

Wildly in the Rockies

Chapter eight

Stewing

Jim picked up the plate of cookies Maria put on the counter for Koyl's friends. "How much food was in Koyl's saddlebags, Maria?" Jim asked, "I told Lynne there was enough for a week and I wouldn't be surprised if Koyl stayed out that long." Jim scratched at his head where the hatband plastered his hair down, his eyes mischievously twinkling.

Maria flashed him a wide smile as she tasted the stock for her special sausage gravy, testing its flavor with closed eyes and smacking lips. She winked at Jim.

"I wish he'd get back now that his friends are here." He watched Maria working efficiently about the kitchen. "You're handling the extra work real good."

"You were right," Maria admitted, "about being busier than ever. There hasn't been so much cookin' and cleanin' around here in a month of Sundays."

Jim said she would be too busy to think about Louise but old worries had a way of creeping in. All the fury over spicing the gravy, patting out the biscuits, and preparing the extra dishes required by the appetites of the inventory crew did not shut out Maria's concern for her daughter.

Wayne and Joan sat at the long table in the dining hall sipping coffee. They munched cookies and eagerly listened to Jim describe the fire and Koyl's accident in the wooded hills.

"We're gonna ride out in the morning to look around the burn area. How the fire started is a real puzzle. We'll take the jeep," Jim said. "D'you want to ride along?"

Wayne answered quickly, "You bet I would. I'd like to see more of this ranch." He decided it was going to be an excellent wildlife refuge.

"We can go beyond the burn area into the national forest," Jim explained. "But if you want to see some of the ranch now we can ride out and let Koyl know you're here." Koyl would want to know his friends arrived.

"No, I'll wait 'til he comes in on his own. I don't want to interrupt his work," Wayne insisted. "We'll visit on his free time. I'm pleased to see the progress he's making."

"The plant and animal inventory is already underway, right?" Les asked, restlessly jabbing and retrieving his hands from his pockets.

"Right," Jim nodded. "But Koyl will be back soon. He only planned to check out the hawk's nest. I insisted he take Lynne along in case his injury gave him trouble."

"Lynne gets around, doesn't she," Les remarked jealously.

"She's real competent," Jim agreed. "She fit into ranch life right away. She'll be good at making up the schedule to give the dudes a genuine taste of a working ranch."

Jim took a big swallow of coffee. He sensed the young man's anxiety about Lynne. Jim had a feeling that Les would face a great disappointment before he left the ranch if he set special sites on that independent young woman. Jim set his cup down with a flourish. His weathered face broke into deep furrows with his smile.

He leaned forward as if to disclose a strict confidence. "Koyl wants her to stay on and manage the hotel, guests and all."

Les didn't like that. He couldn't be still. He was anxious to see Lynne and he made no apologies. Nothing interested him in the idle conversation that centered around the opening of the dude ranch. He paced back and forth which did nothing to soothe his nerves. Standing in front of the window he scanned the ranch house off to the left. Green bushes partly obscured the building, making it a natural part of the landscape.

He looked at the ranch house windows wondering if one of those was in the room where Lynne slept. Koyl's room was in that same building, too, just down the hall from Lynne's he'd been told. A wave of jealousy swept over him. A momentary picture of them sharing the same bed fled across his possessive mind. Les hadn't even slept with her. He clenched his fists in frustration. He wasn't sure Lynne would want to see him.

Hell, she didn't even know he was here.

"Someone just drove in," Les turned and announced to Jim, waving his hand in the direction of the ranch house.

It was a woman. She removed her hat and placed it on the seat, revealing her black hair. Her slick grooming declared a contrived elegance as she stepped carefully down from the four wheel drive vehicle.

Jim went to the door and called, "Margaret, c'mon over and meet Koyl's guests." He didn't intend to let her get the idea she could drive out to where Koyl worked today. He strode across the lawn and took her hand. Curiosity about the university guests would pique her interest for a while.

Les stood on the bottom rail of the corral when Lynne and Koyl rode in.

Lynne stared at Les in open mouthed astonishment. She jumped down beside him from her prancing horse so quickly she stumbled and fell into Les's arms.

Les kissed her fervently and while she struggled to regain her balance it

looked as if she responded whole heartedly to his kiss.

Koyl's scalding glance noted the reunion before retreating into the depths of his natural squint.

"Oh Les," Lynne said, breathlessly pushing away from his arms, "It's good to see you. I'll rub down my horse and show you around. There's so much I want you to see." Lynne babbled when she was excited. She pulled on Prince's reins.

Koyl grabbed them from her, "Never mind. You go with Les." He nodded a stiff greeting to the young man. "I'll take care of it." His voice was firm and cold. He turned his back.

Lynne was puzzled by Koyl's abruptness. Weren't the Nelson's his friends? She remembered Koyl's bluntness with Ed Worthington. He hadn't applied the same coolness toward the other Worthington, but then she was a beautiful woman and she was standing near the corral, chatting with Jim. Lynne's knitted brows reflected her rejection as she watched Koyl lead the horses into the barn.

Skillfully, Margaret hid the fury that filled her when she learned Lynne was out in the hills with Koyl. That young woman might be a greater barrier than she first thought. But it didn't matter now. She saw how upset Koyl was when he saw Lynne jump into Les' arms. The spontaneous kiss brought a faint smile to the corners of her mouth. She followed Koyl into the barn.

Horses dominated the surroundings. Unpleasant sounds of hooves, nickering, chewing, fell around her, punctuated with smells of horses, straw and leather in the warm afternoon. Margaret grimaced to shut out the repugnant surroundings as she followed Koyl with measured steps.

No one else was around and she needed just a few minutes alone with him. She would sooth Koyl's irritation. She knew how to distract men from their disappointments. Margaret cooed an intimate "Hello, Koyl, dear," and followed him into the dark straw laden stall.

Lynne covered her dejection with her penchant for sharing her new job assignment. She burst into the dining hall looking for Joan. In the kitchen she interrupted Maria, who was pouring cooking oil into the bowl of measured flour.

"Jim took them to their room," Maria explained. "They'll be back in time to eat." Maria vigorously stirred the contents of the bowl.

Louise arranged napkins and dishes on the table. She politely lowered her eyes when Lynne introduced her to Les. She nodded shyly and only murmured hello.

Lynne had cautioned Les not to embarrass the stuttering girl with too much conversation. She didn't want Louise to have unnecessary troubled moments. But she planned to discuss the stuttering problem with Joan before the weekend was over.

Lynne looked at a list Maria handed her of duties. The list was headed HOUSEWARMING PARTY. This was the first she had known such a party was being planned although it was mentioned when she first arrived. She slowly lowered herself down on a chair trying to comprehend all the preparations involved. Les sat down beside her.

Lynne imagined the party from the notes before her. "It's such an elaborate affair," she exclaimed.

Les replied quickly, "Jim says it's the kind of shindig people around here put on at the drop of a hat. He says everyone in the county wants Koyl to get off to a great start with his new project."

Louise nodded affirmatively and ventured an explosive, "uh huh." Her eyes glowed with excitement. She looked expectantly at Lynne.

Lynne's eyes apprehensively scanned the list. It was a formidable list. This was all new to her. Jim hadn't mentioned it. The developments of the past week ran through her mind. So many things were going on. How would she ever be able to do them all? How terrible it would be if she failed Koyl. A pain twisted her stomach. Lynne was blinded by an agitation brought on by a looming failure.

Les reached out to her. He stood with his hands outstretched.

She had forgotten Les was there. She looked past the reality within the room. She had to get off by herself. She ran out and slammed the door behind her.

"Come back here! Lynne? What's the matter with you?"

Les shrugged his shoulders and rushed to follow Lynne. What had come over her? He wanted to comfort her. But before Les reached the ranch house door, he heard Margaret calling. He stopped and looked down toward the barn.

Les hesitated. He glanced from Margaret to the ranch house and stood in a moment of indecision. Lynne didn't want his comfort. His shoulders drooped with that knowledge and he turned away. He went to meet Margaret.

"I didn't mean to blunder in on you and Miss Worthington, boss," Mike apologized. Their eyes were riveted on Margaret's hips as she walked indignantly away. "Jim sent me down to take care of the horses. He's settling your friends into their room right now. But he figured you needed to favor that head of yours."

Mike's glance swept from the bandage Koyl wore and, with a jerk of his jaw, took in the general scope of the ranch. "He thought you probably had more important work to do than rub down horses. But he didn't know you might be tied up with other interests." Mike struggled to keep a straight face. He hurried to unbuckle the cinch, not quite sure how the boss was going to react to the interruption of another rubdown that would ultimately be in progress if Margaret was not interrupted.

"You sure stopped a lay in the straw. I ought to give you a bonus. That

woman almost had me undressed and beginning to like it," Koyl said. With a look of disbelief he shook his head and finished buttoning his shirt.

Koyl slung the saddle bags over his shoulder. He affectionately patted the horse Lynne had ridden and closed his eyes, suppressing a longing that rippled through him. He reluctantly turned to go, nodding sadly, "Jim's right. I do have better things to do."

His feet carried him grudgingly toward the ranch house, his eyes unwilling to witness Lynne in another man's arms and torturing himself by expecting it. Why not? They were both young, much younger than he was.

But Lynne was nowhere to be seen. Up the hill on the path to the mansion, Margaret was walking with Les. She held his arm. They were absorbed in conversation, although Margaret was doing most of the talking and Les was nodding with attention.

Koyl shook his head in wonder. "Looks like she'll latch on to whoever's handy," he thought, strangely relieved that it was not Lynne hanging on the man's arm.

Koyl entered the ranch house and dropped the saddle bags inside the door. He started to take them into his office but instead bent down and pulled out the notes he made at the hawk's nest.

Still poised on his haunches, he pondered over the notes. Down the hall, Lynne's door opened, revealing her tear-stained features. Shocked at her distress, he darted up, drawing her attention and she gasped when she saw him, quickly slamming the door with a solid thud.

Koyl threw aside his notes as he bounded to the door and called, "Lynne, what's wrong? Let me in."

"No." Lynne's muffled voice was sharp and adamant but she did not turn the lock against him.

Koyl didn't stop to consider the uncontrollable force that drew him forward. He swung the door open and confronted her sorrowful gaze. He reached with outstretched arms.

"Go away." Her voice was pained. Concerned with the new list now added to the responsibilities he so recently delineated as part of her job, she was wrapped in a desperate fear of failing him. She cringed before him, more concerned with his opinion of her than with tasks that may go undone.

But, then, he was the boss. If she kept that fact in its proper perspective, failure would only be a matter of degree. She felt foolish for acting so childish. She stepped back and stumbled against the trunk.

Her boot heel raked the aged tin covering and tore it loose. She gasped as she realized what she had done. She groaned. Frustration and helplessness overwhelmed her.

Under Koyl's gaze different emotions shuffled through her. He studied her in silence with such intensity she was afraid he could hear the things she did not say.

Confusion overwhelmed her. She struggled with her desire to surrender to him. Overcome by her amazing physical response to his masculinity, she covered her face with her hands and moaned in despair.

Koyl swept her into his arms. He held her tenderly in the crook of his arm and patted her face with a tissue retrieved from her dresser. She accepted the tissue as a distraction and blew her nose. With her head lowered, trying desperately to think of an escape, she glimpsed the damage from her boot heel.

"Oh, I ruined this lovely trunk." She went down on her knees to examine the torn tin. She looked apologetically from the embossed trunk to Koyl and held her breath to receive his outrage. He was so breathtakingly silent she expected the worst. She was astonished that he did not look at the damage.

A strange expression illuminated Koyl's face when he leaned to peer more closely at the trunk. He looked not at the trunk at all, but at elusive memories lying decades beyond. A nostalgic eloquence flooded his eyes. He smiled with the same childlike wonder he once used to describe his earliest boyhood.

"That's my mother's," he whispered softly. "I'd forgotten."

Lynne knew that she, also, was forgotten. The expression she read in his features was awesome.

"It wasn't here when I came for the funeral," he said in a puzzled tone, his brow wrinkling as his eyes narrowed in retrospect. "I would have remembered."

Koyl dropped to his knees and ran his fingers over the embossed designs with a deliberate touch of tender, indicating appreciation of deep imbedded memories instead of the heavily embossed design.

He tried to lift the cover and fumbled with the latch, imprisoned in a miniature padlock. He held the little lock solemnly between his fingers, examining it thoughtfully. He closed his eyes tightly to shut out the present and see into the past.

Then his eyes opened and instantly pierced the padlock with probing intensity before he turned to look up at the shelves above the window. With a sudden urgency, he searched, knowingly, determinedly. He took down a yellowed shoebox, uncovered it and shuffled through the contents.

Excitement deepened the brilliant blue of his eyes. Pushing old dice and discarded lego pieces aside, he brought out a small bundle of feathers. He turned in triumph and pulled the bundle apart revealing a tiny key.

"It's here! It's still here! Right where I kept it all the time." He held it up for Lynne to see.

Her widened eyes admitted how incredible that was but she couldn't imagine why.

"How did you remember that?" Lynne asked.

"Funny. I just remembered my mother giving it to me," he said, his eyes getting a far off look. "She told me I could keep my treasures safe. She helped me find a safe place. She was the only one who knew how I kept it from Peter."

He didn't like touching the things I saved."

Koyl gazed fondly at the key in the palm of his hand. In the solemn silence of the room, he was lost in memories. Reverently he went to his knees. His trembling fingers couldn't immediately insert the key into the padlock. As he fumbled, the bell clanged from the bunkhouse.

"Oh, oh. Maria's got the biscuits on. We'd better not keep her waiting."

"It's just the way I planned it," Margaret remarked haughtily as Les stood in awe in the entrance to the mansion. "It isn't a common tourist attraction," she continued. She was pleased to see that Les was properly impressed but she didn't expect his reaction.

"Pretty fancy all right. It sure looks like a hotel. Koyl doesn't care much about the building but it ought to bring him a pretty income," Les said. "Tell me, just what happened to Peter Chapman anyway."

Margaret reacted as if she was slapped. She turned away to collect her thoughts. When she faced him her heavily made up face was a cold mask.

"No one knows exactly. He was on a routine check of the stock." Margaret described the discovery of his mangled body and death by exposure. Her sharp edged description was cold and distant.

Les shuddered and turned from her, trying to put the picture out of his mind. His withdrawal from Margaret was complete and his face brightened when Jim appeared on the balcony.

"C'mon up, Les, you'll have this room," Jim said, opening the door to the room next to the lavishly decorated suite he had been instructed to give to Wayne and Joan.

Margaret glanced speculatively from Jim to Les. She intended to follow Les but saw no real ally in him and thought better of it. Was there no way to recapture what she once had? Her expensive boots clicked a hollow retreat on the terrazzo flooring. She put up a haughty chin and walked out the door. She grimaced at the sharp clanging bell announcing a common meal in the dining room, a rustic uncouth ritual she always managed to avoid.

Koyl opened the gate and Jim slowly drove the jeep on the bumpy overgrown trail. He turned to Les and Wayne as they jumped out of the back seat. Koyl's pride shown in his eyes as he swept his arm toward the south.

"That's the ranch--eight sections of rangeland for a fledgling sanctuary." His twinkling gaze met Wayne's. He knew the pun was apropos to his work. The fledgling hawks would leave the nest in a few short weeks.

He continued to boast, "Over there is where Lynne saved my life."

Les narrowed his eyes and his mouth went tight at the suggestion of pleasure that Lynne's name brought to Koyl's eyes.

Jim intervened, "I just don't believe that brush fire started spontaneously." He moved to the edge of the trail and looked down the

fenceline. He walked ahead not seeing any sign of tracks or broken brush.

Cal approached across a clearing on the Willison side of the fence. He had met Jim in town and knew Koyl by sight but the others were strangers. He introduced himself as the ranch owner that he claimed to be. He further explained, "I've been looking over the site of the fire, Koyl," after the small talk of greetings were completed, "and I'm sure it was started by a smoker."

"That fits in with Lynne's experience at the line cabin," Koyl nodded, the grim line of his mouth tucked into his beard.

At the curiously raised eyebrows, Koyl told of Lynne's narrow escape a few days ago.

Jim frowned, with belligerence in his tone, "Who could it be?"

"More to the point, Jim, where is he now?" Koyl asked. Les and Wayne moved closer to Jim, glancing anxiously around at the fire-scarred trees and brush. Crows called raucously from the tree tops, prickling everyone's backbones and honing their alertness.

"I haven't seen any other signs except the occasional match and cigarette butt," Cal offered, "you might keep an eye out, though. I don't need any more damage on my property." He turned his back and continued searching along the ground for elusive clues.

Jim's attention centered on the loose dirt between the truck tracks. "Look here at these footprints. That looks like it might be a cougar. I didn't think there were any around here."

The sudden excitement that revelation caused brought Cal back. Wayne studied the surrounding terrain. "This would be prime habitat if a pair needed the territory," he said thoughtfully.

Koyl was more interested in the tracks.

"I'd like to have a closer look at the trees before we head back--if that's ok." Wayne was interested in the stand of trees at this elevation. He walked off to examine the forest.

The hundred foot tall lodgepole pines stood majestically against the sky, solidly rooted in the weathered basalt, conspiring with the elements to develop mineral rich soils from the decaying rocks in the high country.

Temperature differences between the relentless sunshine and the cold nights on the high steppe shrub country were slowly taking their toll. The basalt shattered imperceptibly during temperature changes and sprouting seeds forced greater fissures while taking nourishment from settling dust and moisture. Slowly, tenaciously, the powerful plant roots feasted, grew, and endured, collaborating with active fungi and bacteria in a complex soil-making process.

Wayne picked up a handful of the meager compost, containing the moisture and nutrients needed for the cycle of life in this cool dry atmosphere. He looked toward the Chapman ranch and said almost to himself, "This delicate topsoil shouldn't be disturbed by the sharp hooves of heavy cattle."

Koyl looked at Wayne and nodded in agreement, "It won't be for long." Koyl turned to Jim with a satisfied grin.

Jim knew what was expected of him. "I'm going to cull the herd and keep a few for show so our guests can witness a roundup and enjoy a barbecue."

"We'll manage the grazing range with a lot more care so the natural shrubs and understory plants will provide safe habitat for your favorite critters--and mine," Koyl added.

Koyl's mouth became a thin line pursed resolutely a second before he spoke again, "Cougars could come around if there's food. I'd rather wait and see if any come to stay here. Just to give them a chance we'll keep this end of the ranch off limits to the dudes."

His voice trailed off and Wayne watched his gaze focus on thoughts of a pleasant future--not only for Koyl but animals and birds as well. All were fascinated at the thought of cougar.

Koyl stepped over a fallen rotten log and paused one foot in midair.

"Oh, my god!" Koyl exclaimed, horrified. "Come over here! Look at this."

Bitter bile rose up to the base of Koyl's throat and he managed to keep from gagging as he pushed the hat aside, morbidly curious about the identity of the corpse he almost stumbled upon.

"What's up?" Jim asked as he hurried toward Koyl recognizing the urgency in the call. He saw the body, twisted in its own dry blood. His eyes studied the features of the corpse.

"He hasn't been dead very long." Jim screwed up his eyebrows trying to remember if he had seen the man before.

The jeep jumped and bucked as Jim guided it slowly around the brush and ravines and through the patches of cheatgrass carefully avoiding rocks that could put his efficient 4 x 4 vehicle out of business.

Closer to the ranch house, he moved into a well developed trail and the ride was easier. Faster, too.

They cut across the ranch without the aid of any trail in the urgency of reaching a telephone. Koyl had two mysteries to sort out. He wondered if by chance, or by design, the dead body and the fire might be connected. Jim doubted the presence of a cougar in the area or it would have mutilated the body, unless the animal just hadn't made its rounds since the murder was committed. But he would let the sheriff sort it all out.

Louise grabbed Lynne's hand. She pointed to the arriving vans. Lynne watched musicians lifting guitar and fiddle cases as they shouted with enthusiasm to Maria's family. Pretty girls in colorfully ruffled skirts laughed and teased the various figures dressed in tight jeans and shirts that matched the brilliant colors of the skirts. Those were members of the local square dance

club.

The party was about to begin. The men hadn't come back yet from their tour of the ranch. Lynne willed herself into a party mood. She went slowly to her room to get ready for the party. But her heart wasn't in it. She pulled off her shirt and prepared to bathe. She noticed the trunk and felt a twinge of guilt as her eyes fastened on the gash her heel made in the trunk's embossed covering.

"Maybe I can find someone who can repair it," she wondered to herself as she filled the tub with hot water and dumped in a package of lilac bubble bath. She watched the bubbles tumble into piles exuberantly building higher and higher. She inhaled the lovely fragrance.

"Stop acting like a spoiled child," Lynne chided herself, "Wash off that gloomy attitude. You love a party and you know it." Preparations for the party turned out to be easier than she could have dreamed. These country people spontaneously whipped up a party and she only had to see to the physical amenities around the dining room. The biggest difficulty she encountered was getting the details to fall into place at the right time. That had miraculously happened.

She splashed into the water and covered her body with the soft bubbly fragrance. She smiled at herself as the luxurious bath wiped away her ambivalence. "I'm ready for a good time," she confidently announced when she stepped from the tub and wound herself in a thick towel.

She just finished buttoning her western style shirt when she heard the jeep drive up. She slipped into her dressy white jeans. Her riding boots got a quick dusting before she slipped them on her stockinged feet. Those boots would be tough to dance in but the sneakers she wore when she worked up at the big house did not fit the occasion.

Her hair still needed to be brushed. By the time she felt she was ready for the party, she heard the front door and what sounded like everyone talking. Why weren't they going to the party?

When she stepped out of her room, Les came to her full of enthusiasm. He burst out with the story of the corpse. The whole thing excited him so he could do nothing but babble.

"What's going to happen now?" she asked, when he finally wound down. "That's going to spoil the whole party and I just got myself all psyched up for a good time."

"Koyl informed the authorities. It's really out of his hands." Les answered. Joan came in and Les turned to ask about new developments.

"Wayne and Koyl are still outside talking to the neighbors. I'll wait for Wayne with you if that's O.K."

Lynne turned to Joan with the far off look in her eyes and said, "I hope this won't hurt our chances of getting guests in the hotel." Lynne wrung her hands as if her own life depended on the outcome.

"I'm not going to let that spoil the party for me." Les insisted as he opened the door for her.

"I'll wait here with Joan until Wayne comes." She looked back at Les and smiled apologetically.

Les was sure that he could enjoy a party. In fact, he was sure that the party was just what he needed. With the authorities in charge there were no worries. He was ready to get caught up in the festive affair.

"I'll go see what's going on. I'll be back." He squeezed her hand and pulled her to him. She let his kiss fall on her cheek.

"I told you we were late. The dancing has already started," Margaret said with reproach as she tugged at Ed's arm when they drove into the Chapman yard. "Let's hurry."

Margaret was anxious to get to the dance and would have driven over by herself if Ed hadn't shared her anticipation of a wonderful evening. She wasn't too certain of his motives. Working her way into Koyl's life would have been easier for her if she had known of Ed's interest in Lynne. She accepted her brother's company, certain he could be replaced with a more acceptable escort before the evening ended.

The early evening air refreshed her and Margaret surveyed the familiar surroundings with a jealous pride. This property came so close to belonging to her. Here beside the dining hall, the sharp odor of horses and manure stung her nostrils. She had put the mansion far back from these base ranch smells. She was annoyed that the dance wasn't being held in the mansion.

Ed responded eagerly to the music coming from the dining hall and followed Margaret for a few steps. In his natural scanning of the surroundings he noticed a cluster of ranch hands around the jeep over by the ranch house. He paused and changed direction.

"I'm going to go see what's going on over there first, Margaret. You go on. I'll be right along," Ed could tell there was something unusual being discussed. After the quiet daily routine he lived through every week he would like some excitement.

"What happened to him anyway?" Ed listened to the chatter and realized that no one had the answer. Everyone talked at once as they walked toward the dining hall where the dance was in full swing.

The sound of the raucous music invaded the silence of the evening that Koyl preferred, but the yapping of the coyotes came through the distance and an owl called from beyond the barns. Jim drove away toward town and the other men headed toward the dining hall.

Koyl had to put in his appearance at the party. The people here were his neighbors and he'd better get acquainted.

Ed glanced from the men to Koyl and spoke quietly, "Mr. Chapman, I'd like to ask you a personal question, man to man."

Koyl hid a wry smile behind his hand as he stroked his beard in amusement. His young neighbor sounded very serious. Man to man. Rumors were spreading about the Chapman dude ranch and he had heard some personal ones as well. He turned to look at the mansion on the hill. He wondered how personal Ed was going to get.

"Go ahead."

"I'd like to know if there's anything between you and Miss Redding...you know...I mean, is she spoken for?"

"You'll have to ask her. She's my employee. I expect her to do her job," Koyl answered in crisp hard tones. A pained look flashed through his eyes as he turned and looked toward the corral, recalling Lynne's passionate leap into Les Nelson's arms.

"Maybe you'd better talk to Les Nelson. He has a more personal relationship with Miss Redding than I do." Koyl's clipped answer was all he could handle. He rudely walked off toward the ranch house. He heard Wayne's voice when he opened the heavy oak door.

"Now," Wayne announced to Joan, "I want to get cleaned up for the party." He pulled her up beside him. "Shall we go to the honeymoon suite and see if the plumbing actually works in the enchanted castle?"

"Oh, it really does, I promise you," Lynne exclaimed, jumping up to protest the suggestion that it would not. One look at the love that passed between the newlyweds told Lynne that she was being teased and she smiled broadly.

"You shouldn't tease her like that, Wayne. Besides, we may never get past the bedroom, and we'll never know." Joan winked.

Giving Koyl their assurances of returning to the party, they pulled the door shut behind them, leaving Lynne to smile at herself. But the smile melted into an uneasy tremble when Koyl came into her sight. Uneasiness hung between them like an heavy curtain.

Koyl hesitated, as unsure of what to do as she was. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and fiddled with the contents. He felt the tiny key and his own curiosity about the trunk was recalled, "I'd like to open the trunk." He brought out the key. "Shall I move it out of your room?"

Lynne opened the door of her room, relieved at the interruption.

"Oh, you don't have to move the trunk. Go on and open it," she said. "I'm going to help Maria."

"No, don't go." He took her hand and led her to the trunk. He went to his knees and pulled her down beside him. "You better help me look. It might be full of old dragons, or maybe just moth-eaten blankets." The lines around his eyes folded until his eyes were narrow twinkling slits and his white even teeth sparkled as a capricious grin warmed Lynne to her toenails.

On her knees Lynne relaxed against her heels and watched Koyl's intense blue eyes glow as he struggled with the old lock, a struggle that

wrinkled his brow.

His sensitive fingers pushed at the tiny key and turned it in the tarnished lock. The tip of his tongue worked between his lips when the first twist of the key didn't click. He turned it several times and finally got results. He looked at Lynne triumphantly as he pulled the lock apart and pulled it from the latch.

The lid did not open easily. Koyl stopped after trying only once and sat back to reach for Lynne's hand. He looked into her eyes with an expression she couldn't define. It was akin to fear mixed with anticipation and deep excitement.

"I'm almost afraid to look at old stuff," he admitted as he bared his soul through his widened eyes that held a winsome expression, "some things might be better left forgotten." He stopped to consider that as he delved deeply into Lynne's eyes.

"I don't want to go back through time by myself," he said, knowing that he must face the past with the same resolve he faced the present, knowing that Lynne could not experience that which she had never seen. Koyl closed his eyes and squeezed her hand.

The heat of love consumed her. Lynne loved him with all her heart. She wanted to console him, to encourage him, to shield him from the pain she knew he felt at the rejection of his father and brother. She wanted to kiss him and hold him but he didn't need her pity.

He needed her strength. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad, too," she murmured and she let her strength flow through her fingers to his heart beyond.

Koyl let out a deep breath and turned his attention back to the trunk. He put his hands on the lid and lifted it slowly and carefully, not wanting to damage the hinges.

Excitement rose in Lynne and she held her breath in expectation. Maybe it did hold dire secrets. She was torn between relieving her curiosity and leaving Koyl alone with his discovery.

A strong scent of lilacs seeped out as Koyl slowly laid the lid back against the foot of the bed. Inside lay a riot of colorful cloth pieces meticulously sewn into a quilt of the log cabin design.

In the center was an envelope on which the name--Koyl Oliver Chapman--was inked in beautiful handwritten script.