

Llama Lady  
' by VeraLee Wiggins

**one**

The savage attack on the front door caused Teddy Marland to do more than drop a stitch the entire sweater flew from her grasp. She checked the clock; it was only half past six in the morning. Gram had just put breakfast on the table and she had just picked up her knitting after having finished feeding and watering the livestock.

*Lord, grant me patience with the fool who s on the other side of this opening* , she prayed, heading for the door that seemed about to crumble under yet another brutal attack. Jerking open the door she discovered a huge blond man with his right arm raised and ready to administer still another round of battery. His face looked like one of the thunderstorms common to Bend, Oregon one of the bad ones.

Teddy stood tall in the doorway. What do you think you re doing? she asked.

The stranger, with his large hand still suspended in air, looked at Teddy, and looked some more. His craggy face began to relax, then his mouth tightened again. Get the owner of this zoo!

Teddy started to yell for Gram, but the tiny woman had already scurried in from the kitchen and was now wiping her hands on the sides of her pants. Rushing to Teddy s side, Gram snaked her skinny arm around Teddy s slim waist, which was about even with the old woman s shoulder. All right, buster, she announced in a gravelly voice that was bigger than she, we ve had it up to here with your tantrum. If you want something, ask like a gentleman. Otherwise get on down the road.

The man s mouth slackened; his eyes darted from Teddy down to Gram and back up to Teddy again. Then the corners of his mouth began jerking, and a low belly laugh rumbled from somewhere deep within.

Well, can we help you, or did you just have the urge to de stroy our house? Gram s guttural voice demanded.

Did anyone ever tell you two that you make a crazy looking pair? he finally asked.

Is that a face? Gram replied, peering up at the man from her four-foot, eleven-inch frame. Well, you have one up on us. It doesn t take tow of you to look crazy.

The man stood silent, his shoulders till shaking.

Teddy looked at Gram who was her mother, father, and entire family, rolled into one tiny dynamo. Why would they look crazy together? True, the top of Gram s yellow-gray head was several inches short of reading Teddy s shoulder, and Gram looked so thin she might not cast a shadow. But she still appeared beautiful to Teddy, even in her size ten, boys bib overalls and red-plaid flannel shirt. Then Teddy looked down at her own

worn jeans and faded tee shirt and realized she did not look too gorgeous either. But crazy?

The tall man returned to life, possibly remembering why he came. His lips tightened again; red streaks brightened his already sunburned skin and his eyes blazed. I asked for the owner of this spread, he told Gram, tersely.

Gram straightened her shoulders and stood tall. She tightened her grip on Teddy's waist. You're looking at 'em. Her voice sounded like a gravel crusher.

He pulled out a scrap of paper, checked it, wadded it in his hand and shoved it back into his jeans pocket. The mailbox says Theodore Marland.

Gram jabbed a bony thumb toward Teddy. That's Theodore Marland. You got a problem with that?

The man considered a moment. No, he said firmly, I don't have a problem with, uh, her. But I want to talk to a man.

Well, you won't find one of those around this place. Gram leaned back, looking up into his face. Then she smiled, and her faded blue eyes crinkled. Come on, sonny, you got a problem, tell me. Maybe I can fix it.

After a moment of indecision, he spoke. How many times a week are you supposed to get water?

Gram jerked her old head up at him. Who, may I ask, are you?

I'm Brandon Sinclair. I bought the ranch just west of here, and I was told that this is my water day.

Gram turned her back and headed for the kitchen. I don't have time to spoon-feed every greenhorn who comes along, she grated over her shoulder. If you'll help the fool figure out his water problems, Teddy, I'll hold breakfast for fifteen minutes.

Teddy sighed and stepped onto the rickety porch. Come on out and I'll show you how it works. She closed the door and stepped gingerly down the rotting steps. I don't understand how you could mess up your water. You're the last one on the line.

I may be greenhorn, he bellowed, and I may also be a fool, but even I can see that you're taking my water!

Teddy did not respond as he followed her across her overgrown yard through the gate and into the pasture. Llamas appeared from several directions and followed the two across the pasture, their heads resting on Teddy's or Mr. Sinclair's shoulders. Other llamas, in their eagerness to be with her, bumped into Teddy.

And why are you raising these, uh, goats? he shouted.

I m not deaf, she said quietly, striding beside him. And I m sure you know they re llamas. We raise them because we make several times the money with them that we did raising cattle. And we have a lot more fun doing it.

In a few minutes they reached a bubbling stream about three feet wide and two feet deep. As they continued to walk across the pasture, Teddy explained how the Deschutes County ranchers shared the water. The water comes from the Deschutes River and is divided into many lines so each rancher gets enough to survive but not a lot more than that. A line is simply a wide ditch with lots of water flowing through it. There is one ranch before mine on this particular line, and you are the last. We each get water twice a week. None comes through on Sunday. The first ranch gets water on Monday and Thursday, I get it Tuesday and Friday, and you get it Wednesday and Saturday.

I know all that. Is this Wednesday? he asked, obviously struggling for civility.

This is Wednesday and you re getting the water. She glanced at the rushing water again. You can see there s plenty in the ditch.

They approached the gates and Teddy could not believe her eyes. Water gushed through her open gate, into her nearly filled pond! She pushed the lever that closed her gate and sent the water coursing through his ditch into his nearly dry pond.

Her bright blue eyes looked into his, laughing at him. I don t know how you bumped the gate open, but I closed it this morning. I always do it at exactly six o clock, the shut-off time.

How could I bumble? he shouted. I don t even have a gate; I get water when no one else wants it.

Even though Brandon Sinclair stood there accusing her of stealing his water, Teddy s kind heart went out to the frenzied man. No one s stealing your water, Mr. Sinclair, she said softly. Ranchers work together. We not only share water, but anything else the other person needs. You go on back to your own place now, and things will be all right.

As Teddy watched her new neighbor trot to the old log fence and jump over, she wished she could have met him under more favorable circumstances. She had never seen such an attractive man. His shoulders were wide and his legs went on forever. And his sun-streaked blond hair and bright brown eyes could really do something to a girl. Wait a minute! What was she thinking about, anyway? She was not shopping for a man.

When Teddy crossed her unstable porch floor again, she wondered for the hundredth time how soon they would be able to repair the old house. They had mortgaged the ranch to buy the llamas and all repairs had been put on hold until the loan could be paid off. She opened the door, removed her shoes, ran through the completely empty living room to the bathroom to wash up, then slipped into her chair at the kitchen table.

Gram asked the blessing then poured coffee into fat brown mugs. Well, did you get him calmed down?

Teddy shook her head. I don't know, he's pretty upset. She took a sip of the delicious liquid. I tried to explain about the water. But our gate *was* open. I told him he must have done it. I remember closing it after I finished the chores.

Gram nodded. Wonder what he's doing on a ranch. Looks as if he wouldn't know which end of a cow to feed.

Teddy and Gram finished breakfast and stacked the dishes in the sink. Then they hurried across the pasture to set up the irrigation system in the alfalfa. They would use up what water they had left from yesterday then start all over again on Friday. Hey fifty-acre alfalfa field provided enough hay to keep their llamas through the winter.

They barely had four of their eight monstrous water gun sprinklers set up when a horse and rider pounded up to them. He jumped from the saddle, marched up to Teddy, and leaned over her, his face contorted. Do you really want the water or are you just trying to make me crazy? Brandon Sinclair yelled.

Are you sure the gate's open again? If it is, it must be faulty, Teddy said trying to keep *her* voice calm.

Sinclair put his hands around Teddy's waist, hoisted her onto his horse, then hopped up into the saddle. We'll see what's faulty, he informed her.

When they reached the water gate, Brandon Sinclair rolled off his horse and jerked Teddy down beside him. The curious llamas surrounded them as they walked toward the wide open irrigation gate.

Almost before he could point at the unobstructed water gushing toward her pond, Teddy pushed the lever and the gate instantly swung shut. It seems to work just fine, she said, determined to keep calm.

You bet it works! And if this happens again, I'm reporting you to the water master!

Teddy felt her patience growing taut. Mr. Sinclair, she said, a little louder than necessary, no one around here steals water or anything else for that matter. I'd be much more likely to share my water with you than to steal yours.

Glad to hear it. Just the same, you'd better remember I'm watching my water as if it were diamonds rolling through that gate. He jumped on his horse.

At that moment, a beautiful cream and dark brown llama named Iris walked up, took the lever in her mouth and pulled back. The gate opened and the water once again rushed into the Marland line.

Iris! What did you do? Teddy pushed the lever, even as she yelled at the llama. Did you see that? she said, looking up, wide-eyed, at the man astride the horse.

Brandon Sinclair dismounted. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it. How long have you had her trained to do that?

Don't be ridiculous. I suppose she did it because she sees me doing it all the time.

The tall man remained silent a moment, then laughed out loud and climbed back onto his horse. Sorry I accused you of stealing my water, he called, starting back toward his own ranch. A moment later he stopped short. The problem is located, but not corrected, he yelled across the distance.

I'll think of something, she mumbled as she watched him gallop back to his own ranch. She walked away slowly with her arm around the animal's neck. Come on, Iris, you have to stay in the small corral until we get this figured out.

The next afternoon Teddy hauled fence posts and wire out to the irrigation line to build a fence and gate to keep Iris away from the water gate. Working in the warm June sunshine, she dug four post holes, buried the posts, and started unrolling the wire fencing.

Think that'll do it?

Teddy turned at the sound of the warm deep voice to find Brandon Sinclair standing, feet apart, watching her work. I hope so, she replied. Iris is so mad at me for penning her up that she won't even look at me.

Sinclair took the wire from her hands. Here, let me help. I'm probably a little stronger than you. They worked together until the fence protected the water gate from the llamas.

I understand what a cattle ranch is all about, Brandon said, but how do these things make you money? You don't eat them, do you?

Teddy reached her arm around a long woolly neck. Never. Don't talk like that in front of my girls. How do llamas make money? Well, the wool is worth two dollars an ounce, as compared to one dollar a pound for sheep wool. Llama wool is much stronger, warmer, and comes in many beautiful natural colors. A llama produces around five pounds of wool a year. Our herd numbers around 500 right now. Are you doing your arithmetic?

Brandon's eyes grew round. If you're telling me you take in \$80,000 a year on llama wool, then I'm getting rid of my cattle tonight.

Teddy laughed. I'm telling you we could. And some people do. But we don't shear our llamas. We sell the young. We get \$10,000 to \$15,000, and sometimes more, for females, and \$1,000 or more for males. People buy them before they're born and take them when they're weaned, at about six months. We sell about 200 young each year, and so far we've been having slightly more females than males. Now, Mr. Sinclair, it's my turn to ask some questions.

Brand. My friends call me Brand. He looked down at her, a soft friendly look replacing the anger. The sun sent gold flecks skittering around in his eyes.

All right, Brand. How long have you been ranching beside us? Teddy looked west to the shining white fences, the monstrous white barns, and metal loafing sheds. The three-story, white colonial house stood on a small knoll, overlooking the ultra-modern ranch. She knew it had been empty for the last six months since the old rancher had died.

Arrived on the scene early this week. I m still getting it set up.

Where are you from? The llamas jostled the two as they walked along, often distracting them from their discussion.

Brand shoved a large black llama away. I m from Alvadore, near Eugene. Western Oregon, you know? My folks had a large ranch there but they retired and moved into Eugene. I d helped them from the time I was a child so ranching is in my blood. He held his arm out and up and shoved the llamas away again.

Why Bend? Why did you buy in our area?

He smiled. I ve always liked Bend. It s such a nice clean little town. He shoved two woolly heads away, then grinned, almost embarrassed. And I suppose the fact that you can buy a lot more ranch here, for the same money, may have influenced me some.

One extra large red and white llama insisted on hanging its head over Brand s shoulder, so Brand gave it a mighty shove. The llama stepped back a few feet from Brand, raised its head as high as it could, laid back its ears, and began chewing vigorously. No, Casanova, no! Teddy yelled, but she hardly had the words out of her mouth when the llama let loose a great green missile which found its mark, splattering all over Brand s face.