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Well, what do you think? he repeated.

It sounds like fun, Teddy said, but why would you want me to go to your folks's place?

He seemed so excited he could barely sit still. I want to show you off to them. And I want you to meet them, too.

Gram had been sitting quietly. Go on, kitten, she finally said, it'll be good for you.

Gram! Teddy could not leave her alone to care for the llamas. I'd like to, really I would, she began. I almost said yes, but I forgot you, Gram. I can't go off and leave you with all the work.

Pish posh. We have it all caught up. I'll just feed and water. That'll leave me most of the day to get into trouble.

I can send Rolf over to help, Brand suggested. He isn't always busy, either.

You send Rolf over with Pharaoh, if you're so intent on helping, the little woman said, laughing.

I'll do that. With instructions to ride with you. Now, Teddy Bear, there's nothing to stop us.

But Gram was not finished. Don't you dare tell him to ride with me, sonny. My death wish isn't to be shot by a jealous wife.

But Brand had Teddy in his arms and they did not hear Gram's old joke.

When the sun awakened Saturday morning, it found Brand and Teddy crossing the Cascade Mountains, excited to be together. Teddy had a doubt or two about the integrity of her spy trip, but she told herself she would just enjoy herself, meeting his family and getting to know Brand better. After all, he had asked her to marry him. She had not given him an answer but the offer was still good as far as she knew.

They talked nonstop as they drove through the beautiful forests and paused at several waterfalls on the Clear Lake Highway. Then they drove out of the trees, through Springfield, and into Eugene. My folks live about a mile out on River Road, Brand explained as he expertly threaded through the dense traffic of the large city.

Then minutes later they drove up to a neat, white, two-story house surrounded by tall firs and pines. The front door opened and Brand's parents ran down the steps to engulf him in their arms. As they all talked at once, asking how each had been, Teddy could not help but notice the close relationship, and how happy Brand and his parents were to be together again.

Then Brand remembered Teddy and hauled her to his side. I almost forgot to tell you I brought someone along. Brand introduced them, and assured them he had a nice little Teddy Bear.

Brand's mother, Donna, had lunch ready and they gathered around the little table on the north porch. Tell us about Teddy, and how you met her, Brand's father, Frank, suggested.

Brand winked at Teddy. I met her when she tried to steal my water. Water's semiprecious over there.

He tried to smash the door out of our house, he was so mad, Teddy added, laughing.

Then she tried to lay the blame on an innocent animal, Brand continued, his eyes taking on a dreamy look as he remembered.

Teddy pounded him on the shoulder. You saw her do it.

All right, you two, Frank said, laughing, there won't be any dessert until you get this all straightened out.

Brand stopped short. Dessert? Well, I guess Iris was the water thief, but we fixed her wagon. But then those crazy llamas broke down the fence and invaded my ranch.

Llamas? Brand's parents yelled together.

Brand laughed. Yes, llamas. She raises llamas next door to my cattle ranch. He shrugged. There goes the neighborhood, but what can a guy do? His eyes twinkled at Teddy. But she's making so much money she chooses not to shear their wool, whereby she could make another \$80,000 a year.

Gram's with you, Brand. She thinks we should shear them but I just can't do it, Teddy said.

The little group visited through the rest of lunch, Frank and Donna learning something about the two ranches and also about Teddy and her grandmother.

Well, what would you like to do while you're here? Frank asked when they had finished eating.

See the ocean? Teddy piped up before Brand had a chance.

A happy smile spread over Brand's tanned face. I'll bet you haven't been to the coast too many times.

Teddy willed her face to stay nice and white. Well, I'm embarrassed to tell you, but I've never seen the ocean. Gram and I just stay home and work.

Brand nodded his head. Hmmm. So that's why you came, is it? he asked in mock seriousness.

Frank laughed loudly. Can't think of a better reason if the girl hasn't seen the Pacific yet. Let's do that in the morning. But what about today?

Brand turned to Teddy and nodded, then raised his hands several times in front of him, as though pulling information from her. Come on, out with it. Surely you have our itinerary all planned.

Okay. She turned to face Donna. I want to learn all about Brand. All the good things he's ever done, and also the bad. I want to leave here knowing the total man.

Unfair! Brand protested. I've never done anything good, and I don't want you knowing the bad, so let's not get into that. I'll just have to keep you so busy you forget all about that idea. I was thinking we might go out for dinner tonight. Maybe The North Bank?

Great, and I'll be you want to take Teddy out to the ranch this afternoon, Frank said. We've been helping the new owners a lot, so we're sure of being welcome.

Donna showed Teddy to her room at the head of the stairs. You have your own matching bath through this door, Donna said, opening a narrow door into a sunshiny, yellow bathroom. Then she pulled back the gold-specked white drapes in the bedroom, revealing a sliding glass door opening onto a private balcony facing the backyard.

What a gorgeous home, Teddy said.

Thank you. We had it redone before we moved in. She left Teddy alone to put her things away. Teddy had not brought an evening dress, but she had a nice short one. A light green chiffon, which she hung up so the wrinkles could hang out while they ran to the ranch.

The ranch looked a lot like Brand's. Hereford cattle dotted the green pastures as far as the eye could see, and the buildings showed excellent maintenance. Teddy looked into Brand's shining eyes. It's as nice as your ranch, she said softly.

He swallowed and reached for her hand. At least. She knew at that moment how much he had loved this beautiful place, and how many memories it had given him. And instinctively she knew that the Central Oregon ranch was an attempt at a replay. How she would love to help him make a million memories of their own.

After they left the ranch in Alvadore they drove past Fern Ridge Lake where Brand swam and canoed as a boy. Then they hurried home to prepare for the evening.

Later, Brand's eyes lit up with joy when Teddy came down the stairs in her mint chiffon dress. She had pulled her dark hair all to one side, letting it fall in a cascade of curls.

Don't you think we make a fantastic pair? Brand asked his mother as they drove downtown to the restaurant.

You look beautiful together, yes, but are you a pair? Donna answered, her eyebrows raised questioningly.

Brand looked at Teddy. She returned his gaze, saying nothing and feeling everything. Finally, he looked back at his mother, grinned foolishly and shrugged. I don't know, Mom, I'm working on it.

Back home, after a wonderfully impressive dinner, everyone changed and Donna served coffee. Well, Teddy said, this must be the time for my education. Tell me all about Brand.

Donna sipped her coffee, slipping off into some other time and place. After a moment she returned. Brand was the best kid anyone ever had. He may have told you that we were almost middle-aged when we married, so he was an only child. He's been a wonderful son. Sometimes during the years, we'd forget who was the child and who were the parents. We've all taken care of each other.

You mean he never got into trouble? Teddy asked, trying to bring anything she should know into the open.

No, but he should have, a couple of times, Frank volunteered. Remember the time you lambasted that guy with potatoes, Brand?

Brand slapped his hand against his forehead. He never forgets. He's like an elephant. I swear he is. I'd forgotten all about it. Dad had sent me to the dump to get rid of several sacks of rotting potatoes. It was dark and I started heaving them down into the dump. Then I saw this flashlight down there, where someone was evidently gleaming strictly against the rules. I just happened to start throwing in that direction, and you never saw a flashlight come out of a hole so fast.

Everyone laughed at the memory. Tell me more. Teddy said when everyone quieted down.

How about the times he skipped the Boy Scouts to go see a girl? Frank asked, and roared with laughter.

Now! This sounded interesting. She might as well learn about the girls in his life.

That was nothing, Brand said, laughing. I was only fifteen at the time and after about the third time, the leader discovered me missing. He went next door to the girl's house after me and raised such a stink the girl never spoke to me again.

And the blind date that you couldn't handle at first sight? Remember, what you told her? Frank threw back his gray head and laughed heartily again.

Dad! How many more of these incidents do you have ready to zap at me?

Go on, son, tell Teddy how you got out of that date, Donna said. She laughed too, remembering days gone by. Obviously very precious days. Teddy could see they both felt intense pride in their only child.

Well I m not going to do it. You don t have to testify against yourself even in a court of law. Brand winked at Teddy, got up and took her arm. We re going to check on the moon. We ll talk to you when you ve found a new subject. He took Teddy to the sliding glass door and they stepped out into a silver fairyland.

Oh Brand, it s nice out here, Teddy said, taking in the small water falls and stream that occupied center stage in a perfectly groomed backyard.

Yeah, and even the moon is trying. It s getting toward full. Come over here and sit with me.

They sat on a stone and wrought iron bench beside the waterfalls. The sound of the falls and bubbling creek, together with the fragrance of roses, petunias, and alyssum, and the moon spilling silver beams over everything in sight, made an even more romantic ambiance than the restaurant had. When Brand pulled Teddy to him, she lay her head on his shoulder, drinking in the beauty and peacefulness of the night. His spicy aftershave blended with the other smells, a few crickets added their music to the evening, and Teddy decided she could stay just like this forever.

I love you, Teddy, he whispered. You look and smell like my own special heaven. He put his hand under her chin and turned it up. The moment his lips touched hers, Teddy heard her own heavenly music and felt a bright pink cloud settling down over them, protecting them from any harshness of reality.

She knew she loved him. And she also knew he could never have done anything immoral, unethical, or illegal, let alone rob a bank. As he repeated the kiss, she lay in his arms, enjoying it to the fullest.

Anyone out here? Frank s piercing voice broke the magic and Teddy sat up with a guilty jerk, looking toward the sound.

Brand said something unintelligible under his breath before he answered. We re out here by the waterfalls.

Donna and Frank stepped out of the trees into the moonlight, then settled onto the other bench beside the water. They sat outside for an hour getting acquainted and watching the moon flitting in and out of small white clouds. Finally, Brand put his arms around Teddy again. You re cold, he said against her cheek. I m taking you inside.

Frank and Donna followed and Teddy gave up all hopes of being alone with Brand. She visited a while longer and went to bed.

Before sleep came, Teddy lay in the comfortable bed and went over the afternoon and evening. Frank and Donna were certainly ready to welcome her into the family. And Brand seemed to have been the ideal child. If he had ever done anything wrong his parents did not know about it. The family was far too frank and open to be concealing anything major. They had put every doubt to rest not that she had ever had any.

She jerked away when she heard a voice, but fell right back to sleep. Then she heard it again and opened her eyes. Sunlight streamed through the sheer curtain at the window and Brand's voice and gentle knock drew her to consciousness.

Good morning, my fairy princess, Brand said in his endearing way. I'm waking you for breakfast. We need to get with it if we're going to the coast this morning. He seemed to pause outside her door and then turned and walked down the hallway.

Teddy showered quickly and climbed into white pants and a red sweater. She would rather have worn jeans, but Brand saw her in those every day of his life. She would like to look somewhat special today. She put her hair in two ponytails, each with a red ribbon, added a touch of red lipstick, and ran down the stairs.

The family sat at the table drinking coffee while waiting for her. Wow, Frank said, when he saw her, this girl isn't old enough to be so far from her mother.

Brand got up and put his arms around Teddy and kissed her tenderly, then seated her at the table beside him. He grinned at his father. You're almost right, Dad. She's twenty-one.

Donna served waffles with strawberries and ice cream for breakfast. They'll stay with you until we get around to eating lunch, she said.

Then they all jumped into Brand's car and took off for the coast. Teddy barely heard the conversation, so eager was she to see the ocean.

Brand laughed at her preoccupation. You won't see the ocean for nearly an hour, so you may as well enjoy the trip. Even though it was only the last part of August, lots of trees showed golden, orange and red colors.

Finally, they left the mountains and, in a little while, drove through Florence, a busy little coastal town situated almost in the exact middle of Oregon's coastline. Teddy watched for the ocean, but did not see it until they almost drove into it. Bright blue, as far as she could see, with glittering silver stars where the sunbeams kissed the waves. The waves rolled in perfect symmetry until they neared the shore, where they burst into wildly foaming water and crashed onto the sandy beach. Brand jumped out, ran around, pulled Teddy from the car, and hugged her to him.

The wind snatched at Teddy's hair and stung her eyes. And she could not tell whether the enormous roar she heard was the wind or the ocean, or both. Then Frank and Donna got out of the back, allowing the door to slam against the car with a force that made Teddy jump.

Wow, I've never felt wind this strong, she said, closing her eyes against the sand that blew into her face with tremendous force.

Brand opened the car and retrieved everyone's sweaters. All of them took off their shoes and put them into the car.

The sand feels wonderful on my feet, Teddy said, but stings my face. Do you think we can walk in this hurricane?

Brand took her hand and started toward the roaring ocean. Sure, we can walk. It always blows this way down here. When they neared the ocean they turned and walked along the beach, watching the waves creep ever farther onto the sand. When a super big wave burst a few feet from them, Brand shoved Teddy into it.

Teddy had not expected that. She screamed and jumped into Brand's arms, pulling her feet up from the now-receding water. That stuff's cold, she yelled above the roar. It should have icebergs in it.

Brand laughed and carried her back from the water a little way and set her on her feet. Roll up your pants, he commanded, doing the same with his own. We're going wading. You'll be surprised how soon the water loses its cool.

They continued walking south, following the curve of the beach. Sometimes they walked in the shallow, foaming waves and sometimes they plodded along in the wet sand. Teddy did not care, as long as Brand held her hand.

Are we going any place special, or just walking? Teddy asked after about a mile.

He nodded. We're going to the jetty. It's fun to walk on, and we can check out the fishermen.

In a little while they walked the length of the jetty, watching the waves crash into the rocks, sending twenty-foot walls of water flying into the china-blue sky. Where are your folks? Teddy asked when they climbed down from the mammoth structure.

Brand grinned and shrugged. Who knows? Want to hide from them?

Of course not. They love you and want to spend this time with you. They both had to shout, for the wind tried to snatch away every sound while the ocean joined in, roaring out its mighty strength.

Okay, let's go back, Brand yelled into her ear. They walked hand in hand as they retraced their steps over the two-mile distance.

Brand drove to Devil's Elbow for lunch. Mountains on three sides protected the much smaller beach from the wind. They took off their sweaters to enjoy the meal while watching the ever-changing ocean.

Are you ready to go home? Frank asked after they tossed the remnants of the food to the sea gulls and put the other things back into the car.

I guess, Brand answered. I really wanted Teddy to see the sun set over the ocean, but we still have to drive home.

Brand packed their things into the car as soon as they got back to his folks's place. It would be midnight when they reached their farms.

Frank and Donna walked out to the car to tell the young people goodbye. How'd you like the ocean, Teddy? Donna asked.

I loved it. I can't wait to see it again, Teddy bubbled.

A wide smile split Frank's face. Of course you liked it, he grinned impishly. That's why Brand takes all his women there.

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Donna smacked Frank on the arm. His ex-girlfriends, you idiot, she said, laughing. And I don't remember him ever taking anyone else to the coast. You're just trying to make the poor girl jealous.

I'm trying to help her see that Brand's a good catch, he said.

I give the girl credit for having good sense, Donna said. Why don't we let her discover how nice he is all by herself? That's part of the thrill of finding each other, remember?

Brand sat comfortably in his bucket seat grinning at both of his parents, neither embarrassed nor upset in the least. He started the car and stuck his head out the window for a last kiss from first his mother, then his father. He pushed the gearshift down and eased away. You guys come see us real soon, he called as they glided into the street.

Teddy leaned back and closed her eyes. She had learned all she would from this trip. A lot and all good.

Brand slipped his hand over hers. What do you think of my family?

I like them a lot. It sort of made me think about... She had been thinking about her mother and father. No, not her own mother and father, but how her life might have been if she had had a mother and father around for her. Now, how could she have even thought that? Gram had done her very best for her all the time. They sure like you a lot, she finished.

Not any more than Gram likes you. He stroked her hand with his thumb. You were about to say it made you think about your mom and dad, weren't you? Wouldn't you like to talk about your folks, little Teddy Bear?

She did not answer, but shook her head. She knew Brand wanted to comfort her, but her parentage was one subject that would always stay buried, as far as she was concerned. She searched for a subject strong enough to drive the other one out of his mind. Do you really take all your women to the coast?

Brand signaled, then turned off the freeway onto the McKenzie Highway, laid his head back on his headrest and laughed. His laugh sounded almost like Frank's, only more refined. You're the first one ever, and I'm glad. It was special to me, introducing you to the ocean.

Me, too. I want to go back, Brand.

On our honeymoon?

She burst out laughing, feeling a great relief. He really wanted to marry her. So you didn't take your women to the coast Where did you take them?

He hesitated a moment, then glanced her way. His lips twitched and his brown eyes sparkled pure gold. Oh, I usually took them to dark, quiet places.

Teddy knew he was kidding but could not respond.

Hey, why the silence, he asked a moment later. Do you love me so much you can't stand the idea of me ever having had another girlfriend?

She nodded.

He reached for her hand again. To tell the truth I haven't had that many girlfriends, and no serious ones. I was always too busy studying or helping Mom and Dad on the ranch. As I got older, so did they, and at the last I worked from dawn to dusk. He chuckled. You know, like we both do now.

Do you care about my other boyfriends? she asked mischievously.

He slowed for a bird eating something from the roadside snow, then resumed his speed. Not a bit.

She tossed his hand back into his own lap. What a thing to say! You could at least act a little jealous, couldn't you?

His hand slid into hers once more. You can't even imagine how jealous I'd be if I had a reason. I'd tear any man apart who touched you now, and maybe any that ever had. He retrieved his hand to negotiate a sharp upward curve, as they drove in to the mountains. Teddy's eyes met his, and saw love in them that made her stomach flutter.

They talked about everything and laughed about anything as they drove through the mountains, then over the open country to their ranches. Much too soon, Brand carried Teddy's suitcases into the old run-down ranch house. He set them down in the empty living room, kissed her goodbye, and disappeared through the front door.

Well, get those shoes off and tell me about your trip, said Gram.

He isn't the one, Gram. They're really great people. And I love him, and Then it hit her like a spiked volleyball. Gram might not feel quite so happy about her new love. What would they do with Gram?

That's what I needed to know, Gram said. Of course, we both knew he was all right, but now we're sure. She glanced at the clock on the stove. Do you see what time it is? Those fool llamas will be ready for breakfast at five o'clock no matter what time we want to go to bed.

The clock read twelve-thirty when Teddy crawled into her bed, tired, but exhilarated as she had never been. She set her alarm for quarter of five in the morning. But she could not seem to fall asleep. *Father, she prayed silently, won't You please help me know for sure if You want me to marry Brand. If for any reason You don't, could You please make me feel uneasy about it when I wake up? Thank you, Father. I love You. Good night.*

Teddy turned off the alarm at (he first chirp, and jumped out of bed, feeling as high as a cloud and just as fluffy. Brand loved her and they would be married! And best and most important of all, God wanted her to marry him!

She left the house quietly so she would not awaken Gram, but Teddy found her in the barn, loading feed onto the pickup. Gram, did you forget I'm back? Teddy asked, laughing from pure happiness.

Gram's yellow-gray curls shook. Naw, bull thought you might be tired.

I'm too happy to be tired. Teddy told Gram more about her trip as they fed the llamas together.

Brand did not show up all day and Teddy thought she would go wild if she did not see him soon. She could not bring herself to leave Gram to go to his place, and she felt a little shy, anyway. He would come as soon as possible.

As Teddy and Gram sat down to supper, he arrived in his sports car and they invited him to eat with them.

I hear you're in love with my girl. Gram's granite voice made it sound as if he had stolen the crown jewels.

He buttered a hot biscuit and spread honey over it, then nodded soberly. I'm in love with both of you, Gram. Right now, I'm trying to figure out how to get us all into the same family. Teddy hasn't said yes yet. Would I have better luck with you?

Gram swallowed a big bite of corn she had just chewed off the cob. Then she waved the cob at Brand. No, you have to deal with her, but I'll push while you pull.

Brand flew off his chair as though catapulted. Forgetting all about his uneaten supper, he grabbed Teddy from her chair, wrapped his arms around her and danced wildly around the room. Finally, he fell to the couch with her still in his arms. That's it, baby, there's nothing to stop us. He kissed her quickly, then looked into her eyes. Say it, Teddy Bear, say you'll marry me.

Teddy got to her feet, then cast an impish glance at Brand. Sorry about that tornado that just blew through. Shall we finish eating now?

Brand jerked her back down beside him and crushed her in his arms. This is going to get tighter until you say the word. He pecked her on the cheek, then tightened his grip.

This is nice, she said. He tightened his arms again and she struggled for breath. How come you've never hugged me like this before? she wheezed.

He squeezed her again, then released her and tweaked a curl gendy. I can't hurt you, even though you're a brat, he said. I give up. He started toward the door. I'll just go find someone else.

Teddy followed Brand to the door and told him goodbye. As he climbed into his car she called to him. If you can't find anyone else who'll marry you, I guess I could. You know what they say, it's a dirty job but someone has to do it.

He piled out of the car and raced to the house with the speed of sound, hitting the steps like a bolt of lightning. He went through the third one with the crack of thunder sprawling all the way to the top. Teddy dropped to her knees on the porch so she could look into his face. Are you all right?

He winked at her. I don't know. If I could get my busted leg out of the step I might be able to tell.

After resting a few minutes, he managed to haul the leg out and, leaning on Teddy's shoulder, he managed to hop back into the kitchen. Before leaving the porch, he looked back at the mangled steps. I suppose you're going to sue me for wrecking your steps.

When Teddy had Brand seated comfortably on the couch, he pulled a small package from his shirt pocket and laid it on the coffee table. So you're going to do it, huh?

Marry you? Was there ever any doubt?

He pointed to the small box. Well, that's for you, but not until you feed me the rest of my supper.

Teddy reached for the box but Brand grabbed her hand and held it firmly. Not until I've had my supper, he repeated.

I just wanted to look at it, and see how heavy it is, she said.

After my supper.

Gram jumped up, refilled Brand's plate with warm food, fixed two more biscuits and filled his coffee cup with steaming brew. Then she put the plate into his eager hands. But he took his time eating.

Does your leg hurt much? Teddy asked fifteen minutes later. Food still covered half his plate.

Only when you get too near that little package on the coffee table.

Teddy helped Gram with the dishes. At least it kept her busy and away from the package. Her hands flew. Maybe she could get all through before Brand finished his food.

Could I have some more biscuits, please?

Teddy buttered and honeyed two more of Gram's fluffy golden biscuits, carried them over and dropped them onto Brand's plate, then turned and tried to snatch the box. But Brand's uninjured foot flashed over the package, covering it neatly and so strongly she could not dislodge it. Teddy gave up and continued with the dishes.

I need another ear of corn, please?

What was this? Teddy had never seen Brand eat like this. And with an injured foot? He was probably getting even for her own mischief. Well, she could outfox a fox, any day of the week.

Could you fix Brand's com, Gram? she asked. I have to go feed the llamas. I'll be back in about an hour and a half.

No, don't go. Brand jumped to his feet and fell over again. Teddy ran and helped him back onto the couch.

You did hurt yourself, she said trying to make him comfortable.

His face had paled somewhat under his dark tan, but his mouth spread in a wide laugh. No, just trying to get attention. Now, are you ready to open this little box? Teddy leaned over and kissed him as he put the long-awaited box into her hand.

Sitting on the couch beside him, she unwrapped the blue foil from a lightweight cardboard box. Hmm, not exactly what she had expected, but there must be another box inside this one. She carefully opened the lid and pulled out a feathery fish hook? Disappointment flooded over her like ocean waves, breaking and spilling until she felt about as tall as a grain of sand.