

Chapter five

Burning

The hawk caught the young jack rabbit in its talons. The bunchgrass clumps did not hide it from the sharp sight of the adult hawk determined to feed its hungry young. As the hawk swooped up, its flight faltered for several wing beats until it became accustomed to the added weight. It flew upward from the low flat basin that held the massive cottonwood trees planted decades ago in a now abandoned home site.

Koyl watched the hawk flap upward and followed its flight with his field glasses. He documented the pair in this area, now certain that its nest was in the stately Ponderosa pines growing in a dense cluster about two hundred yards uphill. He observed the hawk's flight from the hidden blind against the wide trunk of the ancient cottonwood tree.

He hoped to locate the nest that must be the focus of the hawk's attention. The bird disappeared into the pines. Koyl left the blind and walked in the direction of those trees.

Among the trees the midday sun was intense and air movement nonexistent. Koyl wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead. He picked his way through the long tangled grasses and low growing shrubs.

He walked quickly, not watching the ground but keeping his eyes on the treetops where he thought the hawk would be. The tangled grasses caught his foot and he stumbled. His hands went instinctively out to catch his balance and his notebook flew out of his grasp.

At that moment he remembered other papers flying from his hands. Lynne Redding. Thoughts of her invaded his mind with the slightest provocation.

Koyl avoided her after asking her to manage his dude hotel. He looked forward to her daily reports on his desk. The renovation was nearly complete through her dedication and skillful planning.

Several rooms in the big house were ready for paying guests. The rooms would have to be rented soon if the ranch was to get out of debt. Unless that was accomplished he would fail to turn the ranch into a wildlife sanctuary.

He shook his head. Maybe he hadn't talked to Lynne but she kept getting into his mind. He tried to shake her image away as he searched the trees. The bird had disappeared again. He kicked at the dirt and swore in

frustration.

If only he could concentrate on this bird long enough to locate the nest. Being agitated and impatient during his observations was not like him. He hadn't been easily distracted before. His obsession with his bird sanctuary was bearing too much on his mind. Or was he frustrated that Lynne hadn't fit into his life in the way he had hoped? Things had to change. He desperately needed to make progress on this study.

His impatience disturbed him as much as his failure. If this pair of hawks would cooperate he could get on to the next phase of his contract. But of course birds lived at their own pace. Well maybe not exactly at their chosen pace. They adapted to the conditions over which they had no control--or they perished. But they did take each day at a time. He must do the same.

Koyl picked up his notebook and hunted for his pencil. He looked toward the tall trees. He could not locate the branches that held the hawk. He wasn't even certain he was looking in the right place. Perhaps he had misjudged the distance.

The sun was glaring. He walked back toward the blind looking carefully at the trees that he passed but he saw no evidence of a nest. He should have been able to spot the nest but he could not. He stretched his tired arms and rotated his head to relieve the tension in his neck. He might as well go back to the ranch for the day. He moved into the blind to collect his saddle bags.

He slumped down against the cottonwood tree for another look at the Ponderosa pines that hid the nest. His eyelids were heavy and close to sleep. The young developing leaves on the poplar shoots nearby mesmerized him as they shimmered and twisted on their slender stems. The enclosed blind was stifling. He wiped at his forehead with his sleeve. Flies buzzed around his hair.

Then he saw the hawk again.

He shook his head to keep his eyes open. The bird soared and circled on the air currents. From the habits he noted in the past several days, he suspected that the male had switched places with the female. He didn't expect it to go back to its nest very soon.

Lynne gingerly placed her hand on the wicked cut on the back of her neck trying desperately to remember how it came to be there. She imagined the worst because the chain of events were so strange to her. She contemplated the bandage as she sat watching Louise fussing at the dressing table.

"I - I - It's no use," Louise sighed in frustration as she tried to put curls in her straight black hair. It just didn't work.

"Let me show you." Lynne stood behind Louise and brushed the straight black hair with long slow strokes. She grasped the thick hair in both hands and bent her head to look around Louise and study her in the mirror.

"You just have to learn to live with straight hair. If I can do it, so can you," and Lynne tossed her own long straight hair from side to side so Louise could get the picture.

"What you must do is use it to your advantage." Lynne tilted her head from side to side, studying several possibilities.

Lynne twisted her wrist and made a rope of Louise's long black hair. She placed the rope on top of the teen-aged girl's head, moving in different positions and retwisting it several times before deciding how it looked the best.

"I - I - I'm just a p - p - plain Mexican," Louise stammered.

With her mouth firmly set in a straight line, Lynne shook her head, "You are anything but plain. And you can be proud of your Mexican heritage." Then she remembered her talk with the foreman.

"Jim told me your whole family are American citizens. You were born right here on this ranch." Lynne craned her head around to look at Louise and verify what she had said.

Louise nodded.

Lynne slowly formed the rope of hair into a coronet that made Louise look very mature. Lynne looked into the distance considering her past.

"You know, I was seventeen before I had been further away from home than the small town high school," Lynne smiled at the disbelief in the young girl's eyes. As she pinned the coronet of thick hair on the top of Louise's head, Lynne pictured her own travels since high school.

"I can count the other places on two fingers," and she held them up, "One to the university and one to this ranch."

She saw Louise narrow her eyes in disbelief. "But I've been all over the world," she emphasized.

The skeptical expression on Louise's face changed to a smug 'I thought so.'

"It's not what you think. I never left the library."

Lynne stood back to critically look at the new hairdo and pressed her mouth into a firm line of approval. Lynne was filled with misgivings about her coming to this ranch but she couldn't let Louise feel her despair.

"You can travel, too, Louise," Lynne added, trying to close her mind to her depression, "just find the right books." With the coronet pinned securely, Lynne combed setting gel into the hairline to hold stray strands of the stiff black hair in place.

Louise couldn't dally any longer over her own appearance without getting a scolding if her work went undone.

"I...I...I've got to work in the g...g...garden," Louise said, looking at Lynne with an apology spilling out of her dark eyes.

"I'll go with you. I can help." Lynne knew the routine Maria and Stefano set for their family. The garden yielded vegetables and condiments for the ranch table. All the family helped with the hoeing and weeding.

For Lynne it was a welcome diversion, although nothing could completely erase her uneasiness about accepting Koyl's offer of the guest ranch management. They finished weeding a row of leaf lettuce in silence and straightened to ease the strain on their backs.

"I have to c...c...cut lilacs," Louise remembered. Maria wanted them brought into the warm kitchen to force the florets to open more quickly. Louise took the cutters and began snipping off heavily budded stems. The fragrance of the lilacs penetrated Lynne's melancholy.

"Here, let me reach those for you," Lynne offered. She stretched her arms above Louise to gather branches of the fragrant blossoms and pulled the thick stems within the range of the cutters.

The delicate unopened florets resembled purple beads in tight clusters just beginning to hint of their perfume. Lynne watched the woody stems severed at the correct place for use in a bouquet. She gathered the flowers in her arms, while Louise chose and cut so wisely. Lynne was increasingly aware of Louise's thoughtful gaze each time she handed her a sprig of flowers.

A bird flew on singing wings from the thick branches above them and Lynne watched the astute eyes of Louise follow the bird's flight that Lynne was not quick enough to see.

The rows of bushes and spruce trees were a haven for Louise when she needed solitude from her family and the hard work she endured. She came to hide in the cozy voids between the huge plants and under the low hanging branches of the spruce trees. The cooing of nesting doves stilled her temper when she sought refuge. She would listen to them and her frustrations would fade away. She relaxed under the spell of the breezes whispering through the trees.

Lynne wanted to encourage confidence in Louise but Maria looked pained and anxious whenever the subject came up. Lynne had always considered Louise a bit inhibited, ashamed of her heritage, but at times like this the young girl's intelligence and perception, and no small amount of compassion, was revealed. Lynne studied the lovely dark features and was puzzled at the concern she saw in the girl's big brown eyes as they flicked from her to the row of spruce trees.

Louise laid the cutters down and piled the cut flowers beside them. She took Lynne's hand and stuttered, "C...c...c'mon." Lynne was led down the nearest row of lilacs.

Louise held a bush aside and stepped through the opening, impatiently twisting at a button on her blouse while holding the branches back so Lynne could follow. She looked furtively around to see if anyone was watching.

Then she placed her finger on her lips and whispered, "It's m...m...my secret." Louise stepped around a spruce tree and dropped to her knees, turned and beckoned.

"F...f...follow me," She ducked under a low hanging branch. On her

hands and knees she crept over the matted dried needles to the tree trunk where she turned and sat down. She pulled her knees to her chin and hugged them.

Lynne wiggled into the small space and marveled at the soft cushion of the fallen spruce needles. She curled her legs beside her and listened to the silence. The everyday noises of ranch life were so muted they seemed to be miles away.

Lynne perceived the magic this place had for the shy dark-eyed girl when she saw the serene expression spread across Louise's face. She hugged Louise and understood the wonder that was being shared. She remained quiet, unwilling to break the spell of enchantment. Listening with widened eyes, she slowly turned to look around. She heard a mournful call and sucked in her breath.

Louise pointed to the mourning dove above her. Lynne noted the pile of sticks in the crotch against the tree trunk and then looked more closely at the distraught bird. The pale buffy underside was barely visible through the layered swaying branches.

The anxious bird cocked its head first to one side and then the other in a cautious study of the human intruders. Eyes like dark beads were ringed with light blue and the craned neck revealed a dark spot below the ear patch. Lynne studied the long center tail feathers edged in white.

Never before had she been so close to a bird outside a cage. She didn't want to breathe lest she disturb the curious creature. This close encounter gave her an entirely new perspective of bird life.

Louise moved to her knees. She complained, "Oh, oh, m...m...my button." The worn string had been twisted once too many times and the button fell among the pine needles. Louise moved too swiftly and the disturbance forced the dove to retreat with fluttering wings.

"Here, I'll get it," Lynne said, reaching into the mat of needles. The more she pinched toward the button with her thumb and forefinger, the deeper the button worked its way down into the decaying needles.

The musty smell of decay wafted up to Lynne's nostrils, replacing the pleasant fragrance of the dried spruce needles. Lynne leaned on her knees and pushed the dried needles aside but the button slipped on down into the soft moist decay.

"It's an elusive little thing," Lynne complained.

Lynne pulled her mouth into a tight line. She couldn't let a little white pearl button elude her so easily. She picked up a short stick and put the end under the button that she finally retrieved and handed back to Louise. Something else at the end of the stick among the half rotted twigs and needles caught her attention.

When she brushed off the dirt and examined it, she discovered that it was a small tin star, a couple of inches across, with corroded

letters...SHERIFF. She rubbed at the toy picturing a small boy playing in the shelter of these trees. She cradled the corroded badge in the palm of her hand. Lynne tucked the little star into her pocket. Reluctantly and thoughtfully, she backed her way out of the hiding place.

When the hawk closed its wings and started downward, Koyl tried to predict the location where the hawk would come to roost. This time he must be more careful. If he could just pinpoint the nesting location he could move in and examine the nest. That was the phase of the study that was most critical to the Land Preservation Society. And the report was the most important deadline he had to meet.

Koyl eyes strained with suspense. The hawk shrilled a warning call and Koyl knew that he had lost again. He moved his field glasses down to determine the disturbance. What he saw startled him out of his exhaustion.

It was Margaret!

What was she doing here?

Koyl stood up and moved out of his blind. Margaret saw him and waved. "Hello. I knew I'd find you one of these days." She jerked on the reins to turn her horse toward him. He watched her swing down from her horse in her English riding habit, looking completely out of place among the unruly brush and tangled grasses.

She picked her way painstakingly through the rough terrain. Her slender legs moved uneasily between the grasping shrubs, clearly unaccustomed to the rugged, uneven ground. She clutched her forearms closely to her, twisting her shoulders to avoid contact with the untamed sage.

"Miss Worthington, I didn't expect to see you. What are you doing out in these hills? Is something wrong?" Koyl moved forward to meet her.

"Oh my goodness, no. Jim told me you've been out here more than you've been at the ranch. I knew that if I was ever going to see you, I'd have to come out and find you. And here I am!" She gingerly stepped around the bunchgrass to his side.

"Miss Worthington," Koyl began to tell her she shouldn't have bothered. She broke in before he could finish.

"Koyl, dear, you promised you would call me, Margaret, remember...at the funeral." She admonished him as if he were a child. "I won't stand for any formality."

"Of course, Margaret." He had easily forgotten her after that short meeting. "What is it you want to see me about?" Koyl was tired and had little patience for small talk now that the hawks were wary because of Margaret's presence.

"Koyl, dear, I want to congratulate you on your new business venture. Surely you know what talk you've stirred up in the county. Some neighbors think you'll contaminate the countryside with the strangers you bring onto

your dude ranch. I know that isn't true but a dude ranch is a peculiar departure from regular ranching."

Margaret moved closer to Koyl and put her hands upon his arms in a gesture of familiarity that annoyed him. Her perfume surrounded him. She appraised his bearded face with approval, "Surely you know your father and Peter were partial to the cattle business. What would they think of your venture?"

Koyl stepped back from her hands, his surprise disappearing under his rising anger. He growled, "I know they didn't like anything I did. But that doesn't make any difference now, does it?"

He put his field glasses up to his eyes and scanned the sky once more for the hawk. It was nowhere in sight. He searched the treetops where he expected to find the hawk's nest. He saw no activity. No hawks.

"I'm studying hawks, but they're out of sight." His voice reflected his weariness and he released a slow resigned sigh.

Margaret wanted Koyl to be more attentive. "Oh that looks like fun. I'll just stay and watch! Your work must be fascinating. I could help you make notes...or something." She almost cooed an interest in his bird work.

"Thanks for your interest, Margaret, but I've lost my concentration. I'm ready to give up for the day. Let's go back to the ranch."

Jim studied the map of the ranch that took up a large part of the office wall. He traced his finger along the ridge where the cowhands recently drove cattle up into the spring pasture. He frowned thoughtfully at the location of the line cabin.

He checked the area after Lynne reported the cigarette smoke. Nothing in the cabin was disturbed and, if she had not been injured, he would have shrugged the smoke off as coming from a curious hiker drifting in from National Forest land.

An innocent hiker would not attack a casual rider. The puzzle was worth kicking around. He would have riders checking that north line fence area more often. Tumble weeds gathered against the fence with every wind.

"I better send a couple of hands to clean the fence line before spring lightning fires start in those dried tumble weeds."

Lynne entered the servant's door at the big house. She climbed the back stairs to the third floor rooms to make one last check so she could put her full report on Koyl's desk. The transformation of the servants quarters was complete and she studied it with discerning eyes.

The bedrooms, a common bathroom, a sitting room and large kitchen became a perfect dormitory arrangement. She would find young people's groups to use it. The walls were a light sand color and the sturdy rough hewn furniture held printed pads in darker brown with accents of deep blue and bright green.

She looked over each room carefully. The furnishings were attractively western in motif. She sat down at the small table in the corner of the sitting room and made some notes that she would leave on Koyl's desk.

She slipped her notes into her pocket and looked out the window at the wooded hills and the far off mountains. Closer to the window she craned her neck to look at the ranch buildings. They were off to the left. She could only see part of the bunkhouse and the north line of windbreak trees.

The windbreak stopped on the hillside far below the big house. The tallest trees were Ponderosa pines. She smiled, remembering the secret place Louise had shown her in the bluegreen spruce.

How beautiful it is, she thought. The ranch was a wonderful place to be. She looked longingly at the wooded hills. A few cattle grazed languidly among the trees. Far off two riders galloped toward the ranch.

The square shouldered rider must be Koyl. The other looked like a woman. Jim told her Koyl didn't like being disturbed during his field studies, but Maria mentioned that Margaret had ridden out several times to find him.

Lynne turned away from the window, openly curious about the oncoming riders. She descended the back stairs quickly and hurried toward the dining hall.

Koyl was riding at such a brisk pace that Margaret couldn't keep up her normal chatter.

She resumed immediately when they dismounted. "I simply must meet this person," she emphasized the word 'person', "that you brought here. Jim tells me she is a recent graduate. Are you going to have her renovate my mansion? She sounds so inexperienced."

Koyl's patience was growing thin. His temper was short.

"The 'person' is Lynne Redding. She's doing fine. It never was your mansion, Margaret. Peter built it because you wanted it and it nearly bankrupted the Chapmans."

Margaret was not put off by Koyl's brusque attitude. She didn't like Koyl's defense of that young woman. That must be her coming down the hill from the mansion. Margaret had to distract Koyl. She pulled him around to face her so his back was to the dining hall. Then she dropped her head.

"Oh, I feel faint," Margaret expertly melted forward. As he held her she looked up into his face and put her arms around his neck while she pretended to recover.

"You caught me just in time. I must have gotten too much sun. I'm all right now. You're so gallant." Under shaded lids she smugly noted that the young woman stepped inside the dining hall and left the door ajar.

Lynne watched Koyl and the slim woman. She did look like the Vogue model Maria described. Koyl held her arm. They were engrossed in conversation as they approached the ranch house.

Lynne hesitated at the door. At that moment of indecision, she saw Koyl

embrace the slim rider. The woman's hands came up behind Koyl's head.

Lynne's face stung with embarrassment. She closed her eyes and stepped back inside the door of the dining hall. The door slammed shut and Lynne leaned against the wall. She felt guilty for having spied on intimate lovers.

Koyl felt like anything but an avid lover. Out of genuine concern he hesitated and looked down into Margaret's face. "Are you sure you're all right? I hope that ride wasn't too much for you." He was ever gallant toward a delicate beautiful female. At her insistence they went inside. Koyl was relieved to find Jim in the office.

Jim scanned Margaret from top to bottom. He wondered if this was Koyl's kind of woman. He spoke directly to her.

"Well, I see you found Koyl. Did you get to see him at work?" Jim watched Margaret hover around Koyl like she had done with Peter.

"Koyl wasn't doing anything at all. He was sitting in the bushes taking a nap." Margaret joked, so wrapped up in flirting with Koyl that she missed the grimace that flashed across Jim's face at her remark.

"I thought the same thing about Koyl's work until I saw some of his published papers. And his bird pictures appear in lots of glossy magazines." Jim said seriously. His surreptitious glance caught the agitation in Koyl's eyes.

Margaret addressed Jim as she took Koyl's hand in both of hers. "He's going to spend rest of the afternoon with me, aren't you Koyl, dear?"

Jim moved toward the door. His mouth was set in a grim line. Margaret was acting toward Koyl as she had toward Peter. Yes, it was the ranch, not the man, that spurred her interest.

Jim paused and shook his head. He sent a hard stare at Margaret.

"I didn't understand how an ornithologist did field work, either, but it is work and Koyl has to pay his bills. He's under a lot of pressure these days."

Margaret pouted, "You simply must make some time for me, Koyl, dear, I won't be put off."

She suddenly suggested, "Of course you will have a house warming to celebrate your grand opening before guests arrive, won't you?" Answering her own question with an affirmative nod, she added, "I'll hold all my dances for you."

Jim stepped forward, "C'mon, Koyl's got work to do," and he took Margaret's elbow and steered her out the door.

Maria saw Jim assist Margaret on her horse when she entered the dining room from the kitchen. Then she saw Lynne leaning against the door.

"What happened? Miss Lynne, are you all right?"

Lynne opened her eyes. She tried to understand her sudden feeling of faintness. "I...I was blinded by the sun. I don't know what came over me." She put her hands over her face.

"Come with me." Maria led her into the kitchen. Louise knelt beside Lynne and rubbed her hands. Worry clouded her eyes as Louise stuttered, "D...D...Don't get s...s...sick now, Mr. K...K...Koyl needs you."

For a moment the words made no sense to Lynne. Then she slowly frowned in awe at the thought of meeting Koyl's needs.

"I'm all right now," Lynne said shakily. She tried to remember why she came down from the big house. She wanted to see who was riding with Koyl.

She had a twinge of jealousy when Koyl rode up with the strange woman. Why? She had no right to expect anything from him except a paycheck. And she did not anticipate intruding on his intimacy. Just the same--seeing Koyl embrace that woman tore her apart.

Louise said Koyl needed her. She had no idea how she could be so important to him. Her innocence prompted the question, "How can Mr. Chapman need me?"

Maria was startled at Lynne's question. "Don't you know how he's counting on the success of a dude ranch to pay his debts so he can make a bird sanctuary?"

Maria was perceptive of her employer's feelings. She was like a big sister to him before his mother's death. They played together. Maria's mother extended the security of her affection when his mother died. She was even closer while his father mourned the mother's death--until Koyl's father retrieved him to mold him into his concept of a "real" man.

Maria thrust a cup into Lynne's hands and urged her to drink. The cool spicy liquid was refreshing. The tangy odor washed through her senses. She could almost think clearly again but the depth of Maria's question eluded her.

"That's almost surely going to happen, with or without me, Maria," Lynne assured her.

"Well Mr. Koyl thinks differently," Maria said and her mouth tightened into a straight line.

Lynne's thoughts reeled with the impact of Maria's words. She searched frantically to cover up her confusion. She desperately wanted to believe Koyl placed great importance on her ability. She suddenly stood up and put her arm around Louise.

"Maria, can you spare Louise for an hour? I need her help with some measurements in the big house." Lynne needed company now but could not bear up under Maria's penetrating eyes.

"Go, Louise," Maria urged but she was troubled. Her eyes narrowed as she glanced from one young woman to the other, still worried that Louise would suffer if she tried to become a self-sufficient career woman like Miss Lynne.

Maria knew her family's future looked bleak when Mr. Peter was in charge. Margaret considered servants to be less than human. Mr. Peter expected them to do their work and not get in the way. Mr. Koyl was different.

Maria wanted the dude ranch to succeed. She and Stefano were assured they were included in Mr. Koyl's future if it did. He considered them a vital part of the ranch and, although Maria and Stefano received a salary, Koyl regarded them as part of his family.

Lynne and Louise left the kitchen and hurried to the mansion. Lynne turned to look again at the hills down which Koyl and Margaret recently rode. Grazing cattle raised their heads to watch two ranch hands head into the hills. A few young animals were gathered around the trunk of a large pine, stomping to dislodge the flies and twitching their tails to put off the buzzing insects.

The ranch hands routinely cleared the fence of tumbleweeds. Nick headed to the fence to check on the extent of the tumbleweed piles. The amount of clearing would dictate the tools they would need. Tom went toward the cabin. He expected to handle the job with a couple of straw forks and a match.

Tom pulled his horse up beside the cabin. He took off his hat and swept his arm up to wipe the sweat and dust off his forehead with his sleeve. His horse stomped and beat his tail against an insect, circling against the confining reins. Tom was ready to dismount when he saw the smoke.

He slapped his horse on the withers and slammed his hat back on his head, grabbing the reins in both hands as the horse shot forward in response.

"Nick, why didn't you wait?" Tom shouted the question into the wind as he urged his horse around brush and trees. The horse balked at the smoke.

He forced his horse ahead. He had to find Nick. He slapped at his horse with the reins. Where was Nick? Why had he started the burn before coming to the cabin? They had always worked together. Something was wrong.

"Nick, where are you?"

The dry weeds piled against the fence were burning furiously. Tom twisted around looking in every direction for Nick. He was nowhere to be seen.

An explosion sounded and Tom watched as the fire instantly devoured the treetop to which it had leaped. The flames licked at the pitch on the trunk of a nearby Ponderosa pine. The tumble weeds caught at the fence were burning themselves out and the fire would do no more harm there. He hoped it couldn't jump across the space to more trees.

Out of the corner of his eye Tom saw a movement and he turned to see if it was Nick.

"Nick," he called again. There was no sound but he clearly identified Nick's horse.

No rider!

He slowed his horse and looked cautiously around.

"Nick," he called and then gave a piercing whistle. The ears on Nick's horse pointed forward as it nickered in response. It pranced nervously backwards watching the fire, wanting to escape but remaining tethered to the

spot by its dragging reins. Tom scooped up the reins. He spoke quietly to the frantic horse.

"Where's Nick? Easy now," Tom rubbed the horse's neck. His experienced eyes examined the saddle and the ground for some sign that would indicate what happened to his ranch hand companion.

"Nothing there. I know he didn't fall off his horse." Tom kept talking to quiet the horse. His eyes narrowed as he looked across the fence to the barren soil of the Willison ranch. He saw nothing unusual among the bluegreen rabbitbrush to betray a recent disturbance of the ground.

Panic rose in him as he listened to the crackling flames. He anxiously looked back toward the fire. Both horses balked at going any closer. The horses watched with wild eyes. He understood their fear and moved beyond a large open space. He jumped to the ground and dropped the reins.

Tom frantically ran toward the fire fearing he would find Nick's body enveloped in the flames. He heard a spasm of coughing and ran to pick Nick up by the shoulders.

Nick coughed again as he gasped for breath. Some smoke still clung in his lungs. Tom dragged him far back from the smoke. There were no signs of burns on his clothes or hair.

"Nick, are you all right?" Tom tried to hold him up so he could inhale the fresh air more fully. "What happened? Why did you start the fire?"

Nick shook his head, "I didn't," he gasped. "It was already smoldering in the bunchgrass. I...left my horse...and a tumbleweed rolled into it. Then the whole pile...just exploded."

Koyl was closing the ledger on the red ink when Jim came in.

"I saw Margaret off but she's not likely to stay away." Jim said as he looked at Koyl with a secret amusement in the tight wrinkles at the corner of his eyes.

"She's a pretty woman," Jim ventured. He was fishing for Koyl's opinion.

"That she is," Koyl commented as he jutted a determined chin at Jim in agreement.

Jim had other ideas about this conniving neighbor, "She can be charming when she wants to be. Peter got every bit of her charm."

Koyl shrugged, raising his eyebrows for the rest of the story.

"Peter lived on your father's praise. He performed like a circus dog, doing the things that he knew would be praised. I watched him calculate every act. He played your dad to please himself."

"I sure resented him when we were growing up," Koyl murmured. "Dad was disappointed when I spent any time observing birds instead of planning and scheming for the future of the ranch. Always said I was too much like mother." His voice trailed off while he contemplated his own remark.

Jim looked more closely at Koyl as if he had made a new discovery.

"That was never mentioned around the hands. But it was Peter who was always praised for his riding and roping skills. I never paid much attention to what you were doing. I remember when Peter started making decisions about what feed would be bought, where cattle would graze, which stock would be sold. We had expected you, as the oldest, to take over."

"That never bothered me much. I didn't want to run the ranch anyway. But I hated to be ordered about like a regular ranch hand by my kid brother. I can still hear him: 'Koyl, get those cattle out of there. Koyl, the line fence hasn't been checked this week. Koyl, this. Koyl, that.' And Dad backed his every decision no matter how much I disagreed."

"I wasn't too surprised to see you go," Jim said, quietly, knowing his words didn't matter.

"I was happy to get away to the university. Peter taunted me about being disinherited. He said I deserved that for running off to study birds. He accused me of thinking the ranch wasn't good enough for me."

Jim was baffled, "You didn't know until after Peter's death the legal move to disinherit you was never made?"

"No, and I still haven't figured that out. Peter always seemed to get what he wanted."

"Your dad didn't spoil him except with praise. Every prize the boy won was earned. He was driven by a terrible competitive spirit. But from the time he was born he had to be constantly encouraged and praised. You were so darned independent, your dad couldn't drive you in the direction he wanted. But he followed your career with some pride, I think, at least that's the only reason I could see to have those bird journals coming in."

Koyl's eyes snapped to attention. "I never saw any around."

"I'm not surprised. They were burned the day your Dad died. Peter was real broke up. He got all melancholy. Didn't do anything for a long time. Then Margaret discovered him and took him in hand. She started praising him and in no time a'tall, Peter fell into doing what pleased her."

"He should have had better sense than to get so far in debt," Koyl shook his head slowly in disbelief.

"He believed every bit of her praise. In his mind he just simply couldn't fail at anything. And she did encourage him to stick to the business of running a paying ranch, thinking that it could pay for everything. She wanted it to succeed. I think she started out in the right direction."

"Well she got off to a wrong start with me today."

"I'm sorry she interrupted your work. But I didn't expect her to find you. I've sent her out in the wrong direction before." Jim hesitated, "I'll try to keep her from going out again."

Jim sat down in the chair beside the big desk and looked at Koyl's tired features. He said, "A few hours off will do you good. You're looking mighty tired."

Jim had been concerned not only with Koyl's health but with his own ambivalence about what changes were being made on the ranch. Somehow he had to get Koyl to go over the ideas that Lynne and Stefano had given him about activities for the guests.

Jim continued, "Things are coming along up at the big house. When's the last time you talked to Lynne?"

"I don't know...a couple of days, I guess," Koyl hedged.

It was exactly two days and six hours since he almost walked into her in the hall on his way out that day. He wouldn't soon forget it. She was stepping out of her room. He stopped and mistook the smile of recognition for a whole lot more and on reflex reached out to put his hand on her arm. Her grey eyes widened and what he thought was acceptance turned to fear.

"How is the work coming along?" he asked, withdrawing his hand.

"Right on schedule, Mr. Chapman," Lynne's eyes darted briefly to Koyl's hand. She had a wary look, like she was being cornered.

The look changed as she glanced toward the outside door. "Guests could move into some of the rooms anytime."

"Do you always start work this early?" Koyl asked.

"No...Well...yes. I check to see who is available to work and plan the work schedule for the day."

He watched her stand so still and breathless. Only her eyes betrayed her anxiety. He didn't understand why she was afraid. He wanted to ease her fear and he reached for her arm again then thought better of it. He hesitated. She was so vulnerable. He wanted to protect her. He ached to take her in his arms but he had backed off.

The memory of that disappointing encounter was painful.

Jim was droning on. Koyl tried to concentrate on what Jim was saying.

"It's time we did some planning for the guest activities, especially if you expect Lynne to take over management. She needs to know what ranch activities you'll let the guests into."

Koyl looked thoughtfully at Jim with his eyes narrowed but Jim went on.

"Are you going to have some riding trails or is the range closed for your studies?" Jim asked not waiting for Koyl's answers.

"If Lynne stays on as manager, she can fill in as a riding instructor. We'll likely get some folks who need pointers on riding." Jim pinned Koyl's eyes and waited for a response.

Koyl was astonished that Lynne talked with Jim about guest activities. Is that how she got to be on a first name basis with his foreman?

He realized he didn't talk with her enough. Obviously she was thinking about staying on. And a good thing too. He told her to do what had to be done regarding the hotel and she was getting the work done. He had enough to worry about. The bird sanctuary was within his grasp. He collapsed back against the supple leather chair.

"What makes you think Miss Redding can give pointers on riding? What does she know about horses?"

"Quite a lot from what I've seen. She rides with Louise every day. Takes good care of her mount when she comes in, too. Tells me she's been riding all her life."

"I better get caught up on what's going on around here," Koysl admitted. "Get a list together and fill me in. Get Stefano and Miss Redding over here. I'll grab a shower and be ready in half an hour."