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Oh well, how could she expect to see each of 500 llamas every time? Still, it bothered her and she mentioned it to Gram at breakfast.

Let's go have another look, Gram said.

They wandered through the herd for an hour and a half but did not spot the large red and white llama. We can look again after lunch, Gram. He's probably lying down somewhere in the shade.

But several more checks convinced Teddy that Casanova had disappeared. Where could he have gone? No llama had ever disappeared before. Not only was Casanova a good friend, but they had paid \$14,000 for him. And for Romeo, too. They were top breeding stock. A ranch the size of Teddy's one of the largest in the United States must breed good stock.

That night, Gram busily cut out pieces for her quilt and Teddy worked on her red sweater. She hoped to finish it that evening and start on the matching skirt. Just how mad was your neighbor when he left the other day? Gram asked.

Teddy laughed. Pretty mad, and I don't blame him. You can't believe how awful that stuff is.

Mad enough to do something to Casanova?

Teddy's throat constricted and a fat lump formed too far down to swallow. No. Brand would not do something to any animal. He was too kind. But where could the big llama have gone? After asking her Heavenly Father to care for the llama, Teddy felt better and went to bed.

The next morning, Gram went with Teddy to do the morning chores, and they both searched behind every tree and in all the sheds, as well as among the many sizes and colors of llamas. He simply was not on the place.

I think we owe our neighbor a visit, Gram said, after they finished washing the breakfast dishes.

Maybe just one of us should go, Gram. He might think we're being unfriendly if we both go.

He might be right, too, Gram said, nodding her head.

They both took off across the uninhabited south pasture. After climbing the old log fence, they trotted across Brand's pasture, through his yard, and up to the house. Gram banged on the front door; Teddy wished she were small enough to hide behind the tiny old lady.

Brand's middle-aged helper, Hannah, opened the door. Well, our neighbors. I've been wishin' you'd come see me. She opened the door wide. Come right in. I'll fix something to munch on.

Teddy stepped forward and ran into Gram's steel arm. We didn't come for socializing, Gram said in a stern voice. We'd like to see Mr. Sinclair.

He ain't here, Mrs. Marland. He and Rolf had a business engagement in Sisters this morning. Think they hauled an animal over there. I don't know when they'll be back.

Humph! You tell Mr. Sinclair we have urgent business with him the minute he gets back. Understand?

Hannah nodded. I understand, Mrs. Marland. I hope everything's all right.

Just tell him. Gram turned Teddy around and marched her down the steps.

Neither said a word until they jumped the fence into their own property. Then Teddy stopped Gram and looked into her faded blue eyes. You don't think they hauled Casanova to the Patterson Ranch do you? The Patterson Llama Ranch was *the* largest in the country and located in the tiny town of Sisters.

I'd rather think that than that he killed the animal.

It could have been someone else, Gram.

Sure, and Brand wasn't mad at Casanova.

Someone could have taken him for the money.

Come on, kitten, your brain's turning to mush, Gram puffed as they trotted across their pasture. Anyone who knows how much Casanova's worth would know Cocoa and several other females are worth twice that much or more. Don't you think they'd be likely to rustle the females or both?

Teddy's mind felt like mush all right. She had had enough worries, fearing some of the llamas might get sick and die after mortgaging the ranch to pay for them, now she had to start worrying about rustling.

An hour later, Brand drove his black truck down the driveway amid a cloud of dust, turned into the yard and skidded thirty feet to a stop. He ran to the front porch, where Gram and Teddy sat, taking a breather from their work.

Hannah said you girls are all upset about something, he said. Breathing hard, he plopped down on the front steps. How can I help?

What did you go to Sisters for? Gram asked in a voice resembling a moose's call.

Brand's eyebrows shot up in surprise. We sold an unnecessary animal, he answered a moment later. Another long silence followed. Have I done something wrong? he finally asked. He looked from Gram to Teddy and back to Gram.

Teddy could not answer. In fact, she could not bear to be making this rift. But Gram did not seem to mind. Any idea how much a good breeding llama is worth? she asked.

After a short silence that seemed an eternity, Brand answered. No, Gram, I don't. I hadn't considered it vital information to my operation.

Well, it's vital to our operation, young man. We paid \$14,000 for that llama that spits.

Brand whistled. But his eyes never left Gram's face. Then he shook his golden head. Seems like an animal worth that much money could learn who his friends are, doesn't it?

Gram jumped from her chair and towered over Brand, who still sat on the top step. I've had enough game playing, Brand. Why don't you just tell us what you've done with Casanova.

Brand sprang up beside Gram, reversing positions, and peered down at her, the benign expression gone from his face. What do you think I've done with that cheap camel? I haven't been near him and believe me that's the way it's going to stay. His stormy gaze met Gram's thunderous one. I hate that animal! he finished, with feeling.

Gram nodded. So you hate him. I'll ask you once more. What did you do with him?

In the moment that followed, Brand's eyes lighted with understanding. Oh, you mean you want to know what I did *to* him, do you? Well, I shot him and fed him to my cattle. He cast one furious look at Teddy and stomped down the steps.

Well, what do you think? Gram asked, as they watched the truck disappear in a cloud of angry dust.

I think he's innocent.

I don't know. He got pretty riled.

Wouldn't you? If someone accused you of purposely doing someone out of \$14,000?

As Teddy went about her work that afternoon she thought about Brand. If he did do something to Casanova, then he probably robbed the bank too. She did not exactly know why one would have anything to do with the other, but that is how she felt.

The next Sunday, Brand did not sit beside Teddy at church, and she felt very lonely. Even though she felt she had lost a personal friend in Casanova, and that they could hardly handle a financial loss of that magnitude, the fact that Brand would do such a thing was the most painful thought to Teddy. She had been so sure that he would not even step on an ant. Later at home, Lynden seemed unusually happy. I wonder why the big cowboy didn't push himself on us today.

Because one of our llamas spit on him, Gram said in a hard voice.

Lynden burst into one of his rare fits of laughter. He slapped his knee. Fantastic! How did you get her to do it?

It was Casanova, Teddy explained. And this was the second time he did it. Somehow he took a dislike to Brand.

Wise animal.

A lot you know, Teddy thought. You have never shown the slightest interest in our llama herd.

Lunch is ready. Have you washed your hands? Gram asked, looking sharply at Lynden.

He held out his hands. As soon as I came in, Nelle, he answered with a good-natured laugh. You have me trained.

Teddy put the roast on the table and slipped into her chair. Lynden speared a piece of meat almost before Gram finished asking the blessing. The thing is, Gram said, Casanova has disappeared now. Completely gone. She helped herself to a large roasted potato and drowned it with brown gravy.

Lynden took two more bites of roast beef, then his eyes snapped to Gram's. Did you say Sinclair did something violent to your llama?

Gram's eyes never left her plate, but she nodded slowly. I think I'd say that.

Lynden dropped his fork onto his plate, forgetting his food for the moment. This just might be the story that'll get me the advancement I deserve. After we finish eating, I'll write it up.

No you won't. Teddy laid her own fork on the edge of her plate. We have no idea what happened to Casanova, other than he's gone.

Lynden laid an assuring hand on Teddy's arm. I'll just write a story about the disappearance of a valuable animal. Then I'll casually mention that it spit on Sinclair the day before it disappeared. He burst into laughter again. I'll bet he was really mad.

Teddy nodded. I don't blame him a bit. I got it, too, and it's awful stuff.

After lunch, the three sat around visiting. About an hour later, Gram became restless. Did you notice I mowed the lawn? she asked.

I did, Gram. It looks beautiful and smells heavenly. She grinned at her wiry grandmother. We really should mow more than three times a year. I mean I should, not you.

Right. Well, I mowed it so we could play croquet this afternoon. If we don't watch out, summer will be gone with no croquet games.

In a little while the wickets all stood in their proper spots and the players had each chosen a mallet. Gram made each play count, but Teddy and Lynden could not seem to get going. They were still headed toward the far post when a black pickup truck drove slowly up the driveway. It stopped near the house and a short balding man jumped out.

Would you happen to be missing a llama? he called.

Everyone dropped their mallets, the game forgotten. We sure are, Teddy said. It's red and white male. A really huge one.

The man nodded. That's him. You pay for the damage he'd done and he's yours. Personally, I wouldn't have the filthy thing. He crawled over the fence and bred my two females. Then he spat on me when I tried to catch him. The man looked at each of them to determine the effect his story had. And I wanted my females bred to something really good, he finished sadly.

Well, don't shed too many tears about that, junior, Gram said to the middle-aged man. You got a lot more than you bargained for. That llama's worth a mint, and his breeding services go for \$3000, but since he called on you, uninvited, I guess you just received a \$6,000 gift.

The man's face brightened. Are you sure? He's really worth all that much?

Lynden nodded emphatically, as though he knew all about llamas.

I'll follow you home and collect him right now, Teddy said.

When Casanova saw Teddy he ran toward her as though he would smash her into the ground. But Teddy held out her arms to the big llama, who skidded to a stop beside her. Then he nuzzled her face, obviously happy to see her. Come on, you big turkey, let's go, she said, walking toward the open gate with her arm over Casanova's back. She steered him to the horse trailer and he walked in.

Well, Brand didn't do Casanova in, Teddy said to Gram that evening. I guess we owe him another visit.

Yep. Fair is fair, said Gram. Let's get going.

Brand's eyes opened with surprise when he answered his doorbell. He did not smile, but looked at Gram warily. Good evening, he said, without expression.

Gram put her tiny wrinkled hand on Brand's arm. May we come in, sonny? she asked kindly. We have something to say.

Brand backed up. I thought you said it all the last time. He hesitated a moment, then swung the door wide open. Sure. Come in.

We wanted you to know that Casanova's safe and sound, Gram began.

Oh, so I'm exonerated. I'm sure glad he turned up. Otherwise I'd have been guilty forever, wouldn't I?

Teddy knew you didn't do it, Brand.

Brand offered Teddy a small smile. Thanks.

Well, young man, would you like to know what happened to Casanova?

I'm sure you're going to tell me.

He heard the song of romance and deserted his many wives for a new love, Gram said, obviously trying to make Brand laugh.

Brand nodded. I figured as much. You really need to get a fence together that will keep your camels inside.

After a little while of forced conversation, Gram told Teddy they should go home.

Teddy got up then turned to Brand. We came to say we're very sorry we accused you of doing something to him. I know you're much too kind to do something like that.

Brand almost smiled. Oh, I'm not so sure about that. But I'm way too scared of that spitting fool to try anything with him. As far as I'm concerned, his weapon is deadly.

Back home, Teddy and Gram started work on their respective projects. What did you think, Gram? Teddy asked.

I think he's a nice boy. Why do you ask?

Do you think he'll be able to forgive us?

Of course he will. Just give him a little time.

Do you think this means he's not the guy that robbed the bank?

Gram threw back her head and laughed. I don't see what one has to do with the other, but didn't you ask him?

Not exactly. I asked him some personal questions and somehow never got around to that one. He ended up thinking I was proposing to him.

Gram thought that one over for a minute. He's not the kind of person who'd do something dishonest. I doubt he'd even cheat on his income tax and that's borderline. Teddy did not laugh. The sound of Gram's scissors carefully cutting out several butterfly parts snipped a duet with Teddy's clicking needles for a few minutes. Then, Gram laid the scissors down. I was kidding about income tax, you know. Cheating's never borderline. To God, cheating's stealing. And we know the commandments. They worked in silence for a while. Now, maybe I'll get to ride Pharaoh again, Gram said. I'd been worrying about that.

Teddy laughed. Shame, Gram. I never thought you'd be so small.

Oh, pshaw. You've always known I wasn't very big.

Teddy hugged Gram and trudged off to bed. Tomorrow would be another busy day, just like all the rest. She asked God to watch over her, keep her on the right track, and fell asleep in the middle of *Amen*.

All the next day, Teddy watched over her shoulder, hoping to see a big golden man striding toward her, but Brand did not show up. Nor the next day or the next.

When Teddy walked into church beside Lynden the following Sunday, her mind was not on the man she came with. Would Brand come and sit beside her? Just having his big frame beside her on the pew would make her happiness complete for that one day. Her heart beat loudly as she peeked fearfully back toward the door.

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Teddy quickly determined the big man was not in the church. She was not brave enough to turn around again, but her senses stayed turned to the back. *Forgive me, God*, she silently prayed when she discovered she had missed the entire service waiting for Brand.

After the benediction, Gram led her little group outside into the sunshine where the members greeted each other and visited briefly. Then, Teddy saw Brand getting into his sports car, and he was not alone! A tall, dark-haired girl sat in the passenger seat, looking very happy.

Do I detect a grump in you today? Lynden asked after Teddy had cleared the lunch dishes away and joined him on the couch. It couldn't have anything to do with that fox Sinclair had with him, could it?

Why should I care who he has with him? Teddy asked testily.

Well, I care who Brand had with him, Gram said. I was hoping to go riding this afternoon. That Pharaoh s some animal. I can t handle an afternoon of doing nothing. Maybe I ll ride a llama.

A big laugh burst from Teddy and she felt better. Maybe we ll all ride llamas, she said, joining Gram s foolishness.

Teddy and Gram spent the following days fertilizing and watering the alfalfa field. They also kept busy with their other duties, such as irrigating the pastures and caring for the llamas. They always had fencing that needed repairing, but it had to wait its turn. Teddy kept an eye out for Grand all week, but he seemed to be busy elsewhere.

Friday night, Lynden took Teddy to a movie in Bend starring Kurt Russell. I suppose you think that Russell guy is some kind of sex symbol, Lynden kidded while they drank milk shakes later.

Teddy nodded. As a matter of face, he s gorgeous. Admit it, Lynden.

Lynden laughed. He isn t to me. You are, though. Looking a little surprised at his own words, he took the straw back into his mouth and noisily sucked his half-melted drink.

Teddy felt her face redden. She had been thinking she was just another friend to him and here he gives her a compliment. The very first one! Ever!

Thanks, Lynden. She pushed the large, frost-covered glass to one side and leaned on her elbows. That was a sweet thing to say. You re so nice to keep taking me around and I truly appreciate it. You re a good friend, and I enjoy being with you. But is that enough? Shouldn t you be looking for someone who will fall gloriously, crazily in love with you?

Lynden snapped to attention. His eyes narrowed and his lips straightened into a hard line. Is that how you feel about Sinclair?

Of course not. I m not ready for a serious relationship. That s why I wanted to talk with you.

Are you sure?

Of course I m sure. I ve barely seen Brand when you weren t with us.

Lynden released an audible sigh. I ll take your word for it then. I guess we may as well carry on as we have been. I enjoy your company, too, and I m also not ready to get serious with anyone. He chuckled. Not rich enough, anyway. But our friendship means everything to me. I vote we carry on. He reached his right hand across the restaurant table and shook hers firmly.

A wide smile lighted Teddy s face. Okay. Great. But I have one addition to our relationship. We ll take turns paying from now on, okay?

He shook his head. We both know what a bum I am, hanging around your place all the time, eating off you. You're lucky if it equals out. And I do enjoy both you and your grandmother.

Teddy went to bed that night wondering exactly what had happened in the restaurant. She had intended to cool things with Lynden a little, and now she liked him better than she ever had. He had shown insight and sensitivity she had not known he possessed. But she still liked him only as a good friend.

Brand smiled and greeted Teddy and Gram at church that Sunday but did not introduce them to the dark-haired girl who was very much with him.

Back home, Teddy tried desperately to hide the depression she felt. Surely Brand's girlfriend had nothing to do with her feelings, even though she could still see the girl laughing into Brand's eyes while he looked as though he would like to kiss her. The girl's black hair and eyes looked at least part Spanish. With her olive skin and highly-colored cheeks and lips, Teddy had never seen a more beautiful woman in her entire life. Not that she minded Brand having a beautiful woman he deserved it as much as anyone else. And their contrasting looks, his bright hair and her dark, complemented each other. She was glad for him well, she was.

Lynden and Gram appeared not to notice Teddy's funk and all day finally disappeared into a hazy oblivion.

Tuesday morning, Teddy opened her water gate at six o'clock and started getting the irrigation set up so she could use every drop of water that ran into her pond that day.

What're you going to do when you finish that?

Teddy's heart doubled in size instantly and she could barely breathe. She had not talked to Brand for two weeks and here he was, right beside her, in gorgeous living color.

This will take a while. Did you need something? Teddy hoped he could not detect her breathlessness. Or, if he did, maybe he would think it was from moving the long pipe.

I don't need anything, but you do. I'm pretty well caught up right now and I wondered if you'd like some help. We could try to make those rickety fences last another year or two.

Thanks, Brand. Gram and I will be working on fences as soon as I finish here, but I can't think of any reason you should help.

His wide lips parted in a smile. To protect the neighborhood? And my good name? How about to keep a nice old lady off the streets I mean pastures?

Teddy nodded. An afternoon off would not hurt Gram a bit. She probably took the old woman too much for granted. Sure, that would be nice. I'll be ready to start early this afternoon.

He took the big wrench from her hands. I'll help you with this job, which incidentally is much too heavy for a woman, and we'll get on the fence in a couple of hours.

They hooked up several water gun sprinklers and tested them. They all worked fine, except a new one that refused to turn. Teddy worked on the sprinkler head while Brand walked on down the line to check a connection. After she forced a few drops of oil into the right place, the sprinkler began its slow circular motion, shooting a large stream of water more than a hundred feet. She watched it move smoothly in its circle a moment, then, acting on an impulse, spun the head until it drenched Brand.

Hey! He lowered his head and charged toward Teddy, but not until the water had soaked him through. Teddy laughed wildly when he reached her dry spot.

Brand shook his head, sending droplets over Teddy. You did that on purpose, didn't you? he yelled. Grasping her by her arm, he took off running right into the heavy deluge.

Teddy gasped. That water was colder than she had expected. She tried to jerk free, but Brand held tightly, laughing down at her, his dripping hair hanging in points over his forehead. In less than a minute she was as wet as he. They laughed and shouted like two children, pushing each other into the spray as it came around, and playfully trying to escape from the other's grasp. Finally, they ran from the water into the warm sunlight and stood looking at each other for a long moment.

Brand broke the spell. Recess is over, kid. Hit the trail. They worked as energetically together as they had played, neither saying much.

By mid-morning they finished the irrigation and started on the much easier fence repairing. Brand lifted the heavy logs and Teddy drove the huge nails.

Did you know you have a pretty cute grandmother? Brand asked, sometime later.

Teddy nodded and pulled a nail from her mouth. Only the greatest. And she can work as long and hard as I. She shoved the nail back between her teeth and swung the four-pound hammer with all her strength.

They worked a couple of hours without talking, then Brand took the hammer from her and pulled her to the ground beside him. Break time, he said.

Teddy gladly relaxed, allowing the warm sun to continue drying her soaked clothing and hair. Gram and I don't know the meaning of breaks, she said, searching for something to say. We work until we finish and quit.

Brand studied Teddy as though he wanted to say something, but remained quiet.

Gram seemed to be a good subject, Teddy decided. Gram sure enjoyed riding Pharaoh.

Brand nodded. I know. She should ride again. And you, too. You haven't even had one good ride, yet. That, uh, blob that hangs around won't let you finish.

Teddy decided to ignore the slur Brand had aimed at Lynden. Gram really wanted to ride Sunday, but I wouldn't let her interrupt you with your new friend.

You mean Celia? You tell Gram she can come over and ride anytime she wants. Celia would be glad to have her join us.

So Celia did ride with Brand. Teddy felt like crying but she took a deep breath and swallowed. Does Celia ride Misty? she murmured without looking up.

No, she rides her own horse. That's where we met, on that trail I tried to take you on. Brand put his finger under Teddy's chin and lifted it until her eyes met his. Don't you want her riding Misty? he asked softly.

Teddy's eyes dropped to her lap. She swallowed again. For some reason it really hurt her to imagine anyone else on Misty, especially Celia. Or could it be that she did not want anyone else with Brand? She's your horse, she replied. I don't care who rides her.

Brand hopped lightly to his feet and held his hand to help Teddy. Break's over, he said, handing Teddy her large hammer.

They had not worked long when Gram roared up on her motor bike. I fixed lunch for you two, she yelled over the motor. Figured it was the least I could do since I'm having the day off. She gave it the gas and roared away across the pasture.

Teddy dropped her hammer and followed Brand toward the old ranch house.

Several hours, much friendly conversation, and many feet of repaired fence later, Brand and Teddy rested on the pasture floor again. He looked as though he wanted to say something, just as he had earlier in the day.

Say it, Teddy said, laughing. You're bursting with something, so spit it out before we both shatter into fragments.

Brand hesitated, then shook his head. No, I better not. Then he smiled. Maybe I'll ask this instead. How are things going between you and the boy reporter?

Just fine. He's trying hard to get a promotion.

A scowl drew Brand's golden eyebrows almost together. A moment later he got to his feet. I think I'd better call it a day, he said. I still have several things to do before Celia comes over to ride.

Teddy scrambled to her feet, too. Okay, thanks a lot for the help. We repaired as much fence in one day as Gram and I would have in three.

They separated, Teddy walking toward her house and Brand heading for the fence that divided their two places. I notice I didn't get an invite to ride with the beautiful Celia and Brand, she muttered to herself as she crossed the pasture.

Teddy did not eat much supper that night; she was not hungry. After supper, Gram kept looking at her as they watched TV and worked on their projects. Are you sick, kitten? she asked.

Teddy grinned. Almost. Gram, do you think I could be in love with Brand Sinclair?

Gram's blue eyes glistened. I don't see how you could *not* be in love with him, I know I am.

Come on, Gram. I mean really.

So do I. Now, what are you going to do about it?

I don't know. Once upon a time he acted as if he knew I was a woman. But he never notices anymore.