

sixteen

Pandemonium broke loose in the form of cheering, foot stomping, whistling, and laughing. The crowd rejoiced with Teddy and she felt so weak she could not even move. Brand leaned down to her, his eyes laughing. You don't believe it, do you, Teddy Bear? Do you still want to watch the camels, ostriches, and other stuff sold? Or do you want to leave?

Suddenly, Teddy felt adrenalin pumping through her and she wanted to jump up and down. I want to watch the others being sold, but I can't sit still.

Let's get out of here for a while then. Maybe we'll come back later.

As they walked out, the loudspeaker crackled. There they go, folks, the proud owners of the Marland llamas. We'll break for lunch now and, at half-past one, we'll start with the llama's large relative, the camel. See you in an hour and a half.

Teddy, Gram, and Brand were mobbed before they got to the pickup. Many in the crowd just wanted to congratulate them, but several inquired about buying llamas. Teddy gave them each her card with her address and phone number.

Finally, they sat in the truck and looked at each other in shock. Duska just made you famous, Brand said. Your llamas will always bring good money now. He rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. And I hardly believed you when you said you could sell a female for \$10,000.

Someone tapped on the window so Brand rolled it down. A big burly man thrust his hand in and shook hands with all three of them. Fantastic, he said. I'm really pleased with what this did for the llama industry, but your llama would have probably brought more at the Hart sale. They sell only llamas and all the llama breeders go there.

We're just happy with the price we got, Brand said, unable to stop smiling.

Right. I don't blame you, and the llama people will be more serious about this auction from now on, too.

The man walked away and Brand wasted no time getting the pickup on the highway. Hungry? he asked.

No. Yes. I'm too excited to know. But we'll have to go back and tell the llamas goodbye pretty soon.

Brand turned to Gram. You haven't said a word, young lady. What do you think? Are you too surprised to speak? Are you disappointed?

Gram smiled then laughed out loud. I'm just pretending I'm not here. That way I can enjoy the two of you a lot. She quieted for moment Yes, I guess I'm too surprised to talk. Wait until Fritzi hears.

They stopped at a restaurant to eat, but Teddy could not push the food down. She knew what had happened, but just could not believe it,

Want to call Fritzzi, Gram? Brand asked as they walked out and past a telephone.

Gram shook her yellow-white hair wildly. I want to see her face when I tell her. I don't think she believed we could ever get \$20,000.

They went back to the auction and told Duska and Playboy goodbye, but Teddy could not sit down to watch the other sales. I know I'll be sorry. How many times in my life am I going to see zebras and cougars auctioned off? But I can't help it, I want to go home.

Brand nodded understandingly. I don't blame you, love.

They collected their bank-guaranteed check for the price of the two llamas, plus the thousand dollars from Lolli's auction market, minus ten percent for the auction fees. They walked away from Lolli's with a check for \$75,150 tucked into the corner of Teddy's purse. When they reached the truck, she handed the check to Gram. I'd feel a lot better if you held onto this, she said. You know how I keep losing things.

Let's head for home, Brand said after Gram had deposited the check into the most secret pocket in her purse.

They left in the early afternoon and hashed and rehashed the sale, laughing like happy children. After a tiny silence, Teddy uttered a long sigh.

Are you okay, Teddy Bear?

Yes, but it just hit me that'll never see Playboy or Duska again. But don't you agree they got good homes?

You bet! If I paid a fraction of that for an animal, I'd keep it in the house on a pillow. Teddy Bear... \$65,000 for one animal? And that launched yet another rehash of the sale, telling each other how much prettier their llamas were than the others.

Finally, the sun crept low in the western sky, then disappeared, pulling the daylight behind it. I think I'm hungry, Teddy announced sometime later.

Shall we stop for the night? Brand asked. Or should we eat and drive on? I could easily drive a few more hours.

After eating and then driving on for a few more hours, they finally stopped at a motel after midnight. We're making good time, Brand said. It's late and we're all exhausted, but we'll be home sooner than we expected. He kissed both Teddy and Gram good night and went to his own room. Teddy dropped into bed and fell asleep thanking God for answering the prayer she did not pray and answering it more abundantly than she could have ever dreamed.

The next morning, Brand awakened them before six o'clock and they drove three hours before stopping for breakfast. Then, on again. That night, as the sun disappeared from view, Teddy asked to stop for the night. Let's go out for a nice supper.

Gram decided to rest in the room and order some food from room service. Teddy had not come down from her cloud since the sale so she and Brand walked into the restaurant giggling together. They both enjoyed the perfectly prepared steak, salad, and french fries, followed by an out-of-this-world chocolate mousse. Then, they walked around, under a moon that looked round and orange.

A three-wheeled bike pulling a small carriage pulled up beside them on the quiet street. You guys like a ride in the park? the driver asked.

Brand looked down at Teddy, who nodded eagerly. He helped her in and they snuggled together as the man pedaled slowly along.

Our life together reads like a storybook, Brand said, holding her close.

Yes, rich, famous, and happy, Teddy giggled. With fourteen children.

Brand jerked as though shocked. What's the matter? Teddy murmured. Did I say the wrong thing?

Then he laughed. How many children? How about four or six? But fourteen?

Teddy pulled him close and forgot all about children. In fact she forgot everything in the world except Brand and her. Then, This is the end of the line. Hey, buddy, we're back where we started.

Brand helped Teddy down. He silently paid the man, who rode away on his contraption muttering, ... didn't even see the park.

They both burst out laughing and raced back to the motel. The poor guy was right, Brand said, we saw only each other.

Teddy pulled his head down for a quick kiss. What else is there? she asked quietly.

They pulled into the old ranch at midnight the next night Gram ran up the new steps and unlocked the door. They all tumbled inside, each as glad to be home as the others. They went into the kitchen where Fritz sat on the couch. Brand winked at Teddy. Yeah, Playboy really shocked us. He brought \$17,500.

Wow! Fritz said. That sounds pretty good if you're telling the truth. But you took a female, too, didn't you? Didn't she sell?

Gram looked at Teddy who looked at Brand. He put on a sad look. Yeah, she sold, but she only brought... He looked mournfully at Teddy, as though he couldn't say it.

\$65,000! Teddy screamed.

Fritzi jumped out of her chair. Then she dropped back down. No way. You're just saying that to make me feel bad about Cocoa. I know what you're doing.

Gram did not say a word nor change expression. Teddy laughed happily. She did, Fritzi. That Duska is one fine lady. But we have lots more like her.

Know what we're going to do as soon as possible? Brand asked. Get married, I suppose, Fritzi said, sarcastically.

Brand turned sincere eyes on Fritzi. We were almost too busy to think about a wedding but once in a while the subject cropped up. We remembered we love each other though. Do you remember how it feels to be in love?

Teddy walked out with Brand and left the two women snarling at each other like stray cats. It almost seems as though we shouldn't be parted anymore, after the last week, she told Brand.

He kissed her gently and climbed into the pickup. Thanksgiving can't get here quickly enough for me, he said. He tweaked her fingers that lay on the pickup door and drove away in the dark.

In the days that followed, Teddy and Brand worked hard and played hard. Every day of work and play brought them closer together, leaving not an inch of room for doubt of the lightness of their love.

Fritzi not only shampooed her hair but began fixing herself pretty and acting pleasantly. She cooked gourmet meals several times a week and always invited Brand to share them. One evening at supper, Fritzi turned her prettiest smile on Brand. When are you going to teach me to ride? she asked

Brand's golden eyebrows shot into his forehead. I wasn't aware that you wanted to learn.

Of course I do. I'm only human and you always take the old woman. Why can't I go?

I'm not sure you could ride Pharaoh, he said thoughtfully. He's pretty spirited.

Ha! Surely you don't think the old woman can ride something I can't.

That's exactly what I think.

Let me ride Misty. The kid doesn't have to go all the time.

It's all right, Teddy said, she can ride Misty.

Misty's your horse, Teddy Bear, and no one except you is going to ever ride her again. Got it? He snatched Teddy's hand, pulled it to his lips, kissed it, then returned it gently to her lap.

The next evening, Brand rode over on Thunder, leading three horses. Who's that? Teddy asked, pointing to a beautiful gray mare with dark spots on her back quarters. Her mane, tail, and feet were dark, too.

Brand shrugged, grinning as though embarrassed. I picked her up today. Been looking at her for a while, but couldn't justify buying her. What do you think?

Teddy took the kind head in her arms. She's a gorgeous animal, Brand. What's her name?

Dove. She's an Appaloosa. I don't know whether she's gray like a dove or harmless as a dove. Either fits. She's a nice animal. But no race horse.

Teddy continued to pet Dove. Hey. You bought Dove for Fritzi, didn't you?

For Fritzi to ride sometimes. He raised his eyebrows. Great for a kid, too. She's a beginner's horse.

They rode after supper and Fritzi managed to stay on Dove's back. You really should ride beside me, Brand, she whined. I might need you if the horse bolts.

Brand grinned and stayed with Teddy. She's not going anywhere. You can just be thankful if she keeps up with the rest.

Pharaoh isn't happy with this stroll, Gram said. We're going for a little ride. She gave the large horse his head and disappeared around a bend in the path.

The old woman's going to kill herself, Fritzi mused. But then I guess you'd like that. All those llamas would really be yours then.

You be quiet! Teddy yelled. The llamas are already mine, as well as the ranch. You saw the papers, so just be quiet. I love Gram and can't imagine living without her.

Fritzi shook her head and flitted a silvery laugh toward Brand. Tsk, tsk. Quite a little fireball, isn't she? Doesn't take much to set her off.

seventeen

One evening after supper, Fritzi went into her bedroom and returned freshly made up and combed. She had even put on a fresh dress. I was just wondering, Brand, honey, I need to run into Bend this evening for a minute. Could you do the honors?

Gram sighed, dumped her quilt on the coffee table, and got up. I'll take you. Let's go.

Fritzi casted an angry glance at Gram. Sit down and work on your quilt, old woman. You're too old to be running around at night. She put the frown away and brought out a pretty smile. How about it, Brand?

Brand looked at Teddy. I don't see why not. We haven't anything planned for the evening. What do you say, Teddy Bear?

Sure, we can find something to do while Fritzi does her business.

Fritzi's smile disappeared and the scowl covered her face again. You may as well stay and check the llamas or something, she said.

Brand reached for Teddy. Where I go, Teddy goes.

The smile came back. I don't want her to come, Brand. Don't make me tell you why.

You'd better, because if she doesn't go, I don't. Brand's placid look was gradually tensing up.

All right, if I have to. Fritzi pulled Brand away from Teddy and stood on her tiptoes to whisper something into his ear. When he heard what she said. Brand relaxed and his eyes brightened. Oh. Okay, Fritzi, I understand, but couldn't Gram take you tomorrow?

Fritzi made another pretty face. I ask you, how much help would the old woman be?

Finally, with a little more begging, Brand and Fritzi drove off toward Bend. I wonder what she said to soften him, Teddy mused aloud.

I don't know, but I don't like it. That woman is not good news. We'll have to watch her. Gram bit off a thread and spit it halfway across the room.

The two returned a few hours later, Fritzi in a fantastic mood, and Brand snapping at everyone.

Was your trip successful? Gram asked.

Well, not exactly, Fritzi giggled. But we sure had fun. We ran all over the malls until Brand was thirsty, so we stopped for some ice cream treats. She turned to Teddy and actually smiled at her. Gotta admit, kid, you got good taste in men.

Brand had long since replaced Lynden as Gram and Teddy's escort to church. The first week, Fritzi had almost agreed to go, but backed out when she saw Gram's Sunday

clothes. Why should I go and be embarrassed by an old woman who's too senile to know she's in church? was her excuse for staying at home.

But one Sunday morning she came from her bedroom with a yellow and black dress, deep blue eyelids, and a red mouth. She pranced out and danced toward Brand. I decided I was being a bad girl, staying away from church just because of the old woman. Everyone knows she's crazy, so I guess it won't hurt me to go.

Gram jumped off the couch where she had been waiting for Teddy. Well, I'm embarrassed to go with a clown. You can count me out. She took off her straw hat and headed for her bedroom.

Teddy and Brand shook their heads and laughed. They don't get along any better than they did when she was seventeen, Teddy said.

And now you can see why, can't you? Fritzi asked, giggling. The old woman never could stand me. Jealous, I suppose. You know she was forty years old when I was born. That's older than I am now. She made an exaggerated shudder. I just can't imagine having a baby now.

You couldn't imagine having a child when you were younger either, the way I hear it, Brand said in a gentle voice.

Hear, hear! Teddy said, happy to hear him standing up to Fritzi. Teddy, also embarrassed by Fritzi's outlandish makeup, felt like following Gram's lead, but did not because of Brand. It was not his fault he got into this mess.

In church, Brand sat between Teddy and Fritzi and Teddy noticed that Fritzi crowded him more than she did. So she moved a little farther away; she did not want to do anything like Fritzi.

On the fourth day of November it dumped Fifteen inches of snow in six hours. Teddy and Brand helped each other fix the loafing sheds to make the livestock comfortable, with hay and water handy.

That night Brand called and said he would be over later and for Teddy to be ready for some fun. She could not wait. She barely ate any supper and the clock hands crept around slowly. At half past seven, the familiar attack on the front door brought Teddy to her feet. Fritzi beat her to the door, though barely.

Brand stepped inside, covered with snow. Get some warm clothes on, Teddy, he instructed, after lifting her to his frosty kiss. We're going for a ride.

How about poor wittow me? Fritzi asked, talking baby talk directly into Brand's face. I never get to do anything fun. Don't I get to go with you?

Sorry. The rig is only a two-seater. Hurry, Teddy, I'm getting too hot in here, he called.

I bet that's because of little old me, don't you think? She winked at him as Teddy arrived, dressed in a warm snowsuit with the hood pulled over her head and tied securely.

I'm ready, Brand, and I feel like a snowman. She put on the boots she had carried to the door and they stepped out into the wintry world.

Gram! Look what we're going to ride in. Thunder, Brand's huge stallion, wearing a dark blanket, stood hitched to a small red sleigh. Fit for a snow queen, the sleigh was low in front, the sides rising toward the back, with lots of fancy squiggles and curls all around. Thunder wore a gala red harness edged with small bells. When the large horse moved, the bells filled the night with their music.

Brand helped Teddy inside and tucked the heavy woolen blanket around them. This is fantastic, Brand. I've never ridden in a sleigh. Brand gave her a toothy smile and began singing Jingle Bells. His clear baritone voice rang out through the first verse and chorus. Then he stopped and looked at Teddy. Do you know the second verse?

Yes, shall we sing it together? And they did, harmonizing through the second verse and chorus, the harness bells accenting the song.

After they finished, Teddy relaxed in the curve of his arm. I love you for this, she said. You couldn't have done anything more romantic.

Brand leaned across all their blankets and heavy clothing to kiss her. I love you, he whispered.

They talked about the future as Thunder pulled them through the still night. Whether they should run both cattle and llamas or change entirely to llamas, whether they should live in Gram's house and run her farm and get someone to help Rolf with the other.

I can't believe how still the night is, Teddy said. Only Thunder's bells. Thank you, Brand, I love it. And I love you so very much.

In that case, it was worth all the trouble, my love.

Was it a lot of trouble?

Sure was. His twinkling eyes contradicted his statement. I had to take Thunder out behind that back shed and hook it up. He held her close and rearranged the wool blanket over them. You see, I bought the sleigh several weeks ago, and I've been waiting impatiently for the snow.

You mean the sleigh is yours?

Ours.

Then we can go again?

Anytime you want. Are you ready to go home yet, Teddy Bear?

Yes, and it's been the greatest night of my life. Thanks again, my love.

Thunder realized he was on his way home and broke into a smooth canter several times.

When Brand walked Teddy to the house, they discovered Fritzi sitting outside in the love seat waiting for them. My turn, she sang out.

No way, Brand growled. It's too late.

Come on, you know you want one more little spin. She put both hands around his upper arm. Please? I'd really like it.

Brand moved away from Fritzi. Her hands dropped to her side. I'm tired and Thunder's getting cold, Brand said. Maybe Teddy can take you for a ride tomorrow.

Fritzi threw her head prettily. But it won't be the same. She swept her hand over the snow-covered vista. If that isn't a story book scene I've never seen one. Please take me tonight.

Teddy stood on her toes and kissed his lips. Why don't you take her for a little ride? she whispered. Just down to your driveway? I'm afraid her life has been pretty bleak.

No!

Just for me? she whispered again, their lips still touching.

He spun away, angrily. Come on, Fritzi, but it's going to be short. Nevertheless, he helped Fritzi into the sleigh, and carefully tucked the robes around her.

Teddy went into the house and removed her snowsuit and sweater. Gram sat in the rocker, sewing finished quilt blocks together. Where are the others? she asked.

Brand took Fritzi for a sleigh ride. Gram, he's so wonderful. He really didn't want to but after I badgered him into it, I noticed he covered her up so very gently and carefully.

Hmph.

Teddy laughed. What in the world does that mean, Gram?

It means she didn't need a sleigh ride.

Oh, Gram, that's not like you. It's not like Brand either, but she sounded so pitiful I felt sorry for her.

You should have left him alone, Gram finally grumbled.

Gram, Teddy said, that's not the way you taught me. You've always said it never hurts to go the extra mile for anyone no matter whom.

Humph! Well, I'm not saying it right now. I meant someone who needed help, not someone who wanted to tear up other people's lives. Gram's fingers slowed for exactly the amount of time it took her to say the ugly words, then began pushing the needle in and out again, with the speed of a bird picking up seeds.

Teddy picked up her knitting. She probably would not get anything done, but she hated to waste time. She worked fast and finished three rows, then held it up. See, Gram, isn't it pretty? She held a red piece of fuzzy rib knitting, the beginnings of a skirt to match the sweater she had just finished.

Why don't you go on to bed, Gram? Teddy asked fifteen minutes later. I'll wait up to let Fritzi in.

I'll wait with you.

After nearly a half hour, Teddy began to feel uneasy. They couldn't have had an accident, could they, Gram? After all, what can happen in a sleigh?

Finally, Gram grinned. They could have gotten into a snow drift and got caught.

Then Teddy remembered her own sleigh ride. Gram, Brand sang 'Jingle Bells' to me while Thunder's harness bells jingled in the still night. It was so beautiful. And romantic. Her knitting needles stopped as she remembered how glorious it was. Gram, did you ever go sleigh riding?

Gram's needle did not stop. A bright pink border began to appear around the butterfly. Sure did, kitten.

With Cramp?

Gram's throaty laugh filled the room. Don't ask. No, it was before I met your grandfather. They talked a while and somehow got around to the subject of Fritzi's leaving right after Teddy was born.

Poor Gram. I've thought about how awful you must have felt to be saddled with a baby after you had raised your own and I've thought about how you must have worried about Fritzi. Was it awful? What did you tell people?

Gram's eyes, looking all soft, turned to Teddy. You've been the second biggest blessing, close behind your grandfather, of a large assortment of blessings that God's seen fit to shower on me, Teddy. Don't worry about that for a minute. What did I tell people?

For a while I hedged, trying to protect Fritzi because I was certain she'd come back. But after a while I simply told people I didn't know where she was and that you were legally mine. That was the truth, you know. After a certain time, I forget now how long you have to wait, I got legal custody of you.

The front door slamming interrupted their talk and they both ran to the living room.

Fritzi stood by the door, looking as though she had been on a ten-mile hike. Her hair and even her eyelashes had turned white. Her shoulders also had more than a snowy cape over them. Teddy also noticed packed snow on both sides of her mittens. As her eyes took in the entire picture, she saw a lot of packed snow on Fritzi's knees. Knees that had only nylons between them and the snow.

Well, Gram said almost jovially, looks like you crawled home on your hands and knees. She laughed as though pleased about the whole thing.

Why are you laughing, old woman? Fritzi asked. That Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde that Teddy wants to marry is crazy. First he sang 'JingleBells' to me right in time with Thunder's harness bells. When he finished the song, he just picked me up, laughing like a maniac, and dumped me overboard several miles from here. Then, he told that big horse to run home fast. I heard him. And the horse took off as though the devil himself was chasing him. He probably knows how daft the man is.