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"MOMMY, WHY ARE there pokers on the flowers?"

Lois Wurtz leaned back and smiled at her youngest son. She rubbed the small of her back. "God made them like that," she answered simply. "Be sure not to touch them," she warned.

"Won't," Shane promised. He sat down on his haunches and studied the rose thorns more closely. He reached out and almost touched one. "They hurt, right?" He looked at his mother.

"Yes, they do." She wished he would forget this little problem and go play, but it was so like him to need to think it through. Of their four children, Shane was clearly the deepest thinker and the most sensitive. Conrad, at eight, sort of disappeared into his own world. He never seemed bothered about anything. Austin, twelve, and Kaylene, ten, were certainly the most challenging. They fought easily, and where there was noise, they were sure to be involved. She couldn't decide if they were thinkers or not. Sometimes it sure did not seem like it.

Lois sighed and rubbed her back again as she bent down to weed the flower bed. Sometimes she wondered if they were doing all they could for their children. They did not seem as carefree as others, but then her mother-in-law said David had never been a happy child either. Lois shrugged. *I guess*

*it's just natural for my children to be like this.* But she was not convinced. Shouldn't children be happy and carefree? Was she understanding them as she ought? She did the best she knew. She loved them.

"And I love you, baby!" She patted her abdomen. This was her last baby. David had firmly told her they would have no more. Lois stood and stretched. She looked around, hoping no one had heard her. David would say she was foolish. She shrugged again. Probably she was. What was the sense in talking to an unborn child?

Chiding herself for her nonsense, she pulled on her garden gloves to load the rose clippings and weeds onto the wheelbarrow. Shane was playing with Tawny over by the porch. *Why indeed are there thorns on roses?* she wondered. She had never considered it before. They just grew there, that's why. But there had to be a reason . . .

Her gaze fell on the large pink tea rose she had noticed first thing that morning. After a chaotic start seeing the three oldest off to school and dealing with one of David's difficult moods, it had been refreshing to step out into the morning air. And then she had seen the rose! It wore morning's shimmering dewdrops, and its dazzling beauty had filled her with a small sense of awe. There were some good things in this world. She had bent over to smell the gorgeous flower and her dress had gotten caught in its thorns. In the process of freeing herself, she had pricked her fingers. "All to enjoy a rose!" she had muttered.

The rose still carried its queenly splendor . . . but among thorns. Was that rosebush mocking her? It seemed to say, "You can't have the rose yet. Not yet . . . Not yet . . . You have to get pricked first."

Lois attempted to dismiss her black thoughts. There was no reason to dwell on them. It would not get her anywhere. There were no answers. The only thing she could do was work hard, keep happy, and try to keep her children busy and well-fed. Besides, her life was not really that much more difficult than a lot of her friends' lives. *Life is not a bed of roses*. It was never meant to be. An ironic thought, here in her own rose bed.

But this thinking would not get her work done. She lifted the handles of the wheelbarrow and started toward the produce shed.

An unusual rattle grated on her keen sense of hearing as she approached the shed. Following the noise with her eyes, she noticed a piece of loose tin on one end of the shed. "Wind must have done that last night. I'll have to repair that right away. Don't want it ripped off any further. Not that attractive to customers, either." She dumped the wheelbarrow load behind the shed and went for a hammer and nails. They were where she had left them, on the workbench in the tool shed. Good thing too, because if there was anything she and David could argue about, it was where to find things. Not that that was the only thing they argued about . . .

Lois dismissed that thought, too, and pounded vigorously. There, that looked better. And now she had better get out to the field and make sure things were going right for the workers.

Shane saw her heading for the old farm pickup, and he scrambled to his feet and ran toward her. She lifted him into the cab and climbed in behind him. Tawny never missed a chance for a ride either, and he leaped nimbly into the back of the truck. Glancing over at the driving shed, Lois noticed the four-wheeler was gone. *Good, David must have decided to go*

*out to the field, after all. Maybe I don't have to go. It sure would be nice to get those beans left from yesterday into the freezer.*

But, no, she had to go. Even if David was organizing the workers now, he might not be later on. Then she would have to take over. She needed to know what was going on out there.

A small cloud of dust trailed her as she drove out to the back end of their four-acre truck patch. She made mental note of each crop and its progress. Next week they would begin picking cucumbers. She had better make sure the cucumber picker was ready to go. One seat had come loose last year. She could get Max to look at it. He wouldn't miss anything. The cantaloupes were developing beautifully. Maybe they should do another weeding in the watermelon field before the melons were too much bigger. She would mention it to Max.

She was so grateful for his help. On days when David hardly showed up in the field, Max more than earned his pay.

She brought the truck to a stop in the bean field. She noticed David on the four-wheeler at the far end of a row, five workers clustered around him. Lois watched for a moment. *What's going on?* she wondered. She would ask him at lunchtime. Holding Shane's hand securely in hers, she walked slowly across the end of the field. *Looks like they're about half done.* That was good. That meant the Mexican immigrant workers had been up early this morning. It never paid to get produce to market after noon. It had to be there by ten if possible. She walked over to a pallet loaded with bean crates. The green and yellow beans were still in their prime. "At this rate we'll be picking beans in this field for another week or two. Then the next field ought to be ready for harvest," she noted out loud.

Max pulled up with the produce wagon and backed it up to the bean pallet. He waved a friendly greeting. Lois watched

as Pedro expertly steered the forklift underneath the pallet and lifted it onto the truck bed, adding it to the four already there. That meant about ten pallets for today's picking. If the ladies in the produce shed did not have to throw a lot out as seconds . . . Lois did some quick figuring and nodded in satisfaction. This week's crop should pay off the planting expenses for the year. The rest was clear profit, unless they had hail or some major breakdown.

Of course, there were always the workers to pay. This operation would never be possible without their help, and Lois did not begrudge them their meager pay. In fact, had it been up to her, they would have gotten a higher wage. But David would hear none of it. "Not my fault they have to come to the States for work. Show me a Hispanic or a black that knows how to make a decent living," he had sputtered.

"I know you feel that way, David. But our good living would not be possible without their work, and we owe them a decent wage. We could afford to give them a raise."

"I am not giving them a raise, and you know it! As soon as we save a little more, we are buying more land."

She kept quiet. It would not help anything, and besides, she did not wish to hurry the day when more land would be a reality. From experience, she knew that whenever she mentioned their extra cash, he was bound to purchase something. He always called it an investment. Sometimes it was, but more often than not it also added to her workload. For example, several years ago he had turned the whole back pasture into an apple orchard. The first year he did all the spraying and hired men to do the pruning. She had so hoped he would keep at it. But no. In the end, the newness wore off, and the orchard was her responsibility. Lois never did things by halves, and often there was profit in the newest project.