

## Wildly in the Rockies

# Chapter Seven

### Fumbling

Lynne worked at a feverish pace to cover her anger. She fell into bed exhausted, knowing she could not avoid Koyl. She must steel herself to his charms, his virility, his magnetism. But how? Anger only lasted so long. Anger only went so deep. She would have to quit. Leave. She would not give up so easily. She put the thought aside. She would deal with the problem in the morning.

Koyl woke before dawn. He was anxious about the requirements for the Land Preservation Society. The doctor advised him to rest completely for a couple of days but he couldn't rest with his head wrapped like a sultan. He rolled his pencil between his fingers then tapped the desk, absently drawing lines around the old ink spatters on the leather trimmed desk pad. He put his hand to his bandaged wound. The stitches were tender to the touch. There was a slight itching, and itching was a sign of healing.

"The x-rays show your skull intact," the doctor had assured him, "Get plenty of rest in the next couple of days."

He slept well and was anxious to get back to the hawk's nest. He couldn't afford to lose any more time. Every hour wasted put his bird sanctuary in jeopardy. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath. "Yesterday's ride may have bruised my head but it was worth it. I got a lot more headaches when I was trying to find the hawk's nest."

He vacantly scanned the desk top thinking of the tools he needed for examining the nest and the young he knew were there. His eyes came to rest on the old photograph of his mother and dad. He caught his breath. He hadn't seen that picture since he left the ranch to go to college. He bit his lip as the pain of unwanted memories flooded in.

Lillian Corning Chapman was, in that picture, the vision that Koyl remembered. He looked at the picture many more times since her death than he ever looked at her face when she was alive. How much does a child study the features of a parent? He recalled the comfort of her arms, the reassurance of her voice, the security of her convictions. He looked more closely at the

faded photograph. Her features were much like his. He smiled.

"It's the other way around. I suppose my features are much like hers," he murmured, "I don't even know the color of her eyes."

He put the picture back on the desk, sat back and squinted at it. Peter could have substituted for Oliver Chapman.

"I wonder if that's why Dad always favored him." Koyl's shoulders sagged and he slowly shook his head in regret.

Turning in his chair he looked at the sky, bone white with a hint of dawn. The window framed a large expanse of ranch land touched with a pale pinkness that comes through the air before the sun rays strike the landscape. Far off the cattle bawled. A dog barked in the distance. He searched the rolling hills. His hills. His sanctuary.

"Well I won't have to carry on any of Dad's old ranching traditions if I get out from under this debt and establish a bird sanctuary."

He gripped the pencil with such a fierce determination it broke in two. He stood up and threw the pieces on the desk. He was going to examine that nest. The deadlines must be met or his whole dream would go down the drain.

Maria handed Jim the saddlebags she packed for Koyl's daily excursion. "Mr. Koyl is supposed to stay in bed," she stated with a frown. "Eating like this isn't good for him. He should eat more of my good food."

Jim gulped the last of his coffee. He shrugged his shoulders. "I agree, but I can't talk him into anything. With the Land Preservation Society breathing down his neck and the mortgage payment coming due he's more pressured than ever." Jim flipped the saddle bags over his shoulder.

Maria sipped at her coffee, "I thought he was supposed to rest for a couple of days?"

She felt a sisterly concern toward Koyl ever since his mother died. He was taken into her family as a brother until Old man Chapman decided to make a man of him and kept him occupied in the barns or out on the range. Koyl was allowed to eat in the dining hall and she helped her mother see that he had his favorite dishes without being too obvious about it in front of the old man.

"Yes, but he's too worried," Jim paused and a slow grin spread over his furrowed face as he recalled the flustered anger Koyl showed when Jim insisted Lynne go with him. "At least he agreed to take Lynne with him."

"She's all giddy over Mr. Koyl. I'm surprised that she's able to help him at all." Maria stated with vehemence. "I'll be glad when her work on the big house is done."

Jim's smile faded and his eyebrows pinched in a deep frown. He was startled by Maria's hostile expression, "Did she work you that hard? You mustn't hate her for that. She was hired to do a job and from what I see ahead she just might succeed in getting the Chapman ranch out of debt."

Jim confronted Maria straight on. "How can you fault her for that?"

"I want her to stop putting foolish ideas into Louise's head," Maria admitted, "Louise can never be a professional woman, no matter how much she admires Miss Lynne." Maria turned her back on Jim with the excuse of turning the bacon. "I'll just be glad when she's gone, that's all."

"Now wait just a minute, Maria. Lynne won't be leaving. At least not 'til the guests are gone."

Jim stepped over to Maria's side and compelled her to face him. "Paying guests are coming. This place will never be the same again. Louise will meet lots of professional women. She is a bright young woman. Why shouldn't she expect a different life than this?"

Maria's defiant expression turned to pain as tears welled up in her black piercing eyes, "I suppose so. She's been so hurt by criticism already. I don't like to put her where she has to face more of it and disappointment besides," Maria hurried to pour a cup of coffee and brought the cup to her mouth, hiding her sadness behind the rim.

"Louise is as strong as you are, Maria. She deserves to make her own future." Jim eyed her with compassion at the same time wondering why parents made such an issue of trying to live their kids lives. But then, he didn't have any kids so what did he know?

Jim patted the saddle bags that hung on his shoulder. "I'd better get going and saddle the horses." He headed for the door. Jim stopped with an afterthought, "Don't forget that Wayne fellah from the university and his bride are coming for the weekend."

Jim wanted to lighten the tension that hung between them. He smiled mischievously as he looked at Maria. "You won't have time to worry about Louise. You'll have too much to do around here."

Koyl strode down the hall and knocked on Lynne's door. "Wake up. Rise and shine. Time to ride out and examine the nest you discovered."

He held his breath. He didn't feel as enthusiastic as he sounded. He was apprehensive about her response. She might refuse. He could hear her stirring.

"I'm up. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

He leaned against the carving on the door and announced loudly, "Come down to the corral when you're ready."

Lynne was surprised that Koyl was going out to work. He had been told to rest. And why was she expected to go with him? She was curious about the nest. The prospect of watching Koyl work made her adrenaline flow.

She stripped her nightshirt off over her head and flung it beyond the end of the bed in anticipation. It fell over the embossed trunk. She admonished herself for her carelessness. She always hung up her clothes but she had to hurry. Koyl wanted her to meet him at the corral right away. An unbidden

warmth flooded through her whole body.

In her haste to retrieve the fallen nightshirt, she stubbed her bare toe on the richly carved corner of the trunk.

"Ouch," she cried. She grimaced at the pain. She shivered in the brisk air that swept across her smooth nakedness from the open window.

Slipping into her jeans and a tee shirt, she then pulled on a heavy wool shirt to ward off the early morning chill. She would be down to the corral before Koyl got the horses saddled. She hurriedly straightened the blankets and tucked the bedspread into place. She fluffed the pillows and tossed them against the headboard. She didn't want to waste time here but she couldn't leave extra work for Maria and Louise.

"He told me to come when I was ready." Lynne put her hands on her hips. *I am ready*, she thought, *more ready than he will ever know*. She closed her eyes and inwardly shuddered at what Koyl told her yesterday - that he wanted her near him. But he couldn't have meant the permanence she wondered that wanting might include.

She clenched her teeth. She didn't want that permanence. She didn't want a sexual affair either. She straightened her shoulders. She must get on with her job. She quickly pulled the brush through her thick auburn hair, bringing out the gleaming highlights before coiling it tightly and pinning it on top of her head to make the tan felt Stetson hat fit comfortably. She was pleased with this old hat that was abandoned in the closet. She tugged on her own leather gloves. She stopped at the door, felt her pockets thoughtfully and returned to the dresser. She put a clean cotton kerchief in each back pocket of her jeans.

A glistening yellow glow reflected off the mountains in the distance beyond the rolling hills. The crisp morning air touched her ears. She hunched her shoulders and would have pulled her hair down to protect her cold ears, but if she did, the hat would fall down over her eyes.

Horses stomped and nickered. The steamy smell of fresh manure stung her nostrils. When she got to the corral the horses were already saddled. Jim gave her his best 'good mornin' grin. He finished buckling the saddle bags in place behind the cantle on Prince's rump.

"I didn't expect this to be part of my job, Jim. What's going on?" Her voice was quiet and her breath left pale white puffs in the cold air.

"None of us could hogtie the boss to his bed, but we did badger him until he agreed to let someone go with him, just in case he has trouble with his head," Jim said quickly. She noticed an apologetic tone in Jim's voice.

"Why me?" Lynne stared at Jim holding her breath. He seemed to be struggling for an answer.

"I guess you're just the low one on the totem pole."

"I like an early ride but going without breakfast isn't my idea of great fun," Lynne said as her shoulders settled in defeat. Still the thought of

watching Koyl at work was worth some sacrifice. Being near him was becoming exquisite torture.

Jim patted the saddle bags, "Koyl always takes his breakfast in the field. Maria packed enough to keep the two of you 'til next week." He grinned at the exaggeration.

Lynne mounted. She was ready but her pride still rankled at Koyl's apparent lack of feeling. She was wary about being alone with him for one hour, let alone a whole day. Just then Koyl rode by on a glistening chestnut with a large bundle tied behind his cantle. He didn't seem to have a favorite horse. He did handle each with skill no matter which one he rode. He was on a different one every time Lynne saw him riding.

She wondered about that. Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Zorro, those Western heroes had special horses of their own. But she wouldn't expect Koyl to leap on his horse from the barn roof and ride off in search of bandits so she supposed it didn't matter. She shrugged.

Koyl wasn't the cowboy of her dreams. But she loved him more than any dream man. She no longer tried to deny it. Her horse stepped smartly against the bit, as anxious to be on its way as she was. She preferred to have one horse and she was pleased with Prince. She patted his neck and spoke softly as she held the reins firmly. At a beckon from Koyl she released the tight hold and touched her horse with her knees. Prince moved out as regally as his name implied, with his neck arched and his tail held high.

Les waved to Wayne across the crowd. He arrived on the UPS flight from the university. Wayne and Joan met him at the city airport and were driving the last forty miles to Koyl's ranch. Joan was radiant as she hugged Les. She lived in with Wayne long enough to consider the younger brother as a friend and now he was her brother-in-law.

"It's gonna be great to see this ranch I heard so much about." Les was pleased that he was going to help with Koyl's inventory. He was excited to see new land become protected for wildlife. But it was Lynne's image that dominated his mind.

"You sure can help," Wayne said. "The inventory will take some time and we ought to do as much as we can for Koyl."

"I can take inventory if that's what it takes to get me there. I'm really going so I can see Lynne." Les was excited at the prospect but she wasn't too pleased with him before she left. She never cared for him the way he cared for her. Les folded his gangly legs into the jump seat of Wayne's sporty truck and they set out, anxious to see the potential bird sanctuary.

"How far is it?" Les was mildly curious as he watched the scrubby bushes along the way. Lupines were in riotous bloom beside the fences. Tiny pink phlox gathered in patches on the barren patches among the flowering greasewood. Blackberry bushes tangled on the fences beside the weedy

ditches.

"We'll be there in time for a real ranch supper." Joan said. She was looking forward to a whole new experience.

Koyl rode in silence at a slow canter. He pulled the chestnut horse to a walk when they came in sight of the trees marked with the plastic ties. Lynne smiled at the recollection of the moments before the nest's discovery.

Koyl turned and his hooded eyes revealed no emotion as she waited for him to speak. They brought the horses to a halt.

"I'm going to put these trees on my map after I examine the nest." he informed her. His gaze swept the surrounding area and rose to linger on the treetop where the nest must be.

"I expect to find young birds." He spoke absently as he dismounted and put the bundle down beside a tree near the blind.

"And what am I supposed to do?" Lynne's empty stomach made her testier than an employee should be towards the boss.

"Jim expects you to hold my hand so I don't injure myself," Koyl said very matter of factly. "But I'm going up that tree first so you can tether the horses and find yourself a place to watch for the time being."

Lynne bristled at his careless statement. She looked from the marked pine tree to the tall cottonwood where Koyl placed his bundle. She picked up the chestnut's reins and pulled the big horse behind her as she rode off to tether the animals in a nearby patch of grass. When she pulled the saddle bags off Prince's rump and put them on her shoulder, she wished she had dropped them off by the cottonwood tree. They were heavy enough to hold a month's supply of food.

Koyl dropped his denim jacket beside the tree. He hooked a leather apron of tools around his waist and picked up spikes that were fastened to leather straps. Lynne couldn't identify the odd looking equipment. Koyl plodded up the slope to the marked tree with long slow strides. He sat down and buckled the spikes to his boots. With a long strap he encircled the trunk and buckled himself in with the tree. His white turban bandage stood out like a beacon in the slanted rays of the early morning sun. The bulky bandage took the place of his worn broad brimmed hat.

He proceeded to walk up the straight trunk with his spiked feet, leaning in to the tree and sliding the belt further above with each step. Finally he unbuckled the belt and hugged the tree while he placed the open end above each branch.

That looked precarious for a man who recently hit a rock with his head. Lynne worried. She forgot how hungry she was and ran to the pine tree. She gasped and held her hands tightly to her mouth, watching Koyl unbuckle the belt at the first branch. It dangled at his waist.

She stifled a warning gasp at his every step as he worked his way up to the top. She was relieved each time the spikes sunk into the trunk and held his weight. Insects buzzed around her in the sun. She swatted the insects away from the back of her neck, holding her hat fast to the coil of hair on top of her head.

Time dragged by. Her neck ached from the strain of looking up toward the nest she couldn't see. Her back hurt and she put her hands on her hips and flexed the muscles in her torso. Waiting was a most tiresome task.

Koyl was completely out of her sight. He measured the nest and noted the materials and methods of its construction. He weighed and measured the young birds within it. He marked every measurement with diagrams. He examined the down and emerging pinfeathers to determine the age of the birds. He photographed the hatchlings and nest from many angles. He did this with gloved hands while belted to the branch on which the nest was built.

Lynne repressed her desire to call out. Her cautious instincts warned her to be silent. If Koyl fell she couldn't do anything but go to the ranch for help. She walked slowly and despairingly down to the cottonwood trees. She squinted to inspect the high branches for the hawk's nest. She couldn't see it from the cottonwood tree either.

Tall Ponderosa pine trees huddled in a cluster as if to protect the central tree and hide the nest. She couldn't even see Koyl's feet from where she stood. To her horror, she saw violent movement in the tree top and heard the belt sliding on the trunk. She knew he was at last coming down. The needled clusters violently shook as Koyl's weight released them when he moved down the trunk.

The downward shaking sequence of the branches reminded her of a big shaggy dog jiggling water off his body from one end to the other. She released a deep sigh of relief when she saw Koyl at the base of the tree. He dropped to the ground, put his soft, thin gloves in his pocket and removed his climbing spikes. Lynne sat back patiently against the rough dry trunk of a cottonwood tree that stood downslope.

She settled back. Koyl was safe on the ground and she could take time to enjoy the rustling sound of the leathery leaves of the cottonwood trees. The breeze whispered over the prairie grasses with leisurely, almost imperceptible, waves. A bird trebled merrily in the distance. For the first time ever, Lynne wondered about the color, the size, and the habits of a bird.

Koyl finished his notes. He tucked his notepad into his pocket and picked up his spikes. He flashed a triumphant grin and strode down the slope counting his steps as he came. He made a note of that number before he looked at Lynne.

"There're three young, only a few days old," he announced as he dropped beside her, "I'll have to be careful, but I can observe their progress easily now that I know where they are."

His beard slowly revealed a pleasant curved smile that opened in a wide grin to reveal straight white teeth. He self consciously stroked the flakes of pine bark off the thick brown hairs of his beard, flipping at the sticky ones with his fingers.

A hawk's piercing call pulled his gaze from Lynne's inquisitive face. "See the anxious pair?" He pointed to the soaring birds. "They're watching the nest. I've interfered in their routine enough for one day."

Lynne followed his gaze into the sky where the attentive birds flapped and glided in circles. Her eyes reflected the thrill of the flight. How wonderful to fly! She looked back at Koyl with an awakened wonder. A fresh understanding of his dedication to the bird world surged through her.

Koyl felt her gaze and reluctantly pulled his eyes from the sky to lock with hers. He was pleased at the wonder in her eyes. She quickly looked away.

"It must be wonderful to fly," she murmured, as she watched the flying pair. The back of her hat brim was pushed up by her shoulders and a wisp of her hair fell from inside the brim. When she tucked it back, Koyl pulled the hat off her head. Her hair fell down around her shoulders. Lynne moved to reclaim its loosened coil.

"Leave it down. It'll protect your neck from the sun and insects."

He put the hat back on her head and stared when it came down to cover her eyes. He took it back and examined it more closely. "This hat wasn't made for you."

He stared much longer as he turned the hat over in his hands. With a dawning in his eyes, he asked, "Where did you get this?"

"In the closet. It didn't look like it had been worn for years."

Koyl looked at the hat and lifted it to his own head, "Not since I left for college." It sat strangely on top of his bandage. "I didn't want to take that reminder with me." His eyes were filled with a past he wanted to forget. He took it off and handed it back to her.

Lynne was self conscious at the revelation. This was no place to go soft on this man as much as her heart went out to his pain. She fumbled for some other subject.

"Jim said you ate breakfast out here. Are you going to let me in on it? Or isn't that included in my employment?"

Koyl reached for the saddle bags. The crinkly smile lines disappeared from the corner of his eyes. He covered his discomfort at the reference to employment. He unwrapped a thick sandwich and handed her one half.

"Maria sent a whole extra bag for you." He opened his mouth to take a bite and instead he turned to Lynne. He took a deep breath and expelled it slowly.

"I meant to talk to you about the big house." His voice was low and his words were slowly measured, "Jim tells me that guests are booking in for their

vacations. He also tells me that I need a riding instructor."

Koyl examined his sandwich with much more care than necessary before taking a huge bite off the corner. He chewed thoughtfully when he finally raised questioning eyes to Lynne.

She was waiting to hear what else he had to say. There had to be more than that behind his statement. His eyes held hers with the strength of a brassy blue magnet on shiny polished steel.

"When are you going to tell me you're going to manage the whole affair, Lynne?"

There was no way she could handle an 'affair' with Koyl. The way he put the question sounded like he was only biding his time until she came around to his bed.

If only he wanted more than an affair. She didn't know what to say. His true feelings were a mystery to her. She tried to stay calm. She impatiently brushed a fly off her face.

"There really is nothing more to be done in the hotel." She exhibited an outward calm she didn't feel.

Koyl poured a cup of steaming chocolate into the lid of the thermos and handed it to Lynne. He poured some into a plastic cup and gulped it down.

"I know you have the right training..." and he proceeded to outline the daily routine he wanted for his guests.

"The guests should be involved in ordinary ranch routines from morning until night, with no chance for getting into places where they might be injured or cause trouble.

"Someone has to plan group activities for all guests to participate or observe at their own levels of physical abilities."

"I...I," Lynne knew such duties would make her an intricate part of the ranch operation. In her heart she wanted that desperately. In her head she knew she must never let that happen. She would not be tied down, her creative energies stifled.

Koyl made his case before she voiced the refusal he expected.

"You proved to be an organizer, and that's what I need. After all, the guests will pay well for their adventure. I need you to keep their expectations satisfied. I can't have them wandering unsupervised around the ranch."

The job Koyl described would be difficult, but with the help of the present ranch staff, it was a challenge that intrigued her.

Lynne watched him chew. His beard moved in a strange juxtaposition to his cheeks and the motion fascinated her. Slowly she comprehended what he said. Lynne recalled the statement Koyl made about keeping her on the ranch. Of course. It was because there was a big job to be done. Success of the dude ranch was the key to his wildlife preserve. There was some pleasure in knowing that he believed in her ability to do the job. But she had hoped - however futilely - that he might begin to care for her. She struggled to swallow

food she couldn't chew.

The next few weeks would be a trial time for the whole operation. So many changes. Working together perhaps the ranch staff could come up with an easy routine. When Koyl's hand rested on her arm, she felt a yearning creep through her body. Perhaps, just perhaps, he would come to love her. He had such a tender look in his eyes.

"I need to know if I have to find some one else." Koyl asked again.

Lynne wanted to believe she saw a tenderness beyond the pleading tone of his voice. His touch electrified her. He pulled his hand away, curling his fingers as if he, too, was affected by the spark. To avoid her he looked skyward at the circling hawks.

"Those birds will keep to a routine of feeding their young for a few days," he said, looking speculatively at the sky. "If you'll stay, at least until I find someone else, I'll help set up a plan. That is, if you want my help." He was showing an uncertainty that reflected her own.

To steady his hands he gripped his cup firmly and raised it resolutely to his lips. He held his breath in anticipation of her answer.

Lynne gave in against her better judgment. She couldn't refuse Koyl anything. She realized that now. A smile softened her creamy skin. In the harsh midday sun, Koyl saw her darkest freckles stand out like the ink spatters he made on his desk pad.

She took a deep breath. "I'll try." Then she let out a long sigh and added, "And I'll take all the help I can get."

The sandwiches were finished in silence. The crinkles returned to the corners of Koyl's eyes as he squinted up into the bright sky. He picked up the sandwich wrappers and tucked the covered thermos into the saddle bags.

Lynne thought he started to say something then thought better of it and rose to his feet. When he stood up, he pulled Lynne up beside him. This time his hand did not linger on hers. He dropped it quickly. He watched her twist her hair into a coil and place it firmly inside her hat. She picked up the saddle bags and Koyl picked up his bundle. They walked together toward the waiting horses.

Lynne matched his stride. She mounted with ease and kept her horse abreast of his as they cantered to the corral. She rode intuitively, unconsciously relaying her directions to her horse.

Her thoughts were elsewhere. On the guests. On ranch activities. On her new responsibilities. On lonely days of avoiding the solicitations of the man she loved.