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I guess it s time for us all to get to bed, Brand said. Gram, you re some artist. You just whistle anytime you get the urge to draw again. He laughed softly. Just be sure we play on the same team again.

You got that right, sonny. I m not about to play with that lump of dough that just left.

After Brand had left, Gram turned to Teddy, her faded blue eyes dancing. You ve never been kissed like that before, have you, kitten?

No, and I hated it. Teddy shuddered, remembering. I felt his yucky teeth and Gram, is something wrong with me?

Nope. It s the toad that kissed you. Maybe now you can wake up to find the handsome prince.

Like who?

Gram shrugged. How w ould I know?

Teddy took a shower and brushed her teeth. Then she went to bed, wondering what Gram had been babbling about. She had been referring to Brand, of course. After asking God to bless and guide her, she fell asleep.

The next afternoon, Teddy noticed that one of Brand s water gun sprinklers was not rotating. He would have a flood in almost no time if the huge sprinkler was not fixed it threw out fifty gallons a minute. She dropped the hammer and spit out the nails she had been using to repair a weak spot in the fence between the north and south pastures. Then she dashed to the shed for her wrench and took off toward Brand s place. Thirty minutes later she gave the sprinkler a final testing; she smiled at the smooth and steady way it turned.

Waiting until the hundred-foot stream of water passed the spot where she would climb the fence, she zipped out behind its path and scrambled onto her own property, pleased that she had discovered the problem and helped a neighbor.

She shook her head. She could not be disappointed that Brand had not come out to help. She did not need him. *Why does Brand invade my mind all the time?* Teddy wondered as she continued working on the fence. *I ve never spent time dreaming about a man, not even Lynden, and this tall, bronzed giant walks into my life and knocks me completely out of whack.* Father, she whispered, I ve always been a sensible down-to-earth person. Please help me to stay that way. Thank You. She gathered up her hammer and nails and started working on her fence again.

I ll bet I can guess whom you aren t thinking about.

Teddy dropped the hammer and nearly swallowed two nails. Brand must be a mind reader. She pressed her hand to her cheek. Okay, whom am I not thinking about?

The blob. The one with absolutely no personality.

Teddy stared into his brown eyes the ones where the sunbeams learned how to dance. She said nothing.

Oh, come on, Teddy, surely you remember the blob. He s the guy who kissed you last night.

Oh.

Did you enjoy th at kiss?

Teddy felt her face redden. What I enjoy and what I don t enjoy couldn t possibly be of interest to you.

Oh, but it is. He leaned back on his heels and watched her embarrassment. When are you going to send him down the road?

I have no intentions of sending him down the road. And what makes you think I didn t enjoy the kiss?

Because he forced you, kicking and screaming all the way. I was just ready to rearrange his face when he let you go.

He knew. Evidently he stood there with Gram, watching the show they put on. He s not that bad, she mumbled. I m just not into rough kissing, and I thought he wasn t, either. I can t figure out what got into him last night.

I can. You ve heard of animals marking out their territory? Well, that s what that turkey was doing. And I m still mad about it.

Gram arrived on the scene and heard his remark. What are you mad about, sonny? Because she s his territory, or that he marked her as his?

I don t know, Gram, all of the above? I guess I m just mad. He pulled his hands from his pockets. I d better be getting back. It s about time for evening feeding. See you later. He took off in an easy run and a moment later Teddy and Gram watched him scramble over the old log fence.

You let him call you Gram, and didn t even yell about it, Teddy said, her bright eyes sparkling.

The leathery old face creased into a wide smile. I believe I did, at that.

The next Sunday, Lynden took Gram and Teddy to church as usual, and Lynden followed Teddy down the aisle, into the pew. After they sat down, Teddy kept wondering

if Brand was in the little church, but she refused to turn around to check. She was in deep thought, enjoying the quiet organ music, when a rustling to her left caused her to meet two laughing brown eyes. Brand scooted through the pew from the other side and sat down beside her.

When the opening hymn was announced, Teddy's hand collided with Brand's as they reached for a hymnal. She pulled back as though his touch was distasteful, but she did not feel that way not even a little bit that way. What was the matter with her, anyway? Then she felt Lynden tense up beside her.

When they rose to sing, Brand motioned for Lynden to share his hymnal with Gram and he held his out for Teddy. Lynden could hardly ignore the sensible-sounding request there being only two hymnals in each pew so Teddy shared Brand's book, and learned he had a strong clear baritone voice.

The minister chose for his sermon the verses that said, Inasmuch as you have done it for the least, you have done it for me. For some reason that made Teddy think of Lynden. She decided she must treat him better. After all he had been coming over for several years and had been faithful and kind all the time. Brand's arrival had upset Lynden as well as her and she wondered if maybe he had even knocked Gram off her always-even keel.

Afterward, outside in the warm sunlight, Brand held his big brown hand out to Lynden and shook hard. Great sermon, wasn't it, brother? Then he turned to Gram. Hannah has prepared lunch for six, Gram, so could I persuade you folks to help us eat it?

Hey, that sounds fantastic, replied Gram. What do you think, kitten?

Teddy thought it sounded interesting but she had just told herself to be more considerate to Lynden. She turned to him. How about you? Would you rather eat at our place?

Frankly, I would, but it looks as if I don't have any choice. His bottom lip puffed out as though a bee had stung it, making him look for all the world like a pouty child. Are you going to ride with me? he asked crossly.

Of course, I'm riding with you, Teddy said. But you do have a choice, Lynden. I can fix a meal that will fill you up. Really I can. I'd like to go home and change my clothes first anyway. No telling what we'll be doing before the day ends.

After lunch, everyone settled into luxurious white leather chairs and sofas in Brand's comfortable living room and visited for a while.

Well, my lunch has settled, Brand announced about midafternoon, how about everyone else's?

Yeah, Lynden agreed. You have a comfortable place here,

Thanks. Anyone want to go riding?

Gram was on her feet before he finished talking. You know, sonny, I thought you d never ask.

Me, too. May I ride Misty? Teddy asked.

I think I d better head for home, Lynden said. Why don t you come on into Bend with me, Teddy? We have plans for later, you know.

She bounced over and captured his hand. No, you don t. You re going to ride with us. Our plans are for much later.

Brand saddled Powder, a dark fat mare, for Gram. Just what she needs, Gram, a tiny little lady. She s going to be a mama in about five months.

Then he saddled Misty for Teddy and Pharaoh, the big chestnut gelding for Lynden. Here s your steed, Greeley, think he ll be fast enough for you? Brand asked, mischief jumping in his brown eyes.

Lynden looked the gelding up and down, and from one end to the other. That thing looks pretty big, he mumbled. And I m not real used to riding. Maybe you should take him and let me ride yours.

Okay, Brand agreed. He stepped to the next stall and brought out Thunder. Here he is. He s the largest stallion in these parts and his name is Thunder for a reason. Do you want to saddle him?

Lynden looked doubtful as he watched the monstrous horse prance and rear in its eagerness to go. No, I really think I should be getting back to town.

Gram stepped up to Brand and indicated Lynden with her thumb. He s pretty skinny. Think he s too heavy for Powder?

I suppose not, if he treats her carefully. Did you decide not to ride?

No way. I m riding Pharaoh.

Finally, everyone rode down the long driveway toward the highway. I know this neat riding trail, about a mile west, Brand said. Rolf and I ve been riding it.

Everyone walked their horses until they hit the trail, then Gram urged Pharaoh into an easy canter. Brand and Teddy followed and Lynden s pregnant mare, Powder, who was not about to be left behind, stepped up to a fast trot. Hey, Sinclair, Lynden yelled after a few minutes. How do I stop this thing? It s shaking my teeth out.

Pull back on the reins, gently, Brand called, but Lynden only heard the first part of the instructions and jerked the reins as hard as he could. At the same time, his heels dug into Powder s tender flanks. The mare stopped short and stood on her hind legs, then

put her head down and kicked her back legs straight above her head. Lynden flew several feet into the air, landing on his back on a bed of pine needles.

Teddy sucked in her breath, wondering if Lynden was all right. But Brand instantly flew off his stallion, caught Powder's reins, and examined her mouth. There, there, girl, we won't let him do it again. He hugged her dark neck and patted her. I'm sorry, baby, he's just a mean man, but you're all right, now.

Then he turned to Lynden with fury written all over his face. What were you trying to do? he bellowed, Tear her mouth off? Don't you know horses have feelings? Guys like you ruin perfectly good horses.

Lynden struggled to his feet. If you think I'm climbing back on that horse, you're crazy. You just gave her to me because you knew she'd do something like that.

Brand said something under his breath then stood quietly for a few moments. If you think I'd let you on any of my horses after that performance, he finally said, you're the crazy one. Now you just high-tail it back to the ranch. I think there's some candy on the kitchen counter. That ought to keep you busy for a while.

Gladly. Come with me, Teddy.

Teddy looked at Gram.

Don't ask me, Gram said. You already kissed the toad. I don't know what the next act is, but you're going to find out, one way or another.

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Please, Teddy, Lynden said quietly. A butterfly's song could have been heard in the ensuing silence. Teddy had been looking so forward to the afternoon ride, but she really should go with Lynden. After all, he had been her boyfriend forever. He wanted her company, and he had a right to ask.

She smiled at the super-thin young man. Sure, I'll come. What shall I do with Misty, Brand?

Uh, bring her to the house and get Rolf. He'll take care of her.

Teddy turned to Misty to walk beside Lynden, who now wore a satisfied smile. They had walked a few steps when Brand called to her. Teddy, would you lead Powder back? You might tell Rolf that Misty feels cheated and needs a nice run. Suggest he come ride with us. He handed Powder's reins to her, mounted Thunder, and turned to Gram. Okay, Gram, are you ready for some serious riding?

Never been more ready in my life. Let's go. Thunder and Pharaoh gracefully galloped away, and Teddy felt morose.

Lynden walked swiftly back toward the highway, with Teddy, riding Misty, beside him, and leading Powder. Thanks, Teddy, I really wanted a little time alone with you.

It s all right, I can ride another time. I really do like horses, you know.

No, I didn t know. Why don t you get some of your own?

You know we mortgaged the ranch to the limit when we changed from cattle to llamas. Well, Gram s been putting every spare dime on the mortgage. She took a notion it had to be paid off in five years, and we re right on schedule. Then we can get some horses. And fix up the place. And whatever else

How about I hop up behind you? Lynden asked, as they turned into Brand s long, long driveway.

Teddy shook her head and slid out of the golden horse s saddle. I can t, Lynden, but I ll walk with you. Both horses plodded along behind the pair.

Are you getting hooked on that guy? Lynden asked.

Teddy shook her head. He s nice, though, she said quietly.

They talked about inconsequential things until they reached the house, and Lynden went inside for Rolf. He returned a few minutes later with a handful of candy. Teddy laughed out loud. I see you remembered the candy.

A half-hour later they reached Teddy s house and, after having removed their shoes, they went through the bare living room and flopped onto the kitchen couch. Well, I guess we got our exercise, even though it didn t turn out quite as I d planned, Teddy said with a quiet sigh.

Lynden rested a moment, then scrambled to his feet. I ll make some sandwiches. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out roast beef, mayonnaise, lettuce, and white bread. A short while later, he set the small plate on the coffee table, put two tall glasses of milk beside it, and sat down next to Teddy.

Aren t you going to ask me if I know anything exciting? he asked. He took a huge bite of his sandwich, and washed it down with some milk.

Okay. Hey, Lynden, I was just wondering, have you learned anything exciting lately?

He nodded, and wiped his chin with a paper napkin. Then, he pushed himself back on the couch and sat up straight. It s about your fancy neighbor. Do you still want to hear?

Suddenly, Teddy did not feel hungry anymore. She laid her sandwich down. Of course I do. Tell me. She waited a moment, then realized she was holding her breath.

What do you know about the guy anyway?

Teddy thought a moment. Not much. She felt stifled as though the air were too hot to breathe. Get on with it, Lynden, I'm curious.

Well, it was this bank robbery in Eugene. Isn't that where he came from? It happened just a few weeks before he showed up here. We got a short item and picture concerning the robbery and it's Sinclair, Teddy. I'd swear it is. Not only the picture and description match, but that truck he drives is the getaway rig.

Teddy shook her head. No way, not Brand. You have the wrong guy.

Maybe. Maybe not. He looked so smug that, for a second, she almost did not like him. How much did that ranch cost, Teddy?

I don't know. A bundle, I guess.

He leaned closer to her, his eyes boring into hers. Where did he get the money? Not too many guys his age have that kind of money and almost as few have the credit to borrow it.

Where did you see it, Lynden? Show me. Teddy felt breathless, but she would not let Lynden know.

Well, it hasn't been published in our paper, yet. Since it's old news anyway they'll wait until we have a little place to fill. Who'd ever expect him to be hiding out over here?

Could you bring me a copy of the picture? And also the item? I might even show it to Brand.

Lynden shook his head vigorously. I'll bring you a copy but you better not show it to Brand. He may be dangerous.

Teddy went to bed that night with Gram's praises of Brand ringing in her ears and his golden good looks floating in her mind, riding like the wind on his beautiful black stallion. *I wish Gram would keep quiet about him*, she told herself, turning over for the ninth time. *He's only a friend. I want to spend my time thinking of Lynden.* But Lynden's face refused to take form in her mind. *What's happening to me? Brand has given me no reason to think about him like this. Besides, he may be a dangerous bank robber.* She laughed out loud at the ludicrousness of that, turned over, and whispered. *Lynden's been my special friend for so long I keep thinking You've given him to me. Is that Your plan for me, Lord? And if Brand's a criminal, won't you help me find out for sure?* Finally, she fell asleep.

Teddy did not see Brand for several days, but her thoughts were constantly on what Lynden had told her. Come to think of it, she did not even know how old Brand

was. But he certainly did not look or act like someone hiding from the law. Finally, she could not stand it any longer and asked Gram what she thought.

Why don't you ask him? Gram said. Nothing works as well as communication, I always find.

I'm not sure why I haven't asked, but Lynden told me not to as he might be dangerous.

Pish posh, Gram bellowed. Brand's about as dangerous as Cocoa. Cocoa was one of their best llamas and also one of the gentlest.

Lynden asked Teddy to go to play the following week and she eagerly looked forward to it. Not only to see the play, which is always enjoyed, but so that she could ask him again about that newspaper article he had mentioned about the Eugene bank robbery. She did not get the chance until they came back at ten-thirty that night after the play.

Want to come in for a minute? she asked.

Sure. For a little while. He sprawled on the couch and pulled the candy dish onto his lap.

She had to ask him now, or she would drive herself crazy wondering. Anything interesting at the paper these days?

No, not in this quiet little town. He unwrapped another mint.

What about the bank robbery thing? Did it ever get printed?

He popped the mint between his teeth and reached for another. I don't think so. I guess the editor thinks there isn't much chance of the guy's being around here. Think I should turn him in?

No! I mean, you don't even know if it's him.

He looked sharply at Teddy. You do have something going with him, don't you?

Of course not. You've been with us every time we've tried to do anything. And wrecked it, too, I might add.

Lynden lumbered to his feet. Well, I'm glad I wrecked your fun with him. I don't approve of his coming around here. Now I have to go home or I'll never get up in the morning.

Teddy walked to the door and waited while he put his shoes on. Then he gave her a peck on the lips, his usual goodbye. See you Sunday.

The next afternoon Teddy worked on the north pasture fence again, with the llamas crowding so close she could hardly work. Finally, she threw down her hammer and spent thirty minutes loving her woolly friends.

Looks like the real thing to me.

Teddy pulled her arm from Romeo's neck and smiled. What's the real thing? she asked.

Love. It looks as if you and your llamas really love each other.

Oh. Well, we do.

I suppose you're going to tell me that you know all your llamas by name.

Of course I do. She started pointing at individual llamas. That's Lily, there's Cocoa, one of our best young llamas, and there's Angel, Rose is over here, that black one is Belle, Duska is beside Belle and the baby llamas are Peanut, that's the brown one, and

Brand cut her off with a deep laugh. Whoa! We could be at this all day. But one thing I've been wondering about. Have you ever looked across my cattle? All red, wide, and exactly alike?

Teddy nodded. Exactly alike.

Well, Brand continued, that makes me feel as though my cattle are all the same breed.

I know. Hereford. That's the kind we raised.

Brand flashed her a friendly smile. Right. But when I look at your multicolored herd of goats, he shrugged, I think you have a bunch of mutts.

You're wrong, Brand. Llamas come in every color from white through reds and browns to blacks, and all mixes. The color doesn't matter and you never know what a female will throw. It's the conformation that counts. She grinned. As Teddy talked, the llamas crowded and bumped them until they could not stand still. Let's get out of here so we can talk.

In a few minutes, they sat in the lush grass of the empty south pasture about ten feet from the disappointed llamas. As they visited, Teddy could think only about Lynden's terrible news concerning Brand. She just had to find out if it was true.

Uh how old are you? she asked when a lull developed in the conversation.

Okay, nosy, I'm almost thirty. He tweaked a dark brown curl. Old enough to be your father.

Have you ever been married? Have any kids?

Teddy thought Brand's eyes opened a bit wider, but he took the question in stride. I thought I was just getting old enough for those things. Are you applying for the job?

As Teddy tried to think of a clever answer, something wet and green plopped against her forehead and bounced onto her lap. Brand wiped it off his face while Teddy scraped the horrible stuff from her lap and threw it as far as she could. But that awful odor remained. He took her hand and they ran to the line of old bath tubs that supplied water for the llamas. He washed his face and she literally poured water over her pants. They both washed their hands and washed their hands and washed their hands. When she met Brand's eyes, she realized he was more than unhappy, he was furious!

I'm sorry, she began, I didn't see Casanova around this morning. He must have come up after we left the llamas.

He started off toward his own ranch, muttering under his breath. The rest of the day seemed colder and darker to Teddy. In fact, she barely noticed when the sun dropped behind the trees. When she could not see to drive nails anymore, she quit and trudged to the house.

Gram offered no sympathy when told about the incident. Don't worry, kitten, he'll get over it.

But Teddy did worry. She had a hard time getting to sleep, thinking about Brand. He might not come back anymore, after two run-ins with Casanova. Then her mind wandered to the news that Lynden had so eagerly pressed into her ear. If Brand had any criminal tendencies he was the best actor she had ever met. Well, what was it to her, anyway?

The next morning Teddy filled the watering tubs and checked through the llamas, especially the young ones, making sure everybody was happy and well. As she worked, she thought of Brand. He really did brighten her days. After she finished feeding, she remembered she had not noticed Casanova. She walked back through all the milling llamas and still did not see him.