe it was already too late--he was too far gone to resist temptation.

Then his sun-squinted eyelids cloaked his expression and he stroked his beard. He looked down at his hands as if to examine them for some clue to her distress.

Lynne was too distracted by her own discomfort to notice. She slipped past him and opened the door to the front stairs, thankful they were not steep narrow stairs like those in the back. She wanted to fly away from her indiscretion.

His masterful voice stopped her. "You can't just run off," he commanded. "You have a job to do."

She swept on down the stairs to the balcony, knowing he would follow. She halted beyond the foot of the stairs and rubbed her arms to quiet her tingling body. She shook her head to help her mind re-sort the plans they were here to discuss. She stood with her hands on her forearms crossed against her stomach until Koyl stepped beside her.

Words spilled out to cover her embarrassment.

"Each room has adequate space for two full beds," she babbled, valiantly getting back to business.

"The rooms could be done in a basic tan. Drapes, bedspreads and furniture fabrics could be mixed and matched in earth colors.

"The rooms need secure locks. Travelers are used to dead bolts and security chains," she looked boldly at Koyl, although she was not completely confident of her regained composure.

He avoided her eyes as his gaze darted from floor to ceiling and door to door.

"That appears to be all that it will take to accommodate guests," Lynne continued, rubbing her damp palms down the faded denim on her thighs, finally plunging her hands into the front slash pockets.

"I'll list the general items for the rooms. If the same basic color is used to paint the walls, I can keep those costs down. The standard motel furniture can be purchased wholesale for savings but it must have a sturdy western design. The furniture won't be put in the rooms until you know exactly what guests are coming."

Koyl walked impatiently from room to room, looking briefly into each. Lynne began to wonder if he heard anything she said.

Apprehension began to seep through her. What was he looking for? She'd given him the best appraisal she could, considering she'd had no time to prepare. Not to mention the disastrous kiss that kept getting in the way of logic.

He asked for her opinion and that's what he got. A written report could be prepared with extra time. She needed to get away from him if she was ever to come up with cohesive thoughts, let alone a reasonable report.

She tried to keep her mind on the job. Would that be ever be possible again?

Koyl stroked his beard as he looked thoughtfully down the hall. Finally he turned to her, interrupting her spinning thoughts.

"Where are the decorated rooms?" He looked from one door to another down the hall along the balcony.

Lynne understood what was bothering him. Jim mentioned the lavishly decorated room. She opened the door at the end of the hall and invited him inside. She entered and stepped out of the way, putting space between them.

The lovely green of the walls behind Lynne enhanced the burnished highlights of her brown hair and added a deeper dimension to the clear gray of her eyes.

She watched for Koyl's reaction and was surprised it was not what she expected. A look of disbelief raised his eyebrows and brought a frown to his face.

His eyes hardened to a cold steel blue as they took in every detail. He was completely silent. His expression grew stern and a muscle in his jaw throbbed. The crease in his forehead deepened. His eyelids narrowed. He walked across the room and scrutinized the dressing room and bath. Only then did he turn to glare at Lynne.

His demanding voice exploded in the room. "Is this what the rooms have to look like before they can be rented?"

"I wouldn't advise it." Lynne replied, surprised and pleased at his judgment. "And it's not necessary."

"Good. There's no way I can meet that expense." He took another scowling perusal of the furnishings and turned his cold blue glare on Lynne to command, "Have a list of what is needed on my desk first thing tomorrow."

Lynne stood stunned as he stomped down the wide staircase. But she lost no time in compiling the list of common items needed to complete the guest rooms.

Several hours later she slipped into the ranch office and left the detailed list on Koyl's desk with a descriptive note to Jim about differences in hardware for locks and drapery hangers.

Nothing more could be done now. She would wait for further word from Koyl. The job of analysis and estimation was over. She would return to the college town and await a real job offer.

She blinked in an effort to blot out the unpleasant thought of leaving the ranch. Her thoughts joined her gaze in appreciation of the scene unfolded before the office window. She would miss this ranch more than she was prepared to admit.

She longed to ride those sweeping hills just once. She had seen the riding horses the day before. Suddenly the lure of riding overtook her and she went to find someone to give her permission to ride.

Maria's teenage daughter, Louise, offered to show Lynne the riding horses, but the girl's eagerness to help the young designer Mr. Koyl brought in from the big city did not please Maria.

She scoffed, "Don't you know my poor Louise has a terrible time trying to talk?"

Maria assumed nothing could be done to eliminate the speech impediment, implying that in the future Louise could only cook and clean. Believing that Louise had no place outside the kitchen, she preferred that the girl would, of her own volition, choose to stay in the kitchen. When Louise did not, Maria grudgingly gave her permission to accompany Lynne on a short ride.

"I'm glad you wanted to ride with me," Lynne said as she patted the arched neck of the big blood-red gelding she had chosen. "I...I...I like to ride," Louise answered, "B...B...But I'd give up r...r...riding if I could g...g...get away from here and g...g...go to college." She mounted and held her horse in check as she watched the surprise on Lynne's face.

"Is there some reason why you can't go to college?" Lynne wondered, knowing first hand how expensive that was. She spoke in steady tones to her horse while she tightened the cinch.

"Mama w...w...won't let me," Louise said, angrily. She kicked her horse and moved off along the corral fence.

Lynne's horse strained to go along. The conversation about Louise and college would have to be put off. Lynne confidently raised herself into the saddle and patted her horse's neck as it made a couple of dancing steps, "Now. Now. Let's be friends, Prince."

"He...he...he's awful frisky," Louise warned, "D...D...Daddy didn't let me r...r...ride him until last year."

Prince appeared to have just the right amount of spirit that Lynne liked. With her boots firmly set in the stirrups she held the horse back, feeling him testing her. That was fair. She was also testing him.

"Let's just take an easy canter like you suggested, Louise. I'll follow you."

Lynne looked ahead at the rolling hills. The folds forming gullies rose to the rugged mountains behind them. What a beautiful place to explore, she thought.

Louise pulled up and smiled as Lynne asked, "Can we ride up into those rocks?"

"Sure," Louise called, with impish excitement in her eyes as she surged ahead.

Lynne grinned and gave Prince his head while her knees signaled the horse into another canter. At first she followed Louise conscientiously, matching her speed, turning to keep her in view. Soon Lynne's imagination was lost in the beauty of the weathered basalt columns among new green leaves of struggling brush. Dreams of riding forever on a ranch of her own took over and she rode in charmed fascination at her own imagination.

Prince sensed Lynne's distraction as a well trained horse will do. The horse slowed to a swinging gait without the intense urging of its rider.

The terrain fascinated Lynne and Prince responded to her lack of direction by slowing down even more. Every rock and shrub was a sharp contrast to the range grass. Yellow buds burst out of the waxy green leaf ends of the greasewood, huddling against the weathered basalt outcroppings on the slope.

Bright red caught her eye and Lynne turned to investigate the unexpected color, thinking it was not too far for her to have a look. She directed her mount toward the spot, weaving around rocks and shrubs until the goal came in view.

What Lynne found was a clump of cactus with its spiny thick fleshy stems fringed with blossoms, brilliantly red, in the warm spring sun.

What Lynne lost was her complete sense of direction. When she decided to return to follow Louise, she didn't know where to go.

Lynne turned her back on the brilliant cactus blossoms to face in the direction from which she came. She held Prince in check for he was anxious to move ahead. Rising in her stirrups Lynne scanned the rocks and brush before her. She expected to see the corral below in the valley. From the ranch house the hills had been deceptively smooth and she had foolishly thought that from those hills she would be able to see the ranch and maintain her sense of direction.

She felt no sense of panic, but standing in this place wouldn't get her

anywhere. She paused to think carefully. When she followed Louise away from the ranch buildings they moved steadily up into the hills. She couldn't begin to find Louise now so she must find her own way. She put her heels into Prince. It shouldn't be difficult to find her way back. It was just a matter of going downhill.

Lynne soon discovered that going downhill was not as straight a route as she would have liked. Just when the ground seemed to level out so she could get her sense of direction, a gully loomed before her. It was so choked with brush that it took extra time to make her way around it. She was pleased with her progress but another gully loomed before her.

There seemed to be no end to the gullies. Each turn she made unerringly took her in what she perceived as a downhill direction and she was certain that she was getting nearer to the ranch. She made her way slowly, moving around rock outcroppings with a deliberate sense of expectation, replacing the nagging suspense that had plagued her when she first discovered she was lost.

Occasionally she stopped to survey the land around her. Her sense of wonder wasn't entirely quelled by the anxiety of her predicament. The ground became more level and she looked ahead at the expanse of wooded hills that seemed somehow more desolate in the distance. That puzzled her and she paused to study the change more seriously.

Prince moved closer to a rock and reached down to pull at a clump of grass. Lynne indulged the horse and let it graze. In the trees slightly to her right Lynne could see a fence disappearing into dried brush that dissected her path in the downhill direction she was going.

At that she smiled. Following a fenceline would surely take her to a spot from which she could find her way back. But before she pulled Prince to attention, she caught a movement among the trees on the other side of the fence.

A stocky man moved upward away from the fence. His back was to her and he looked downhill over his shoulder and then turned to look uphill as if he expected to see someone or something. He moved slowly and deliberately, searching the area near the fence.

Lynne had a feeling he wouldn't quit until he found what he was looking for. She speculated about his actions and about his presence here. In her intense speculation, her gaze riveted to the back of his head. His calculating actions puzzled her.

He straightened with a keen intuition and his head slowly turned to zero in on Lynne's inspection. His turning body froze and his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Lynne watched with intrepidity as he stared in frozen silence. Lynne felt a fierce antagonism in his limited scrutiny. Then reason prevailed. She was the intruder and this man was probably Koyl's neighbor so she waved her

arm in greeting.

She pulled Prince toward the fence. Where could she have a better opportunity to get sound directions back to the ranch house?

The cold antagonism seemed to disappear behind a stern mask on the man's face as Lynne approached the fence. He tipped his hat back slightly and unspoken questions radiated from his piercing eyes. He waited for her to speak.

"I'm trying to find my way back to the ranch house. I got separated from Louise," Lynne explained, feeling weakly stupid in her predicament.

"What are you doing out here?" His sharp tone and suspicious attitude seemed to emphasize her stupidity. His gaze swept her figure and the length of the horse, pausing at the branded hip before coming up to pin her guileless eyes that widened in confusion at his question.

Lynne bristled. She hesitated to explain anything to a stranger but her need to get directions brought her natural good sense to the surface. She raised her chin and the tone of her voice.

"I'm staying at the Chapman ranch. Can you tell me if I'm headed in the right direction?"

The western cut clothes settled on the man's shoulders with a confidence Lynne liked in cowboys. They weren't faded like the clothes Lynne noticed on Koyl's cowhands. She wondered at this as she searched for other details that might reveal his character, concerned that she might not get any help from this antagonistic man.

His face was shaded by the broad brim of his hat when he strolled to the fence and placed a leather-gloved hand on the top of the nearest post. His jaw was hard and his lips thin but his tone was not unfriendly.

"You're going to miss the ranch house by a couple of miles if you stay along the fence. Follow it past a few ravines and you'll see the even growth of the shelter belt off to your left."

That was the information she needed but something in his manner alerted her to wait for further instructions.

"You shouldn't ride out here," he warned. As if that was too presumptuous a statement to make he added, "It's easy to get lost in these hills. Storms sweep down from the mountains in a big hurry sometimes." His tone softened but his eyes were coldly appraising.

"I'm Cal Willison," he offered, gesturing across the expanse of the shriveled range with his right hand as he steadied himself with his left hand still on the fencepost.

"I own this spread," he continued, "I was surprised to see a pretty woman out riding alone."

"I'm Lynne Redding," she countered, doubting that surprise alone caused his antagonism.

"I'm obliged to you." She tossed a sweet smile over her shoulder and

gladly rode off along the fence, neatly skirting the next deep ravine that confronted her. She took note of the landscape to her left, carefully scanning the horizon for the shelter belt. When it came into view her thoughts went back to the man who directed her.

He was a calculating man she was happy to get away from. No one at the ranch mentioned any neighbors except the Worthingtons, but she never asked. Cal Willison was preoccupied with a serious search when she first spotted him. She had no idea what a rancher would be looking for along his fenceline and she was certain it was of no concern to her.