

## *twelve*

Then wild laughter caught her attention. I must have given you the wrong box, he said laughing some more.

When she looked into his love-filled eyes, he pulled her to him and kissed her softly, then again, not quite so softly. Her heart started beating again and she found she could not breathe. He pulled out another box, this one covered with red foil, and laid it in her hand.

She looked into his eyes. He nodded silently and smiled. When she pulled the foil away, she held a royal blue, felt-covered jeweler's box in her hand. This was it! If she could just hold her hands steady enough to open the box! She fumbled a moment before a strong hand took it, opened it, and put it back into her hand.

There it was, winking at her! The most beautiful diamond she had ever seen, nestled in soft, red velvet. She felt hypnotized, unable to take her eyes from it. Then, a single tear formed in her left eye. Why would she cry now? At the happiest moment of her life. She blinked it away, and started laughing. Oh, Brand, thank you, thank you. Gram! Come see it.

I've already seen it, kitten.

How could that be? I've only seen it, now.

Brand took the box from her and lifted the ring from its velvet nest. Let's see if it fits, Teddy Bear. He took her left hand and slipped the ring onto her third finger a perfect fit.

Teddy looked at the ring sparkling on her finger then threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. It fits perfectly, she said a little later while they all ate the cake and ice cream Hannah and Rolf had brought in response to Brand's call. The decorated cake had Congratulations Brand and Teddy written on it in pink letters.

Somehow everyone knew about this little party but me, Teddy said laughing. But how did you know my ring size? As if I didn't know. You traitor, Gram.

He got your ring some time ago, Gram said, so of course I had to see it. I sent the first one back. It was too small. Gram's faded old eyes twinkled. The diamond, I mean, she finished, cackling over her joke.

What am I getting myself into? Brand asked no one in particular. Two women, and they're both determined to give me a bad time.

After a while, Teddy looked out the window and noticed darkness settling around them. We're through opening presents, we're all stuffed on ice cream and cake, I wonder what we're supposed to be doing now, she mused aloud.

Dreaming, I guess, my little Teddy Bear. Dreaming about tomorrow and the rest of our tomorrows.

Hannah and Rolf stayed until it was bedtime for everyone so Brand kissed Teddy goodbye while they all watched, and then went home.

Gram and Teddy returned to the kitchen to relax a few minutes and rehash the evening. Teddy's blue eyes radiated happiness. Oh, Gram, I never thought I could be so happy, she said, almost purring.

I'm glad. You've missed enough in your life. You deserve somebody special, and for my money you got him.

Teddy dropped a kiss on the withered old cheek. Don't say that, Gram. You've been everything to me.

Gram smiled and her old eyes twinkled with merriment. Until the handsome prince kissed you. I thought he never would, after that toad messed you up. Then she became serious. Have you decided which ranch you'll live on? I'm sure his is a lot nicer.

We haven't talked about that at all, Gram. Now we'd better get to bed, and you sleep in a little late in the morning. I'll do the early chores.

Teddy had barely finished her chores the next morning and sat down to Gram's good breakfast, when Brand limped into the house with a newspaper in his hand. I took off my shoes, Gram, he said walking to the sink to wash his hands.

Sit down and have some breakfast, Gram said, putting on another plate.

Brand waited until after Gram asked the blessing to tell them what he had found in the paper. It's a little announcement about the county fair, coming up next week. We could go if you want. Let's go over to Redmond today and buy tickets for it.

Sounds like fun, Teddy said.

After they bought the tickets in Redmond, they stopped at an ice cream store for a peanut butter parfait before going home. Have you thought about Gram? Teddy asked while they ate their cool treats.

Lots of times. Why?

I mean what am I going to do with her when we get married?

Brand laid his spoon down and swallowed. What kind of question is that? What did you plan to do with her? He almost sounded indignant.

Teddy shrugged, embarrassed. I don't know exactly. That's why I'm trying to talk to you about it.

Brand picked up his spoon and shoved in a huge bite of the ice cream confection, chewed and swallowed, before he spoke. I don't even know where we're going to live yet, do you?

Teddy shook her head.

He continued as though he had not stopped. But wherever we live, she'll live with us. His eyes softened. I asked you both, remember?

A fantastic peace flooded throughout Teddy's being. She should have known. Brand, have I told you how terribly much I love you? You've just made me love you a tiny bit more, and I didn't think that was possible.

They finished their treats and drove home. Do you think Gram's worrying about what we'll do with her? Brand asked as they let themselves into the house and took off their shoes.

I don't know. Let's talk to her right away, just in case.

In a few minutes Gram came in the back door. She had already shed her shoes and washed up in the utility room.

Brand took Gram's small hand in his. Gram, we've been thinking. Where would you like to live after we're married?

A small cloud passed over her face, but the sun broke through and her happy smile showed only the slightest hesitation. I guess it's up to you two. The ranch is Teddy's, you know. If you're going to live on your place, maybe I could just stay here. Otherwise, I can get an apartment in Bend.

No way, Brand said, stroking the frail hand he still held. Where we go, you go. I was just wondering where you think that ought to be.

Gram shook her head. I wouldn't feel right about that Young people should be alone.

Don't you give it a thought, Brand said. And wherever we end up, I promise I'll check my boots at the door and wash my hands quickly. Actually, I think it's a good idea.

A couple of days later Brand arrived with a small trailer behind his pickup. Teddy dropped her hoe and went to meet him. After his usual hug and warm kiss he stepped over to the trailer. I'll bet you can't guess what I have inside.

Gram threw her hoe down and joined Teddy at the high-sided trailer. Open this thing before we rip it apart, Gram instructed as Brand stepped to the back of the truck and unfastened the tailgate.

It isn't alive, he informed the two women as he lifted the wood section out and placed it on the ground.

Oooh, they said in unison when they saw a bright blue bicycle inside. A tandem bicycle.

Brand put a strong arm around Gram and pulled her close. Sorry, Gram, I couldn't find a bicycle built for three.

It's okay. We can take turns.

Brand unloaded the long bicycle and motioned for Teddy to climb onto the rear seat. He straddled the front. Let's take it for a spin, Teddy Bear.

Teddy threw back her shoulders. Aren't you being the least tiny bit chauvinistic? Maybe I want to ride in front.

Brand laughed. I wasn't being a pig, at least not purposely. Okay, we'll do it right. How much do you weigh?

That's a sneaky way to learn my weight.

The people at the bike shop said the heavier has to ride in front. Brand raised his chin a couple of inches. And I might add that he's the captain.

Teddy laughed and gave his shoulder a small shove. You made that all up. So what is the other person called?

I didn't make it up, Teddy, really. The back person is called the stoker, and they said this is a neat place because this person can eat lunch or most anything he wants to. But the captain absolutely must tell the stoker when they're coming to a bump or corner or stop sign. He raised his right hand to his forehead and executed a smart salute. Got it, stoker baby?

Got it. She climbed onto the bike.

Ready? the captain yelled. One, two, three, blastoff. He gave a hard push with his foot and they were riding down the driveway. Wobbly, but riding.

Wow, this is different! Teddy yelled. By the time they reached the highway, they were moving so fast it frightened Teddy. I'm scared, she yelled.

I'm braking, he returned. We're slowing for the corner. After they negotiated the corner, they picked up speed again.

In a little while Teddy felt comfortable and sat back, releasing the handlebars. If only I had my knitting, she yelled.

You won't have to knit your own clothes, anymore, he said. I plan to buy you the most beautiful wardrobe in the world to match you.

Idiot! she screamed into the wind. I don't have to knit my clothes. I love to. It has something to do with pride and satisfaction.

They rode on for a while and the farther they went, the more Teddy enjoyed the ride. It was different from a single rider bike. She felt a loss of control, but was able to relax so much more. Well, she would not want to ride this way all the time, but sometimes it was fantastic.

Ready to go back? the captain yelled, and suited the action to the suggestion. In a moment, they were headed back toward the ranches, rolling along at a fast clip.

It seemed to take much less time to return than it had to go, probably because they had learned how to handle the bike better. They stopped and got off the bike beside Brand's pickup.

Thanks a lot, Teddy said. That was really fun. Maybe we can do it again someday. May I ride with you to take it back?

Back? Brand look at Teddy questioningly. Oh, you thought I rented it? Teddy, this bike is ours for romantic riding anytime, anywhere. Could we keep it in your garage?

Aren't you forgetting something? The gravelly voice came from behind an overgrown shrub. Then Gram stepped out I'm ready for my try now. Who's riding with me?

Brand smiled at the old lady. Since I'm used to riding in front, and since you'll be in back no matter who goes, I think it'll be safer for you if I take you this first time. Okay?

Cut the talk and let's go. She climbed on the back seat and lacked six inches of reaching the pedals. Brand dropped the seat as low as it would go, and the two took off down the driveway.

Teddy watched with a dreamy smile on her face. She watched them all the way down the driveway and noticed they had turned in the same direction she and Brand had. She knew he would be extra careful with Gram, realizing how fragile her old bones had become. As she stood there thinking about Gram and Brand and what a lovely life she had before her, an old car turned into the driveway, and lumbered slowly toward her. She waited.

Finally, the car wheezed to a stop, amid a cloud of black smoke from the exhaust system, and a woman, in her late forties, stepped out. Is this the Marland ranch?

Teddy glanced at the woman. She stood a little shorter than Teddy, and somewhat heavier. Her dark blonde hair, straggling to her shoulders, looked as though it had never been washed. Too much dark blue makeup surrounded pale blue eyes, and oversized glasses hid much of her face.

Her bright red lips opened to reveal darkly stained teeth. Well, don't you know who owns this dump? The woman practically spat the harsh words at Teddy.

Teddy nodded. It's the Marland ranch.

The woman's pale eyes swept the yard and nearby area. Well, where's the old lady?

Teddy began to feel uneasy. This could be anyone. She's not here right now. May I help you?

The woman looked Teddy up and down. Of course you can't help me. Get the old lady.

Teddy did not know whether to tell her that Gram would be back soon, or to get rid of her. She looked at the woman again, feeling as if she should know her. Maybe she had seen her somewhere before, but could not think where.

If I can't help you, you may as well leave. I don't know exactly when she'll be back. Teddy tried to sound kind but businesslike.

You ain't going to get rid of me that easy, you smart-mouthed kid. I'll wait. She turned to her old car, pulled the back door open, and a huge mutt jumped to the ground. It took one look at Teddy and then ran off.

The dog can't be loose here, she said. Call it quickly. The woman just glared at her. Please! We have valuable animals. Still the woman did not move.

Teddy turned and ran in the direction the dog had gone but could not find it. She looked for ten minutes. The dog was nowhere to be seen.

She returned to the woman, who sat on the rickety porch, smoking a cigarette. Aren't you afraid the dog will get lost? she asked. This is a strange place for it, you know.

I certainly do know this is a strange place. No doubt better than you. But as for the dog, I wish it would get lost, but that thing would come home if you dumped it in the middle of the ocean. She exhaled a breath of dark smoke, then watched it disperse, as though it were the most interesting thing she had ever seen.

A noise caught Teddy's attention and she saw Brand and Gram pedaling up the driveway. The woman saw it, too, and stood up to watch. They stopped and Gram hopped

off and walked toward the porch and the women on it. Brand followed. Teddy could not believe how happy she was to see them.

Gram walked up the broken steps carefully, with Brand right behind. The woman stepped forward as Gram reached the top of the steps. They looked at each other, like two wary cats meeting for the first time. Teddy felt a horrible fear clutch her by the throat. Somehow, she knew this woman was bad news.

Good afternoon, Brand said pleasantly. May we help you with something?

Butt out, big boy. You don't belong here, the woman snarled. Her watery blue eyes never left Gram's face.

Brand tried again. Pardon me, ma'am, but I do belong here. Could we do something for you?

After a long, uncomfortable silence, Gram's lips moved. Fritzi? she whispered, almost inaudibly. A terrible choke came from Gram's throat as she tried to repeat her question. Fritzi, is that you?

### *thirteen*

Of course it's me, you old fool. Have your eyes gone bad like the rest of you? You look about a hundred and ten years old.

Brand stepped up and dropped a well-muscled arm over Gram's shoulders. Look here, young lady, if you won't be civil you can leave right now. No one comes around here and insults Gram.

Gram put a hand on Brand's arm. It's all right, sonny. She turned to the woman, Fritzi. You don't look like any spring chicken, either, in case you haven't been near a mirror lately. Must have been living in the fast lane.

Where's the kid, old woman?

Don't you dare ask me about the kid. Don't you ever ask me about the kid again. Do you understand?

Immediately, Teddy knew who the woman was! The rickety porch floor seemed to move under her feet and she felt her knees give way then nothing.

Come on, baby, you're all right. The gravelly voice was one of the sweetest sounds Teddy had ever heard, even though it seemed far away. Teddy opened her eyes to find herself on the porch floor with Gram kneeling beside her, holding a cool cloth on her forehead. She raised her eyes to meet Brand's concerned look.

I don't faint, she said trying to sit up. The porch began moving again, and she settled back down. Never, she insisted as she lay quietly. Then she saw the woman,

standing on the edge of the top step, looking around at the ranch, a cigarette hanging loosely from her mouth. Teddy raised a hand and pointed to the woman, but no words came from her throat.

Gram nodded. I'm sorry, kitten. I hoped this would never happen, but we'll be all right.

The woman wheeled around. You hoped I'd never come back? Never see my own kid? So what did you do, give it away?

Teddy sat up and clutched her throat. She tried to speak but could not get it out, I'm your kid, she finally squawked in a strange voice. I'm the kid you didn't even name.

Fritzi whirled around to face Teddy. What? A big horse like you? Her questioning eyes went to Gram. My kid must be about twelve, isn't it? And I can't remember if it was a boy or girl. You'd better not have given it away and you'd better get it out here, old woman, or I'll have the law on you.

Struggling to her feet, Teddy moved to the love seat at the end of the porch. Her face felt wet and she discovered she was crying.

Gram's eyes looked steel hard as they met Fritzi's. She pointed to Teddy. She was your kid, but only until she got outside your body. Then you couldn't shed both of us fast enough, could you? Walked out the hospital door, when you were so weak you could barely stand on your two feet. How do you think that made me feel, Fritzi? But you wouldn't understand a mother's love, would you? You wouldn't have any idea how it feels to be terrified for your child, week in, week out.

Fritzi grabbed Gram by the shoulders and started shaking her, but Brand snatched the offending hands and threw them against their owner. I want you to get into the car and take off, he growled. And don't come back.

I'll bet you'd like that, wouldn't you, cave man? Well, I'm not going anywhere. She pointed at Gram. That old woman is about to die and I'm here to take over the ranch.

Brand sucked in a big breath and so did Teddy, but Gram laid her head back and cackled with laughter.

Fritzi looked alarmed as Gram continued laughing. What's the old woman laughing about? Is she senile? she asked.

You came home because you loved us so much you couldn't handle it anymore. Is that how it is, Fritzi? But you can't even bring yourself to call me anything more personal than 'old woman'. Well, not-so-young woman, I have news for you. This ranch is now worth well over a million dollars, including the livestock. What do you think of that?

Fritzi's eyes grew round, and they swept over the pastures, the alfalfa fields, even the yard. I'm going to sell it the minute you die. Hopefully that won't be too many days from now.

What about your little girl? Gram asked, a crafty look in her eye.

Fritzi's eye flicked past Teddy. *She still has not asked my name or how I have been all these years, Teddy thought. And worse than that, she does not care one thing about Gram. How could anyone grow up with Gram and not love her?*

What about her? Fritzi repeated.

Wouldn't you want her to have at least part of it? Gram's lips stretched in an imitation of a smile.

Fritzi looked at Teddy again, then back to her mother. Old woman, you don't know anything, do you? Here's the way it works. When you die, I get it When I die... she groped for a name, then settled for, she gets it. If there's anything left, but I plan to spend it all. She dropped her cigarette butt on the old porch floor and lit another.

Gram laughed heartily, almost as though she were enjoying herself now. Well, not-so-young woman, don't spend it too fast. I told you the truth when I said this ranch is worth more than a million, but I forgot to mention that I don't own it anymore. I'm just fortunate enough to live here.

Fritzi sprang at Gram, her face twisted into a horrible sight. Once again Brand stopped her, stepping between. You aren't going to hurt Gram, he said softly. We love her very much and plan to keep her a long time. Now, why don't you leave?

Fritzi turned on Brand and attacked him with insane rage. Before he could stop the woman, her long fingernails raked his face several times, leaving tiny rivulets of blood oozing down his cheeks. Then, long red streaks appeared on his bare arms. Brand pinned her arms to her sides, rendering her helpless before she could do any more damage. The more she struggled, the tighter he held her, until her face grew so red it looked as though it might explode.

You bought the ranch, didn't you? she screamed. Where's the money? I want the money, and I want it now! She jerked wildly for another minute, then relaxed, coughing and totally exhausted.

Brand turned to the older woman with a quiet smile. Gram, he said pleasantly, could you get some fingernail clippers, please?

A moment later Gram reappeared with the requested item. Brand pulled Fritzi against him, her back to his chest. His arms held her so tightly his blood smeared over her dress. Gram's going to trim those fingernails, he murmured, almost in a whisper. If you want the ends of your fingers left intact, I suggest you hold still. He held one of Fritzi's hands to Gram. Cut them close, he instructed.

Fritzi held her hands still and said nothing during the ten-minute procedure, but whimpered quietly the entire time. When Gram finished, everyone, including Fritzi, knew the fingernails would not scratch anyone for quite some time. Will you behave if I turn you loose now? Brand asked.

Fritzi nodded. He released her and she examined her hands. They'll be so sore I won't be able to use them, she wailed.

Just then, llama cries, the sound of several dogs yapping, barking, and finally screaming, interrupted the confrontation on the porch. Brand tore past the hole in the steps with Teddy close behind. Gram came as fast as she could. They all temporarily forgot Fritzi, but she followed Gram as they all ran to the north pasture where the horrible sounds emanated from.

When Teddy arrived, she found Brutus and Caesar standing over Fritzi's badly chewed-up mutt. A three-year-old brown llama stood to one side, her head hanging, and blood running down her chest. Teddy pointed at the dog on the ground. Keep it there! she screamed to Brutus and Caesar, then turned to Brand. Help, she whispered.

Brand moved to the llama's head and Teddy began searching for the source of the blood. She found a slash on each side of the llama's throat and shoved her hands against the wounds. But the blood flowed between her fingers. Almost immediately the llama dropped to her knees, then turned on her side and lay flat on the ground. Blood still flowed from the wounds, but slower. A moment later, the blood stopped and the llama's eyes opened with a glazed, unseeing appearance. Brand took Teddy into his arms and softly held her.

I'm sorry, Teddy Bear. I'm so sorry. He bent his face against hers and said nothing more, just continued holding her tight. Teddy cried for several minutes, then took some deep breaths. There were things to do here and she must get hold of herself. The dog! Her dogs would still be watching it but they must be relieved.

She lifted her bloody, tear-streaked face. Thank you, Brand. I'm all right, now. She turned to see Brutus and Caesar, their fangs bared, standing over the other dog. Fritzi stood watching, but Gram had disappeared. Teddy turned back to Brand. Where is she? she asked.

He shook his head. Then Teddy followed Fritzi's eyes toward the old log house. Gram hurried toward them, holding a small rifle in her hands! The old lady looked at no one and said nothing, but walked up to the dogs. She made a sweeping motion with her right arm and spoke to the dogs. Brutus and Caesar jumped to their feet and disappeared into the herd of llamas that were standing around. Then Gram shot the dog in the head, from a distance of about six inches.

I'll call someone to take care of the carcasses, she said calmly, then walked away toward the house.

Brand put his arm around Teddy again. Are you ready to go, love?

Teddy walked to the llama, knelt beside it and petted its back with both hands. She buried her face in the soft wool. Then she stood to her feet, and held out her hand to Brand. I'm ready.

They walked slowly to the house, arm in arm. Fritzi followed, several feet behind. When they reached me house, Brand looked at the blood covering his arms and clothes, his own, from Fritzi's attack, and the dead llama's. I better go shower and change. I can be back in twenty minutes.

Teddy nodded. Yes, I'll do the same. Brand barely touched her lips with his and then carefully ran down the steps. Teddy stepped inside and took off her shoes. She had nearly reached the hall door when she heard Fritzi clattering across the floor, and Gram appeared from the kitchen.

Get those shoes off before you come into my house, Gram yelled, pointing at the front door.

Fritzi looked shocked, but backed up and stepped out of her-scruffy pumps. Then Gram pointed to the utility room. Now go wash the filth off you. Fritzi moved in the direction Gram indicated and Teddy ran for the shower.

Brand reappeared in less than thirty minutes looking clean and shampooed. The deep red lacerations in his face looked even angrier than before he left. He moved straight to Teddy. Are you all right? he asked tenderly.

Fritzi, rocking in the old wooden rocker, stopped suddenly. What's this poor little Teddy' stuff? She only lost a silly looking animal, and she has a million others just like it. That old woman shot my dog right in front of my face. My pet, that went everywhere with me. And don't think she's going to get away with it. What's more, I'm positive those two white-eyed dogs of yours killed that...thing. When two dogs get together anything can happen. I read that in the paper. I'm going to call the Humane Society right away. She headed toward the telephone.

Gram stepped between Fritzi and the phone. Shut up and sit down! she growled. Let me tell you something. If it hadn't been for those two white-eyed dogs of ours, we'd have lost many llamas, rather than just one. Let me tell you something else. Each and every llama is a personal pet of Teddy's. You saw how much she loved Cocoa, didn't you? Now, let me tell you this. That llama your dog killed was worth \$20,000, maybe more, and she was due to have a baby in four months, which would have been worth a considerable amount too. One last thing. Ranchers around here take a very dim view of stock-killing dogs. No way, no way in this world could your dog have lived after what it did.

Maybe you'd like to make some monetary restitution for the llama, Brand added quietly.

Fritzi, did not answer, but pulled out a cigarette. Don't light it! Gram's harsh voice instructed. No one has ever smoked in this house and you aren't going to be the one to start.

Fritzi shoved the cigarette back into her purse and stood up, facing the group. So, it's going to be three against one, is it? I didn't expect to be welcome here. Well, don't think I came back because I wanted to. I hated this place when I left, and it hasn't improved a bit I only came back as a last resort, and I mean I tried everything else. I have a bad knee and can't stand on it to cook anymore. So I guess I'm stuck with you.

That may well be, Gram said, but I'm not sure we're stuck with you. You have absolutely no claims to our home, our food, our devotions, or our care. You forfeited that years ago, as well as all rights to Teddy.

Tough, old woman. I don't have two dimes to rub together, and owe several thousand on charge cards, so what are you going to do, pitch me out in the street?

She cast a quick glance at Brand. I suppose you're the guy who bought the ranch, so you must have enough money to put up with me.

Gram shook her old head, but her eyes had a gleam. I didn't sell the ranch, not-so-young woman. I gave it away several months ago. In fact, you're just six months too late.

Fritzi shook her head. I'll admit you're dumb, old woman, but you aren't that dumb. You didn't give it away.

Want to see the papers? Gram got up and disappeared into her bedroom, returning a moment later with some stapled papers and tossed them to Fritzi.

After reading the papers a moment. Fritzi's face whitened. Her eyes met Teddy's. She gave it to you? She gave this whole stinking place to you? For nothing? She turned back to her mother. How could you do this? She's only a granddaughter. I'll break this like a piece of cracked glass. I've heard about breaking wills before.

Gram smiled gently. Isn't a will. I gave it to her. Well, technically, I sold it to her for one dollar. Just to be legal. Her eyes, filled with love, turned to Teddy. Now, kitten, see why I insisted? It's all yours, safe and sound.

After Brand had left, Teddy made up a bed in the spare room for Fritzi and they all went to bed, feeling much exhausted from the highly charged emotions of the day, and with nothing settled as far as Fritzi was concerned. As Teddy tried to have her evening talk with her Lord she kept hearing bumps and thumps from Fritzi's room. How mad was she, anyway? Finally, Teddy told God goodnight and fell asleep.

The next morning, when Teddy went to feed the llamas, she found Brand already starting. I thought I'd like to be with you this morning. I knew it would be hard, this first time after Cocoa you know. She walked into his arms and he held her for a little while. The llamas watched and nudged them, eager for their breakfast. Suddenly, he pulled away and looked around. Where is he? he asked, as though frightened.

Who? Oh, you mean Casanova. He's around somewhere. Maybe he's getting used to you.

Brand started breaking apart bales of alfalfa hay and dropping them behind the pickup. He might be, but I don't feel like taking any chances. He worked a little while, then began chuckling.

What could be so funny at half past five in the morning?

I just got to thinking. Wouldn't it be funny if Casanova spit on Fritzzi?

I don't know. Brand, I'm sorry I never told you about my mother. Would you like to talk about it now?