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May 1931
Denver, Colorado

“As you know, we at First Antioch like to introduce our deacon nominees and have them tell the congregation how their spiritual conversion took place, and how Christ continues to work in their lives. Today I’m pleased to introduce Mr. James Britt. Mr. Britt is an attorney for the Northern Rocky Railroad and has lived in Denver since attending the university here. He is married to Winona, sitting here on the front row beside him. They have a three-year-old son, Travis.”

The pastor was a warm outgoing man who talked to his congregation like he was talking to an old friend. “Mr. Britt leads the religious education of the young men’s class. He is the second of twelve children and is a congressionally awarded medal of honor recipient. Many of his brothers and sisters have been a part of our congregation while attending the university. Please make sure to introduce yourself to him after the service, and give a warm Antioch welcome to Mr. Britt.”

James stood up and stepped to the pulpit. He felt very self-conscious. He knew he would have to speak in front of the entire church when he agreed for his name to be placed on the list of potential deacons. He had told God three years earlier, that he would no longer stay isolated—so he knew he had to do this.

Since then, he and his wife had gotten involved with the church and they no longer sat quietly in the back corner of the sanctuary. They had walked the center isle with their infant son and gotten involved with the other young couples attending. James felt that many people had gotten accustomed to seeing his scarred face and he wasn’t as self-conscious when he sat listening during the normal worship services. He didn’t notice the gawking or

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whispering anymore; or maybe he had just gotten used to it. But standing in front of everyone he knew was different.

First Antioch was a large church situated on top of a towering hill overlooking an upscale residential area on two sides. A community park stood across from the front of the church and a few small, fashionable businesses set to the north offering an introduction to the Denver business area on the outskirts of the city. The church was probably one of the largest in Denver. Its massive steeple shown prominently above the surrounding buildings for miles.

James turned to look at the people. He tried to smile at his wife but the only thing she and the other observers saw was a slender upturn on one side of his lip. Winona recognized this slight snarl as a smile. She smiled back. The man speaking also saw his cousin, Dr. Curtis Stewart, sitting a few rows behind his wife. Curt smiled and gave James an encouraging nod.

Curt and James had joined military service together during World War 1. They worked in a medical unit along with two other cousins. Curt had been there when James was injured and he had helped care for his wounds. The young doctor had returned home to care for his cousin again, and had been there when James experienced a healing miracle. Both of the cousins that enlisted with them were now dead.

“Thank you, pastor,” James began nervously. He’d spoken in front of large crowds in the courtroom before, but he’d never talked about himself to this many people.

“As Pastor Simmons said, I am one of twelve children. Of those twelve, ten are adopted. I am one of those ten. My mother was murdered when I was six and my father couldn’t handle the thought of caring for five children alone. He was devastated by my mother’s death. His friend took me, and my four siblings, home while my father grieved the loss of his wife. My father never made the adjustment to raising us alone. He ended up in jail and the five of us were adopted by his friend. This is where I was introduced to the love of Jesus.

“My new father was a Godly man. He taught us scripture, and he taught us to love like Jesus loved. We were expected to obey our parents and God, and because we were loved so well, we wanted to please. We had lots of extended family living near us,

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including the man who became my grandfather. For the most part, it was a happy peaceful childhood and I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior early in life. I was a good kid and I didn't cause my parents any problems.

"But when my older brother was killed, I could easily have lost all faith I had in a good God. My father was also injured in the same incident and a lot of his energy, over the next few months, was spent recovering. But my grandfather, my mother, and my aunts and uncles were there to help, and they kept the whole family focused on God's goodness and promises, and not the tragedy that my family suffered.

"My parents always expected me to help take care of the younger children, and now I was the oldest. I had to gather whatever knowledge of Christ, and whatever faith I had, so that I could guide my younger siblings and support my parents.

"My family had also taken in four other children. My dad had found them living in the middle of nowhere, by themselves, just before the incident that killed my brother. The oldest boy was just a few years younger than me, and he had been scavenging and stealing to feed and care for his little sisters. Dad brought them home.

"It was hard dealing with Matt's death and these new kids in the house at the same time. But love always wins. 'Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.'¹ 'Love never fails.'² And there was enough love in my family to endure anything.

"I watched my parents, and saw them support all of us kids; and I think I began to see how God could love so many, and take care of so many, all at the same time. My grandfather had also taken in the son of another man who was sent to prison. This boy had no other family, and he became like a brother to me. My parents and my grandfather always knew what was going on with each of the children. They knew what we needed and how to best care for each of us. And they taught us how to care for each other.

"Just a few months later, those children Dad brought home were taken away by the authorities. I saw my whole family grieve

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:7 ESV

² 1 Corinthians 13:8a

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this loss and pray for the protection and safety of those kids. I felt that loss too, maybe as much as when my brother died.

“I knew my brother was with Jesus. I would miss him, but he was safe and taken care of in heaven. These children I lived with, and learned to love, had no one to care for them, no one to love them. They were being stripped away from the only family they ever knew. I questioned how God could do that to them, and to us.

“But God was gracious and restored those children to our family a few months later. I saw how God moved silently, and unseen, within their situation to bring them back to us. None of us saw what was happening, but God was working through other people, and out of our sight, to bring them home. They were adopted too, and became my brothers and sisters.

“Four years later I went to war. The constant danger, unimaginable noise and confusion, and the injuries and death of my comrades, were disturbing to my soul. A buddy told me that God couldn’t possibly be there with us. I didn’t want to believe that. My buddy wasn’t feeling God’s presence, but I wanted to make sure God was with me.

“I knew God’s presence wasn’t about my feelings; it was about my faith. I did my best to stay connected through prayer and scripture so that my spirit could be renewed daily. My grandfather had told me to read scripture any time I could, and I found his advice more helpful than anything else I did.

“You couldn’t think about anything during battle. You could only react. But worse than the battle was the anticipation before the fighting started. It captured my mind and held it prisoner. It wouldn’t even allow me to talk to God, I was too busy preparing for what was coming.

“After the battle, all I could do was collapse in relief and try to recover my nerves. I’d walk among the wounded and those I worked with. I’d give them water and talk with them. Sometimes I would feel guilty that I survived and someone else didn’t. Sometimes I would hold a hand and pray with someone I knew wouldn’t make it.

“But the one overpowering emotion that we all had was relief. And when I dropped onto my bunk at night, there were only

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two words I could say to God over and over, ‘Thank you. Thank you.’

“So, I clung to the piece of paper my grandfather had given me. My grandfather had survived the Civil War and held to scriptures he had memorized to survive. Those verses were written in his messy handwriting on a single sheet of paper that I kept in my pocket. I clung to those scriptures for life itself. The Word of God, written just for me by my grandfather.”

James pulled a tattered piece of paper from his jacket pocket and struggled to unfold it; his damaged hands unable to separate the pages. Even from his seat half-way back in the church, Curt could see the creases, tears, and sweat stains on the page. The ink had run in a few places and James could no longer read what was written, but he knew what it said. He knew the words his grandfather had told him to hold tightly to.

“And then I was injured,” James began to fold the paper, “and I became numb to everything around me. My heart called out to God for death, but there was no response. For months I lay in the hospital, and for months God seemed too far away to reach.”

James raised his hands as he looked toward heaven, remembering the anguish of his suffering and spoke in a loud voice.

““O God, listen to my cry!
Hear my prayer!
From the ends of the earth,
I cry to you for help
when my heart is overwhelmed.
Lead me to the towering rock of safety,
for you are my safe refuge,
a fortress where my enemies cannot reach me.
Let me live forever in your sanctuary,
safe beneath the shelter of your wings!””³

James looked back at the congregation and fell silent as he gripped the pulpit and looked around the room.

³ Psalm 61:1-4 NLT

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Then he continued. "When God did respond, he said no. He would not take me home. I had to remain, even though the doctors said I would eventually succumb to my injuries. My family took care of me for twenty long difficult months before healing came. It came unexpected and unexplained, a true miracle from God. God used those months to teach me to trust him totally, for everything; even for the air that I breathe.

““As God lives, who has taken away my right,
and the Almighty, who has made my (life) bitter,
as long as my breath is in me,
and the spirit of God is in my nostrils,
my lips will not speak falsehood
and my tongue will not utter deceit.”⁴

““My words declare the uprightness of my heart,
and what my lips know they speak sincerely.
The Spirit of God has made me,
and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”⁵

James lowered his head and added, "Will you pray with me?

"Almighty God, thank you for allowing me the privilege of serving you and the people of this church. Guide me to make the right decisions and help me to listen to your prompting. Use me, Father, to serve this church and you. To the glory of your name. Jesus is Lord. Amen."

James walked down the steps of the platform without looking at his audience. The corner of his mouth turned up as he approached Winona, taking her hand.

Just before he sat down, he saw two of his Sunday School students, Lee Foster and Rick Barber, sitting a few rows behind and to the left. The young men in his class now knew a lot more about him than they had previously. He hoped he wouldn't have to answer questions about himself later. He tried to smile, but the nerve damage in his face wouldn't cooperate, so he nodded his head at them and sat down.

⁴ Job 27:2-4 ESV

⁵ Job 33:3-4 ESV

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May 1931
Harris, Kansas

Federal Judge Reid Britt saw the sharecropper walking toward the house.

Reid sat on the front porch of the simple wood frame home his family lived in. The home was comfortable. Reid and his wife, Chipeta, had raised twelve children here.

As he thought of his beautiful wife, scripture came to his heart. *Enjoy life with the wife you love all the days of your fleeting life, which has been given to you under the sun, all your fleeting days. For that is your portion in life and in your struggle under the sun.*⁶

He had loved his wife well, and she had loved him. And it was fleeting. Having her with him seemed a lifetime ago, but it had only been a few years since her death. He missed her, but his three youngest girls remained.

Ayiana had been to school and studied nursing. She returned home where she accepted the position of public health nurse, established by the county, just as she was finishing school. She worked well with her cousin, Dr. William Stewart, who was the only physician in the area.

Kimi was now nineteen years old. She was simple-minded. She never finished school, but she took care of the house well and had finally learned to cook enough that they wouldn't starve. She made a good stew and could bake excellent cornbread. She could make scrambled eggs, pancakes, and boiled beef. She could boil

⁶ Ecclesiastes 9:9 HCSB

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vegetables reasonably well, and had learned to make minced meat pie. That was about all she could do.

Her younger sister, Aponi, was a much better cook. She was in her last year of school and her father hoped she would attend the university in Denver next year. But he feared her interest in the middle Neuw boy was stronger than her desire to complete her education.

Charlie Neuw was a nice young man who worked for Reid's brother, Angus, as a mechanic. He was a hard worker, and a Christian. He was the son of the sharecropper that lived on Britt land.

They were a nice family and had done a good job with everything they were asked to do. They had been working for the Britts for three years. The eldest boy, Paul, had moved away, and Reid had written him an outstanding letter of recommendation to take with him. The oldest girl had married the son of the local feedstore owner.

Reid had no qualms with the boy Aponi was attracted to, he just thought sixteen, or even seventeen, was too young to get married. But Aponi had been dangling hints for months. Reid hadn't bitten. He would make Aponi come right out and tell him her intentions. So far, that hadn't happened.

Reid's son Stephen still lived in town. He was an attorney and lived above his office. He was the most eligible bachelor in town and all the young ladies fawned over him. He had been attracted to a few young women, briefly, but had yet to find the girl he wanted to marry.

His brother, Blade, lived at the Double R Ranch several miles outside of town. He had worked at the ranch since he was thirteen and was now foreman. He, his wife Enola, and their two children, lived in a small house at the ranch.

His other children were scattered. James was an attorney for the railroad in Denver. He had married Winona. It was an odd match and the family seldom mentioned that Winona had lived with the family for years before the couple married. It was a lengthy explanation that made perfect sense to the family, but others thought it a little awkward.

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Abigail was married to a fine Christian man who taught at the college in Wichita. Jeannie was married and raising a family in Ft. Collins.

Reid's youngest son, Saamel, sang with a touring group ten months out of the year. They were a popular group and had even made some appearances in motion pictures. Saamel was a favorite because of his solemn and stand-offish demeanor, a characteristic his family recognized as introverted and shy. The fact that he was Indian added to his mystifying lure. It made him stand out in a way that intrigued the ladies and captivated the attention of those around him.

And then there was Esa. Esa was the town's marshal. He, his wife, and their son, lived with Reid and the girls. But Ainena was pregnant and the house was getting crowded.

It hadn't seemed crowded when Reid was raising his children. Five boys and six girls didn't seem like a lot. But now, with adult children and two families in the house, Reid felt like there was no privacy for anyone. He loved his family, he really did. And he wouldn't kick anyone out, but when he allowed Esa and his new wife to move in, it was only supposed to be temporary. Three years later, they were all getting on each other's nerves.

Ainena had been good for the family though. She had filled a need left by the death of Reid's wife. She mothered Aponi as only a natural caregiver could, and she continued teaching Kimi. His daughter had grown under her sister-in-law's tutelage. And as much as Reid appreciated Esa's and Ainena's loving care in everything they did, Reid wanted his house back.

"Reid, do you have time for me to sit for a while?" Bill asked.

"Sure, Bill. Come on up."

Bill Neuw sauntered up the steps to the porch in his relaxed way and sat back heavily in the rocker next to Reid, causing it to immediately start its back and forward motion. Bill gave a relaxing sigh.

"Hard day?" Reid asked.

"No, not really. The family and I have had some hard decisions to make. I think we finally came to an agreement."

Reid looked at the man, now concerned about the approaching conversation. But Bill didn't continue.

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Reid asked, "What's going on?"

"You know I like it here. I like the work, we have a roof over our heads, and we eat. We've never been hungry. Your family is good to us."

"But..." Reid waited.

"Being here has allowed us to recover from years of hardship. We've gotten our strength back. I'm not talking about muscle. I'm talking about hope. 'We are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known.'⁷

"But 'hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.'⁸ 'And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in (me) will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.'⁹

"I don't know what's coming in the years ahead but we can look at the future again and not be scared. We see hope. We've got a few children grown now and on their own, everyone's in good health, and we've saved a little money. We see good times ahead."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Bill was silent again. Reid, however, could see from the expression on his face that something else was coming.

"There's land available for homesteading in South Dakota."

Uh-oh! Here it comes, Reid thought. While they had done everything they could to make a sharecropper happy, and give them a comfortable life, they hadn't been able to keep one for more than just a few years. Now Bill would be leaving them, right here near planting season, too.

Bill continued, "Paul has found some land. He's laid claim to a hundred and sixty acres and he wants us to come up there and work it with him. We've prayed about it, and talked about it, and prayed some more. I don't know how we can pass up this chance to have our own place again.

"I know we're leaving you at a bad time, but you should be able to find somebody soon."

⁷ 1 John 3:2a

⁸ Romans 5:5

⁹ Philippians 1:6 ESV

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Bill looked at Reid. Reid had been a good friend, as well as a good employer. Bill didn't really want to go, but his son needed him. He'd be doing the same work in South Dakota as he did here, but at a homestead he'd be working for himself. He liked that idea.

"Well," Reid said, rubbing his face with one hand. "I'm not going to try to talk you out of it, but I'm sure going to miss you. You're a good man, and you're a good friend."

Reid twisted in his chair and put his hand out, "I wish you well."

Bill shook Reid's hand and stood up. "We're planning on leaving next week. I'll have everything done. I won't leave anything for someone else to do later. And I'll make sure the house is cleaned for whoever you hire next."

"Thank you. I appreciate that. I'll have your pay ready. Just drop by the night before you leave."

Bill no longer looked into Reid's face. He was surveying the front of Reid's house like he was going to miss it. "Charlie didn't have the guts to come over here with me. He..." Bill hesitated and turned to look across the porch floor. "He wants to stay until Aponi finishes school next month."

Reid felt trapped. He knew what was coming. "And what does he want to do then?"

"I'm sorry Reid, you know how Charlie is. He's a good kid. He is. And he loves Aponi..."

"Stop!" Reid interrupted. "I know they've had something going on for a while now. I've been waiting for Aponi to talk to me, but she's been avoiding me for the last couple of weeks. I figured it had something to do with Charlie. If Charlie wants to stay here, it's okay, we can work something out, but he's going to have to talk to me himself."

"He's just a boy, Reid."

"I know that. And Aponi's just a little girl, at least in our eyes. But they have adult intentions. They're going to have to deal with what they want like adults."

"Yes, sir, they do. But Charlie doesn't want to stay here."

Reid waited without saying anything this time. Bill shuffled his feet, uneasy about the conversation. Then resolve set on his face.

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“He wants to get married and bring Aponi to South Dakota with us.”

Reid closed his eyes, praying for strength. He leaned over, placing his elbows on his knees with his head down and his clasped hands dangling between his legs.

“Has he talked to her about it?”

“Yeah. They talked. She wants to come.”

“How do you feel about this?” Reid asked.

“Well, Charlie is old enough to decide for himself, he’s twenty. He could stay here and I’d be okay with it, or he could go find a job in Kansas City and I’d worry about him, but I’d be okay with that too.

“He’s just three and a half years older than Aponi. That’s not that much difference. I’m five years older than my wife and she was only seventeen when I married her. I like Aponi. She’s a believer, she’s a hard worker, and she seems to love my son. The whole family is comfortable with her. I know you have your own plans for Aponi and you don’t like this, but I don’t have a problem with it,” Bill explained. “What don’t you like? Is it Charlie?”

“No. Charlie’s fine. Aponi’s just...so young,” Reid said. “She’s got a sharp mind and I guess I was just hoping she’d do something with it.”

“Didn’t your wife go to school to be a lawyer?” Bill asked, knowing the answer.

“Yes.”

“What did she do?”

Bill had him. Chipeta may have gone to school to study law, but all she did, her whole life, was raise children. And neither of them thought that was a problem. They had both been happy with what she did.

Reid didn’t speak again. He lifted a hand to his forehead and rubbed it, then pressed the heel of his hand into his right eye. Without lifting his head, he said, “I’ll talk to Aponi as soon as she gets in from school. Give us a little while, then send Charlie over.”

“Thank you, Reid, thank you for everything.”

Reid raised his head to look at his friend. “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you...making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in

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the gospel from the first day until now.”¹⁰ Reid said. “Thank you. I appreciate everything you’ve done while you’ve been here, and especially for the way you always conducted yourself in a Godly manner. It was a joy to have you here.”

But Reid didn’t look joyful.

“I’m sorry it ends this way, I wish we could both be happy for them,” Bill said. He turned and left.

Aponi arrived home and changed from her school clothes to her work clothes. She was entering the kitchen when Ainena told her that her father wanted to see her in his office.

Aponi entered happily. “Good afternoon, Father,” she said playfully. She kissed his cheek.

She only called him Father when she was apprehensive about the conversation. It didn’t happen very often. The playful manner in which she entered the room told him she was nervous. She knew what he wanted to talk about.

Reid indicated the chair beside the table where he sat. Aponi obeyed.

“Bill Neuw came to visit me today. They’re moving.”

“Yes, sir. I heard they might be.”

“Did you also hear that Charlie was going to stay here?”

“I knew it was a possibility.”

“Where is he planning on living?”

“He said he was going to talk to Stephen and see if he could rent a room from him.”

“What else did you hear?”

Aponi froze. She didn’t know what to say. Should she tell him that she and Charlie were planning to get married right after she graduated? She hadn’t planned to tell him until after graduation. She knew the law. At sixteen, she didn’t need her father’s approval.

Should she tell him that she was planning to go to South Dakota, too? She hadn’t planned to tell him that until after they

¹⁰ Philippians 1:3-5

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were married. She had told Charlie that he had to talk to her father and ask permission to marry her. Had he done that?

“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”¹¹ Honey. If you know the answer to my question and you don’t tell me, it’s a sin of omission.”

Aponi’s mouth twitched and she started blinking back tears. “I know.”

“I think you’ve been planning something and you’ve been keeping it a secret from me.”

She sniffed and ran a hand under her nose. “Yes, sir.”

“Are you ready to tell me now?”

Her face twisted and she tucked her chin to the side.

“For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open.”¹² Reid said.

“I guess I’m ready,” she replied softly.

“You can quit crying. You’re not in trouble. I’m just hurt that you didn’t think you could come and talk to me. ‘Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory.’”¹³

“Daddy, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just didn’t want to say anything until...” Aponi stopped suddenly.

“Go on.” Reid instructed.

“Until I knew for sure and everything was worked out.” She was still crying.

Reid let her cry. He wanted to cry himself. It was taking a lot of self-control to keep from lashing out at her. He wanted to scream, “Don’t you trust me?” He realized he had been shocked by what she planned to do, but he was hurt by her silence.

They had never had trouble talking before. Why didn’t she trust him with her feelings about Charlie? Why had she wanted to keep it such a secret from him when apparently Bill knew all about it?

Tears started coming from his eyes too. “Would you tell me what you plan to do?”

¹¹ James 4:17 ESV

¹² Luke 8:17

¹³ Proverbs 11:14 NASB

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She sniffed a few times and looked away. "We want to get married after I finish school. He's willing to wait until then."

The judge wanted to say, "A month. How noble of him." But he heard the Spirit warn him against speaking impulsively, "*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*"¹⁴

No, he wouldn't make such a sarcastic remark. He wouldn't hurt her like that.

She stopped briefly to look at her father again. He was looking straight at her, but it didn't look like he was seeing her. His eyes were wet and his lips were pressed together. He was chewing on the inside of his bottom lip. He only did that when he was upset.

She began to talk faster, wanting to get this conversation over with so she could get away from him. She was hurting him and she knew it. She didn't want to see him hurt like this. She loved him and she didn't want to cause any more suffering.

"He says he can save a little more money and then we can take our time getting to South Dakota and have some time to ourselves before being with his family again. We're going to live with them and help them build a home. When we finish their house, then we're going to build us one. Mr. Neuw is going to buy a tractor and they've got the two horses. All we're going to need is some farm equipment and...Daddy? Say something."

Reid had closed his eyes and his lip had stopped moving. He opened his eyes. "It's not going to be that easy. I know Bill, Mr. Neuw, has thought this through, and he and his wife know how hard this is going to be. They think it's worth the gamble to have their own place. But do you know how hard it will be?"

"Well, Charlie said..."

Reid interrupted. "You're going to have to work in the garden from sun up to sun down. Your fingers will bleed and your back will hurt and you'll get sun burned, and you probably won't make enough to have new clothes when you need them. The land will have to be cleared before you can plant anything. That takes time.

¹⁴ Matthew 12:36-37 ESV

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"It gets cold in the Dakotas in winter and you'll need warmer clothes and a good solid place that keeps the wind and the snow out. You'll be stuck inside all winter and you'll have to have a way to stay warm. Charlie can't build a house and work the field at the same time."

The judge leaned back in his chair, resting his head and looked at the ceiling. "Aponi, honey, when you marry, you and Charlie will become one in God's sight. You will need to agree on everything. You can't get mad at him and leave. You'll have to stay with him and help him. That's what a wife is, a helpmate."

"I know. I watched Mom help you. I know it's my job to support him and help him and..."

Reid wasn't listening any more. Aponi wasn't listening to him either. She didn't understand what life was like on a farm, relying on the land for life itself—for food, water, shelter and clothing. She didn't know what it was like to do farm labor all day, and then go home at dark to take care of the house and meals. She didn't know what it was like to wait for the crops to come in and then have to harvest before the sun burned the vegetables, or the rain destroyed everything.

She saw the crops destroyed by drought, and she saw the dust storms move across the land, but it had never affected her—not really. They would just go into town and buy food at the store. At a homestead, she would have to can everything so they would have food through the winter. She knew how to preserve food, she'd helped her mother for years. And she had done it herself after her mother died. But if his family didn't store enough, they could still buy food at the market. At a homestead, there would be no place to buy food, and no money with which to buy it.

She didn't know—but he did. And he didn't know how to explain it to her so she would understand.

He had worked the farm growing up. And his own father had worked hard to get his children an education so they wouldn't have to rely on the farm for survival.

Reid had gotten up before daylight growing up, and prepared breakfast, found something for lunch, done his chores, and gone to school. Then he had come home and worked the land or hunted for food. Sometimes he repaired something around the farm, sometimes he skinned and processed an animal. He knew what it

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was like to haul water for miles because the well was dry, and he knew what it was like to watch his father climb down a dry well shaft and dig in the dark moist earth all day while he hauled bucket after bucket of dirt and mud to the surface. He knew what it was like to chop frozen wood to stay warm because you didn't get enough chopped last summer.

Sometimes he worked into the night to finish what he had started. Then he had to fix supper and do homework. He fell asleep at the table many nights while studying, only to wake up with a sore back or neck.

He didn't own a pair of shoes until he started school, and his only jacket had been a worn hand-me-down from his older brother. It was usually too big. Yes, Reid knew what farm life was like, and he knew that's why his father had worked so hard to get the children an education.

Aponi was still talking. "...and he told me he would build me a picket fence around the house. I'm going to take some of Momma's flower bulbs from the front of the house and plant them at our new home. It will be just like being here with you."

Reid knew there was no use trying to talk Aponi out of this, and he couldn't forbid her to go. In less than four months she would be living away from home anyway. She was stubborn and determined in everything she did. She would just wait until she left for Denver, then she would join him in South Dakota.

He swiveled his chair to face her and reached for his daughter. They embraced. He released her and sent her on her way. She backed away from him, watching his sad face.

"I love you, Daddy, but I love Charlie too."

"I know. I love you too. Now go on."

She stepped to the door, turned around to look at her father one more time, and fled to her room to cry.

Esa knocked softly on the door to his father's office at the courthouse.

His father seemed upset. He had for the last few days. Last night, he avoided his children by coming home late and going straight to bed. Kimi had gone into his room and he had read

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scripture to her before she went to bed, but he had said nothing to anyone else.

Then this morning, Bill Neuw had caught Esa as he passed their house on the way into town. He had asked Esa a question which led to his story of moving to South Dakota. Bill had been surprised to learn that Esa's father had not told him of the move, or of Aponi's approaching marriage.

Now, Esa understood why his father had been so quiet. He was processing what he had been told, trying to get everything straight in his mind. It sometimes took his father time to manage information that was puzzling to him, especially when it upset him. Esa knew his father was disturbed by Aponi's actions. That was what baffled him.

Esa didn't want to upset his father any more, but he needed to talk before any other arrangements were made for the house. If his father found a new sharecropper in the next few days, it would be too late to ask.

Reid looked up from his work. "Hey Esa, come on in."

"Dad, I talked to Bill Neuw this morning."

Reid nodded, "So you know."

"Yes, sir. He told me. Are you okay?"

"I guess. There's nothing I can do about it, so I may as well be okay with it," Reid replied.

"It's not right for Aponi to do this. She should have at least talked to you."

Reid nodded. "Esa, I don't want to talk about it right now. I need to keep my mind on what I'm doing here." Reid pointed to the papers in front of him.

Esa nodded, "Okay. Any prospects on a new sharecropper?"

"I haven't even thought about it."

"Well, I wanted to ask before you hired somebody new," Esa began. "You know I've been saving so Ainena and I could get our own place. Well, I've been thinking, if I spend what I've saved to build a couple of rooms on the back of the barn, then we could hire a single man or a couple and they can live there. Ainena and I can move into Grandpa's house."

Reid just stared at Esa. This was way too much to think about today. Bill leaving on a risky venture, Aponi getting married and leaving, going to a place only God knows, hiring someone new,

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and now Esa with this sudden apparent solution to the housing problem.

"I don't know, Esa." Reid shook his head. He couldn't concentrate on his work as it was. This just added to his distracted thoughts. "Talk to Angus and Luke, then talk to Sarah. Let me know what they say."

Everything was worked out quickly. By the time Bill and his family left Harris, Charlie had moved in with Stephen. Esa and Ainena were making plans to move into Reid's father's house.

Esa began adding two rooms onto the back of the barn. It was slow work, and Esa did his best, working to build the rooms two or three boards at a time. But something would always interrupt his work.

A month passed, and graduation night arrived. The large family was gathered inside the auditorium just off the gymnasium at the center of the school. Classrooms circled three sides of the gym.

The piano began to play 'Pomp and Circumstance' as the graduates entered. Aponi walked past her family but kept her solemn expression, watching everyone's face, until she got to Charlie. He sat two rows in front of Reid, and Reid saw Aponi's hand stretch out as Charlie reached out for her. Their fingers met briefly and her face broke into a smile.

Reid felt a twinge of jealousy. Until just a few months ago Aponi would have smiled at him that way. He would have been the one she reached out to touch. She was his baby girl. She was the child he had saved from a sure death by removing her from the Oklahoma wasteland less than a week after she was born. She was the one he held while he sat in the wheelchair recovering from injury, willing life into her body while not thinking of his own; praying another child wouldn't die in his arms. She would always be his little girl.

Reid was now watching the back of Charlie's head. He wasn't watching the ceremony.

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And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?¹⁵

Reid heard the spirit correct him. He closed his eyes. “I am wrong, Father. Forgive me.”

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.¹⁶

“Lord, I’m sorry. Your law is perfect. It shows me where I sin. ‘Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.’¹⁷

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”¹⁸

And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. ”¹⁹

Yes, Reid knew he needed a change of attitude. Charlie was a good, strong Christian, and so was Aponi. Their lack of judgement wouldn’t stand in the way of their relationship with the Lord. He picked his eyes up to look at Aponi on the stage. She was beautiful, smart, kind, loving, and so young. “Lord, help me. I want to show love. I don’t want them to go away thinking I’m angry with them. Change my attitude. Clear my spirit of harmful thoughts.”

“Aponi Britt.”

Reid looked up to see Aponi stand and walk to the school’s principal to receive her diploma. She turned to look at her family.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:2b-3 ESV

¹⁶ Galatians 5:19-21 ESV

¹⁷ Psalm 51:1 ESV

¹⁸ Psalm 51:10-12 ESV

¹⁹ Mark 11:25

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Or was she looking at Charlie? She smiled before returning to her seat.

The ceremony ended and the family, including Charlie, attended the reception for the graduates in the gymnasium. Aponi talked with her classmates while dragging Charlie by the hand. She introduced him to a few and ended the evening walking home with him instead of riding in the automobile with her family. She went straight to bed.

Reid wasn't going to press himself on her. They would have a few days to talk and say goodbye before the couple married and left town.

The next morning Reid arose and prepared for his day. It was Friday, and he had to be in the courtroom today.

He entered the kitchen to find Esa, Ainena, and Kimi sitting at the table, but no one was eating. Breakfast hadn't even been prepared.

"Dad," Esa began, holding up a sheet of paper. "Aponi's gone. She says she doesn't want an emotional scene. She just wants to marry Charlie and go to South Dakota. She says one of Charlie's friends is driving them to Summersville. They have an appointment with the judge and they're going to get married there and leave on the first train out.

"We won't have time to get to her before that train leaves. The north bound train leaves early."

The sadness on Reid's face could be seen by everyone. Kimi came to him to snuggle against his shoulder. Their arms went around each other as Reid's eyes filled with tears.

He nodded. "Well, that's it then. What's done is done."

Ainena came to him and kissed his cheek. "I'll get you some toast and coffee."

Reid nodded and Kimi returned to her seat without speaking. Reid sat next to her.

"And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee,"²⁰ he said.

"Every blessing or promise has already been given to us through Christ. It's not being worked out or on the list of things to

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 2:21-22 ESV

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do. It's done. Our faith, and our faith alone, holds the hope that these promises will move from the spiritual realm to the natural world and Aponi will remember that her faith is her foundation."

Esa knew that his father's talking was his way of working this out in his heart. His father was upset, but he would be okay.

"Faith is simply believing that whatever we desire has been made available for us by Christ Jesus. I'm holding to Jesus. He will take care of Aponi and Charlie, and hopefully, they will contact us in some way. Maybe I'll get a letter from Bill."

Ainena continued to prepare breakfast and the four ate in silence. Esa and Reid went back to the bedrooms to prepare to leave the house for the day. Kimi was cleaning the kitchen as Ainena fed the toddler.

The phone rang. Esa called, "Dad, they're asking for Judge Britt."

Reid reached for the phone. "Hello, this is Judge Britt."

"Yes, Judge Fontenot. Good morning."

Reid went silent. His already gloomy face grew darker.

"Yes, that's my daughter."

"No, she does not have my permission, but she's of age. I can't stop her."

"No. Go ahead and do the ceremony. Just tell her I love her and I hope she will write when she gets where she's going. Thank you for the call, John."

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