

*Rejoice
as the Sun Shines
on Restorations*

Linda L. Linn



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Preview

Esther Beckett is in for the surprise of her life. She thinks she still desires to get married, but she might be embarking on the biggest adventure she can imagine if she decides she can trust these men. But who are these men and what are their intentions?

Come and spend some more time in Pine City so you can find out. You will also meet an older couple who are still very much in love, and have a deep yearning to see the restoration of lives and to leave a legacy. Renew acquaintances with some of the people in the Grace 'n' Faith Church who were in Book One of the Sunshine Series.

This is an inspirational romance novel and it's the sequel to "Everywhere There's a Sunrise, Let's Tell the Good News!" The prologue of this story occurred before Book One. The rest takes place concurrently, or after the events in Book One.

If you haven't read "Everywhere There's a Sunrise, Let's Tell the Good News!" yet, it would probably be most helpful for you to read it before you read this novel, "Rejoice as the Sun Shines on Restorations," because it refers to many of the characters and happenings in that story. Each is available to buy from thebookpatch.com. Or get each of them as ebooks or PDF files, free of charge from free-ebooks.net, at the same time and then read them in the right order.

Introduction

This is a work of fiction, except for the Bible Scriptures, which are God's Word and are therefore true. No person in this novel exists in real life except for God the Father, God the Son, (also known as Jesus, the Messiah), and God the Holy Spirit. All the characters, places and events in this novel are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events is purely coincidental. Many things in the story, and especially the miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit can really happen.

This novel is meant for adults, not children, although with parental guidance, it has parts children might learn from or enjoy.

Scriptures are shown by italics, and are this author's paraphrase of the King James Version of the Holy Bible. I chose the King James Version because it has no copyright. Basically, what I do is to change words like "thee" and "ye" to "you", "thy" to "your", take the "eth," etc. off words, and sometimes use synonyms, to make it sound like more modern English. You can do the same thing as you read the suggested old hymns in a hymnal.

The author encourages you to look up these scriptures in your preferred Bible translation and read them there also. The Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs chosen for this novel really do have meaningful words and teachings. I encourage you to look up each hymn and spiritual song in a hymnal or songbook. If you don't have a hymnal or a songbook, try looking up the title of the song on a web to find the lyrics.

There is a list of the characters in this story in the addendum at the end of this novel. It might help you to keep track of who is who as you go along. If you decide to print the novel from a PDF file, you can use a regular bookmark to keep track of where you stop. If you are reading it off the computer screen, just write

down the page number where you stop reading. If you are using an ebook viewer, for an ebook, it should have an electronic bookmark.

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About the Author

The author, Linda L. Linn, has lived in Colorado all her life. She has believed in, and loved Jesus since she was a young child. When not doing housework, cooking or baking, she likes to play the piano, write stories, sew, and read. She also enjoys travel and photography.

Before she retired, she enjoyed teaching first, second, and third graders in the public school system for 27 years. She and her husband, Richard, have traveled to see much of God's beautiful creation in the western United States. They are presently living in Montrose, Colorado. She hopes you enjoy this novel,

Dedication

This novel is dedicated with gratitude to
the one and only Almighty God
for his love, the plan of salvation,
and for the way he restores the people he created
if they will believe in, and accept Jesus as their Savior.

Prologue

Early November

Early Saturday morning, Ruth and Esther Beckett were riding in the back of the family van, both looking out the same windows but for different reasons.

Ruth stated, "I can hardly wait to get around the last corner and see our first view of the beautiful valley and the Yardley Dude Ranch where we get to spend the weekend."

Esther exclaimed, "I want to see the Mendoza's van so I'll know if those two handsome boys will be here this weekend!"

"Which one will you have a crush on this time?" asked Ruth.

"That depends on how much Felix teases me and whether Nathan will be less shy this time," Esther explained.

Ruth smiled and nodded, "Oh, there it is! It's just as pretty as it always is no matter what season we come here."

"I agree. I've never been able to choose a favorite season. Oh, I see it! Their van is here and the boys will probably be here too!" stated Esther excitedly.

Jason smiled as he sat in the middle seat of the van listening to his sisters. Since his age was half way between the two of them, he had heard lots of interesting conversations.

Their parents William and Anna heard all of this one also as they sat in the front seat. William took his eyes off the road for a second to smile at his dear wife who nodded and smiled back. In a short time they had reached their reserved cabin and they all got out to stretch and take their suitcases inside.

It was only about a twenty minute drive from their home in Pine City, but it was on a winding road that took them up one side of a long mesa and then part way down the other side into the lower end of the dude ranch. It brought them to a completely different world than the one in the city. The ranch buildings were at the upper end of the valley and there were acres and acres of pastures.

Anna asked, "What would you like to do first, Esther, since we're celebrating your graduation from high school."

"Go horseback riding of course!" she declared. "But let's go greet Oscar and Vera Yardley and any of their guests in the big house first." So they walked over there.

Just then, Oscar opened the door and said, "Welcome! Come in and join all of us for some hot herbal tea and visit with everyone."

They went inside and William said, "Hi, everyone. It's good to see all of you again."

They all had a nice visit and then Anna invited, "We're going for a horseback ride. Would any of you like to join us?"

All of them decided to go riding and they met at the pasture to choose the horses they wished to ride. Each person enjoyed getting reacquainted with his or her favorite mount by walking up to it and talking while rubbing its forehead or stroking its neck. Then the halter was put on, lead rope attached, and the horse was led to the tack room where it was tied and brushed, the hooves were cleaned and the saddle and bridle were put on easily. Everyone had a nice ride in the cool, fresh, morning air. Then they all groomed the horses again, took them back to the pasture, and then cleaned the tack. Horseback riding on this dude ranch was more than just the ride!

Later in the day, the young people hiked up the hillside to see Lavender Falls. Since it was autumn, it had less water and didn't make a loud roar, but it was still spectacular! Most of the wild flowers were already finished blooming.

Felix asked, "Esther, how would you like a refreshing shower?"

She replied, "No, thank you." Then she walked away with a frown, thinking that he was still just a big tease.

After lunch they went rowing on Wild Mint Lake in some flat-bottomed boats. Esther ended up in a boat with Nathan. He was polite and helpful, but had very little to say. It was a nice, peaceful time though. She could hear Felix teasing Ruth who laughed it off and wasn't bothered by it. Jason had stayed on the shore and helped them all when they returned.

The next morning they played croquet on the big lawn by the guest house. Then in the afternoon, all of the young people took one more horseback ride and they all rode different horses than yesterday. Since the ranch was at the upper end of the valley, it bordered on public land. The dude ranch owners had gotten permission for them and their guests to go horseback riding on that land. The horses were all trained to cooperate with the rider on its back as the gate was opened and closed. But they decided to not go there today. Instead they stayed in the valley, and were close to one of the hillsides made by the mesas that flanked the pretty valley of the dude ranch.

About half way through the ride something spooked the horse Esther was riding and it ran away with her. She gave a little gasp and then remembered what Vera had told her to do if that ever happened. She turned the horse so it would go uphill and then urged it to go even faster. After a short time it got tired out, so it stopped easily when she said "Whoa" and pulled on the reins.

Meanwhile Nathan and Felix had both quickly followed Esther to see if they could help her get the horse stopped. When they reached her, she had already stopped the horse and was stroking its neck, talking soothingly to quiet it down and get it ready to walk back to the ranch.

Nathan asked her, "Are you all right?"

Esther smiled and nodded. "Yes, thank you both for coming to help me."

They both said she was welcome and all of them rode slowly back to the ranch.

Later that afternoon when all of them were getting ready to go home, they said their usual, "See you next time!" None of them realized that their times to visit the dude ranch would not coincide in the future.

Chapter 1

Philippians 4:13, *I can do all things through Jesus who gives me strength.*

About nine years later in Pine City

The first Monday in January, Esther Beckett arrived early at her new small group. It appeared to have several other singles along with various couples. Two exceptionally good looking young men were in attendance, and she thought they were probably single, since no women were sitting next to them. She immediately decided to use her newly honed observational skills and things she had learned last year to find out as much as she could about them during small group times. Since she still desired to be married, she was patiently praying that if it would be God's will, he would bring just the right man into her life to be her husband. Maybe it would be one of those two.

Esther looked their way from time to time and a faded memory came into her mind. She thought, "I know both of them from someplace in the past, but I can't remember where or when." She kept racking her brain and almost missed the opening comments. She had brought a notebook to write down the names of all the people who would be in this small group for the coming calendar year. So she opened it and was ready to write, and to introduce herself when the time came.

"Welcome everyone! We'll begin with introductions. Please tell us your first and last names, where you work, and how long you have been living in Pine City," the facilitator instructed. Then he started the introductions with himself. "I'm Jeff Spencer. I work for Evans Construction Company, and have lived in Pine City for 11 years. Next is my wonderful wife."

She smiled, "Hi, I'm Karen Spencer, and I work at Subs are Great. I have also lived here for 11 years."

He motioned for one of the two young men to be next, and Esther was careful to write down all the information for him and the one next to him.

"Hi, I'm Felix Lucero. I work at Valley Truck Farm, and have been living in Pine City since October."

"Hello, I'm Nathan Mendoza. I work at the Yardley Dude Ranch in Mercy Valley, and have lived in Pine City since September."

At this point, Esther put her pen down and completely forgot to listen or write down the rest of the names. Memories came flooding back and she had to school her features to keep from blushing and look down at her notebook to avoid staring at both of them. She did manage to introduce herself when it was her turn. "Hello, I'm Esther Beckett and I work with my brother, Jason in a Beckett CPA office. I've lived in Pine City all my life."

She forced herself to sing the beautiful Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and to at least look like she was listening to the teaching time, but she couldn't have told you what it was about later because she was so preoccupied. It would have helped her a lot if she had listened and concentrated on the words to the first song based on Psalm 23. Its title was "Surely Goodness and Mercy." During the conversational prayer time, she prayed silently for God to guide her and help her to only do his will where these two men were concerned.

Esther had mixed emotions about the refreshment and fellowship time that was next. In some ways she wanted to bolt like a scared horse and go home as fast as she could. But she knew that would not solve her problem. She had to stay and she hoped she'd be able to talk coherently and listen carefully to find out more about those men.

After visiting with a few of the other members of the group, Esther found herself facing both of them at once, and almost could have laughed, because they both looked as nervous as she felt. She found her voice and said, "Welcome to Pine City, Felix and Nathan. I hope you'll enjoy living here. I can't think of nicer places to work than each of you chose."

Felix replied, "Thank you for the welcome. Nathan moved here first and talked me into coming to try it out for a while at least."

Nathan said, "Esther, it's good to see you again. It's been so many years. Would you and Ruth be able to go with the two of us to the Healthy Eating Restaurant so that we could all get caught up on what has happened in our lives since we saw each other so many years ago?"

"Well," she hesitated. "I'll ask Ruth and give you a call, if you'd like to give me your phone number," answered Esther.

"Good, here's my card" he said. "I'll be home all evening, but we need to be leaving now." Felix followed him outside after they thanked the group hosts.

"What's your rush, Nathan? We could have stayed and talked a little longer. There are so many things to find out." But Felix hushed when he saw the look on his friend's face.

When they were seated in the car, Nathan answered, "I was just afraid that we might scare her away, and we've only just found her!"

"I understand. She's even more beautiful than she was as a teen when we first met her. I think she might be a little taller and her shiny black hair is shorter, but very attractively cut and styled. And of course she has developed into a very shapely woman!" Felix stated.

"You're right on every point. I sure hope Ruth will agree to go with us to dinner, because I know Esther would never go with us alone. Do you think we did the right thing by leaving our good jobs and moving here when we found out where she lived?" Nathan asked.

"Sure. How else will we ever find out what we want to know without being here?" he replied.

"You make it sound clandestine," Nathan worried.

Felix snorted. "You know what I mean. But I guess it might look that way to her. I have no idea how this might turn out!"

When Esther got home that evening to the apartment she and her sister shared, she blurted out, "Guess who was in my new small group tonight, Ruth."

"I have no idea, but it sounds momentous," she replied.

Esther stated, "It is! Ruth, do you remember that dream I told you about a couple nights ago?"

"You mean the one about the horse that got spooked at the dude ranch and ran away with you, but you got it to turn and go up the hillside while you urged it to go even faster so you could tire it out and get it to stop?" asked Ruth.

"Yes. I didn't tell you at the time about those two boys who chased after me on their horses and tried to rescue me, because I didn't remember it right then," said Esther a little breathlessly.

Ruth questioned, "Are you going to say that they were both in your small group tonight?"

Esther looked a little ashamed and admitted, "Yes, and I felt just like that horse I was riding must have felt, because when refreshment time came, I really wanted to bolt and go straight home. But I made myself stay and talk to them."

"Did they remember you?" asked Ruth.

"They did. They remembered you also, and asked if you and I would go with them to the Healthy Eating Restaurant so we could all get caught up on what has happened in our lives since we last saw each other. Then he gave me a card with his phone number on it so I could ask you and call him with your answer." Esther also explained how all the memories had come back to her after the men had introduced themselves at the beginning of the meeting.

Ruth inquired, "Do you desire to go with them to dinner?"

"In a way I do, and in another way I don't. But I'll go, if you'll go with me. It's been so many years since we've seen them, and I know nothing about them except that they were in the small group, and what I remember from the times we spent with them at the dude ranch. Maybe they've been in church, but I didn't notice them.

I guess I'll have to admit that I'm a little bit leery and mistrustful about them at this point. I wonder if that dream was a warning, or just a coincidence, or maybe too much pizza for supper that night," she finished and shrugged.

"Relax, Esther. Let's pray. God, we know that you're in control and we can trust you to keep us safe even if they turn out to be con artists, or crooks. Should we at least give them a chance to prove themselves by going with them to dinner?"

Esther added, "Father, please calm my nerves and help us make the right decision. You know I only want to do your will so please guide us."

They waited in silence for a while and then felt they should accept the invitation, so Esther called Nathan.

After the phone call, Nathan yelled. "Felix! Esther called and said they'd go with us! We have a double date for this Friday at 5:30 PM."

"Wow! She really looked like she wanted to run away like that horse did with her at the ranch. I doubted that she'd agree to go with us, but it sounds like we're going to get our chance after all," Felix commented as he came into the room drying his hands on a hand towel.

"I agree about her looking like she wanted to run, and I admit that I don't blame her, because I felt the same way. How are we going to do this?" asked Nathan.

"You mean, what's our plan of attack?" teased Felix.

"No! How can you tease at a time like this? I thought you had reformed," scolded Nathan.

"I'm sorry. I think she brings that out in me and therefore I don't stand a chance with her," he apologized.

“Forgiven, and don’t be so hard on yourself. Remember what we agreed to do in this project, and don’t lose your good sense of humor in the process. Now let’s decide on some good ways to find out what we need to learn in this venture,” said Nathan.

“The first thing I plan to do is apologize for all the teasing I did when we were all at the dude ranch, and tell her that I am really trying to change. Last year when I read the definition of ‘tease’ in the dictionary, I learned that teasing is annoying and vexes people, so I really do want to change. But I already know that it will be tremendously hard because it’s so fun,” said Felix.

“Change is always hard. It’ll be hard for me to stop being so shy and instead be willing to share my feelings if it’s ever appropriate. We’re a fine pair, aren’t we? I don’t think I stand a chance with her, and you just admitted the same thing, so what are we doing here in Pine City?” asked Nathan throwing up his hands for emphasis.

Felix replied, “Well, at least we’re being honest with ourselves and each other. So let’s think through our double date. It’s less than a week away. Do we get to pick them up or are we meeting them at the restaurant?”

“Esther would rather meet us there. I think we have a long way to go to build up her confidence in either of us enough to let us pick them up or to go alone with us. As I remember, Ruth mentioned a couple times at the ranch that she had no desire to get married. Maybe we can find out if she meant it. If so, maybe Ruth would agree to continue the double date idea until we have won their trust. I have no idea how Esther feels about marriage.”

“I don’t either, and I doubt it’s something we can just come right out and ask. But I am glad Ruth will join us with Esther. Do you think we need to get reservations?” asked Felix.

“Yes. I’m glad you thought about that. I’ll call them right now. After that I think it would be a good idea to pray for more guidance,” he said.

On Tuesday when he arrived to work at the dude ranch, Nathan said to his bosses, Oscar and Vera Yardley, “Esther was there, and she’s even more beautiful than I remembered her being. Thank you so much for helping me to find her and for the advice to talk to Don Ross the pastor of the Church you attend! After we told him about our plan, he agreed to arrange for us to be in the same small group as she is. I was about ready to give up after so many years of looking.”

“You’re welcome. She was the younger of the two Beckett sisters wasn’t she?” asked Vera.

“Yes, she’s the same age as Felix and I are, so she’s now 27 years old. Ruth is probably about four years older, and Jason said he was in the middle. I don’t remember her parents very well because we were always outside having fun as a group. I remember rowing on the lake or skating in the winter, fishing in the stream, and especially riding horses. I enjoy the memories of our times together here. Well, I better get to work. What’s the plan for today?” he asked.

Oscar answered, “After you help Vera with the yard cleanup, I want to show you how to smooth out the riding arena.”

“Okay, Vera, just explain to me what you wish to have done out there and I’ll get it done. There’s no need for you to go outside in the cold this morning. That’s what you hired me for,” said Nathan.

After Nathan went out to work in the yard, Vera mentioned to her husband, “He seems like a very nice young man, so grown up compared to when he was coming with his family and that friend who was such a tease. But I have a feeling he’s still just as shy as always. If he hadn’t been looking for a certain special girl, I don’t think he would have had the nerve to come here and ask us anything.”

Oscar agreed and asked, “Have you had any other ideas about the topic we’ve been discussing the past few months?”

“Yes I have,” Vera answered. “Since we have no heirs because our two children died when they were young, we have a longing to make this ranch into more than just a dude ranch so it could be useful in God’s Kingdom now and after we die. Our mistake is that we never get past the longing because every time we say something, we squelch it by saying, ‘we’re too old now to even try.’ Who says we’re too old to try? Only us! How would it work if we both write down every idea we can think of that could turn this place into something God could use. Then we can go through each list together after we ask God to show us the best idea.”

“I think you’re absolutely right. Let’s do that and abolish the statement, ‘we’re too old to even try.’ We don’t have to do this on our own. God will help us and he will show us other people who can help us make a good plan work. We can work on our lists today and talk about them after supper cleanup tonight,” Oscar recommended. “I’ll go get ready to go outside and show Nathan the rest of the day’s work plan.”

"It's a good thing you have good warm work clothes and coats since it's so cold today!" Vera mentioned, and he nodded.

In Pine City that same Tuesday, Esther went to Ruth's office building to join her sister, Ruth, and friend, Maria Gomez, for lunch. As usual they went up and down the stairway for some exercise before eating since it was too cold outside to go for a walk.

Ruth began, "I already told Maria about the double date coming up on Friday, so let's start with prayer as we eat. Father in heaven, thank you for this food. Please bless it to our bodies. The three of us good friends are here to agree in prayer that you'll protect us and do your will in this unbelievable situation."

"Yes, thank you that you are here with us and you already know what you desire to have happen. Give us the right words to say and help us act the way you want us to act," continued Esther.

Maria added, "Please give both of them peace and help them continue to remember that you are in control. Give them the right questions to ask so they can find out what they need to know about those two men."

After a few more minutes of praying, Ruth closed the prayer time and began to tell Maria about the dude ranch. "While we were still in public school, our family used to go to the Yardley Dude Ranch for a weekend almost every month. It's in the prettiest valley you can imagine. There's a stream running along one side of the valley, and a smaller stream coming down the hillside to join it. On it's way down the hillside, the smaller stream goes through a little area with rocks, some ferns and a spectacular waterfall. I don't recall its name right now."

Esther added, "Oh yes, it was one of my favorite places and it it's called Lavender Falls. The rocks are a light purple color until the water makes them wet. Then they become darker, but are still lavender. Vera planted some lavender, you know the flower they use to make perfume, and some other light purple flowers around the area, so the whole area is especially pretty and fragrant when those are in bloom. The ranch is huge with acres and acres of pastures. There are also trails for riding horses in the valley and on the hillsides on both sides of the valley. Horseback riding was my favorite activity, but they also have a small lake for rowboats in the spring, summer, and fall. It freezes smooth in the winter and is great for ice skating."

"It sounds idyllic! I'd like to be able to see it sometime," said Maria. "Is it a place that requires reservations?"

Esther looked over at Ruth who nodded so she said, "We were going to keep this as a surprise and tell you later, but sometimes it's better to be able to anticipate something for a while instead. Our family has reservations to go to the ranch the last weekend in April. Jason has other plans, so we have room for another guest and we chose you. You'll share a room with Ruth, and my best friend, Sunny, will share a room with me."

"Wow!" Maria exclaimed. "I'll definitely look forward to going there with you and your parents. Thank you ever so much!"

"You're welcome. Now let's get back to the first topic," suggested Ruth. "We have a list of questions to ask them if we get to that point. Who knows? The date might not last very long."

"Or maybe it'll be mostly going down memory lane telling and reminiscing about all the fun we had together at the ranch," said Esther. "Just telling you a little about the ranch has brought many memories back to me. The only one I don't like is that neither our family nor Nathan's nor his friend, Felix, were believers at the time. We could have had a much deeper friendship if the Lord had been at the center of it all. Plus, maybe Felix wouldn't have been such a tease, or maybe I would have been more able to be patient with him and forgive him. He was nice, other than the teasing, which was annoying. I had crushes on both of them at one time or another. Nathan was so shy, I couldn't tell what he was thinking."

Maria commented, "They both sound interesting. I think it was a good idea for you to meet them at the restaurant. That way you can leave when you want to, and they won't know where you live."

"Right, we won't need a rescue like you did," Esther interjected, and Maria laughed and blushed. "We'll need to find out if they are believers. Being in small group doesn't prove anything."

"Yes, and you need to know what their intentions are, and if you can trust them," added Maria.

Ever practical Ruth mentioned, "I agree with you both, but I see that our time is up already, since Esther needs to drive back over to Jason's office building so she can get back to work on time."

Maria inserted, "I'll keep praying for you both. Could we get together on Saturday, so you can tell me how it went? Please come over to my apartment at 10:30, so you can tell me all about it and then we can eat lunch."

They both nodded as Esther waved and went out the door.

At the ranch Oscar and Vera added to their lists, off and on through the day as many thoughts and ideas came to their minds after asking themselves good questions without the thought of being too old negating and thwarting their creativity. When they got together to share, each one had a substantial list.

Oscar proposed, "Let's pray before we show our lists. Father in heaven, thank you for the brains you've given us and ideas we have written without being hindered by negative thinking."

Vera continued, "Yes, it was fun to work toward a positive goal of ways this ranch could be used for your work and your glory."

Oscar finished, "Now we ask that you will guide our discussion and point us to the best idea to reach our goal. We pray in Jesus precious name. Amen."

Vera asked, "Shall we exchange lists and read them first?"

"I like that idea," he answered handing his list to her and taking hers to read. While they read silently, if someone had been watching they would have seen smiles, nods, and thoughtful expressions on each face. When they finished and looked up, each one had a finger on an idea written on their spouse's list, and a big smile. They erupted into laughter after being shown the idea each one was pointing to, and then they got up and danced all the way around the room together.

Oscar stated, "I haven't had so much fun in a long time! Thank you, Lord, for showing us the best idea in such a fun way. That was the only similar idea both of us had written down among the others, and it is the very best one too."

Vera picked up both lists and read the identical idea out loud from each list, "Turn this ranch into homes for girls in Caring Foster Homes with families who will love and care for them while they teach them the Good News and guide them to the Savior. Then **he** can save, heal, restore and rehabilitate their lives. The horses on the ranch will be an added blessing for the girls." The wording was almost the same on both lists.

"Now we can start to develop plans to put this good idea into action. Would you like to write ideas about that topic tomorrow during the day and we can read and discuss them in the evening?" Oscar inquired of his beloved wife.

She nodded and then took his hand to lead him to the living room couch where they could cuddle and visit for a while.

The next evening they reviewed their lists of plans and typed out the best ones on a word processor and then printed several copies. An appointment was made with the lead pastor of the Grace 'n' Faith Church for Thursday so they could discuss, pray with, and get his counsel on this project.

Wednesday evening in Pine City after praying separately and brainstorming ideas for their date on Friday, Nathan and Felix sat at the table to discuss the ones they thought might work.

"Would it be good for us to start off with memories of the fun times we had together at the dude ranch?" asked Felix. "Then I can apologize for teasing too much."

Nathan answered, "Those are both good ideas and will get the evening off to a good start. Then it might be a good time to give our testimonies and hear theirs. I assume that since Esther was in the small group, she's a believer. Possibly Ruth is in a different small group. But it's never safe to assume anything, so we need to find out. If Esther isn't a believer, then we would NOT be able to go any further in a relationship. All we could do is pray for her."

"You're right. The Bible is very clear about not being united with someone who doesn't share our faith in Jesus the Savior. So we need to find out that information very early," agreed Felix.

"I think then I'll need to admit why we never followed up with our friendship after high school. I'll be terribly embarrassed to tell her that I was so shy I could never ask her for her last name and find out where she lived. It certainly wasn't lack of interest," Nathan commented, shaking his head at himself.

"I understand, because my pride got in the way of apologizing and therefore I couldn't ask her those same questions, either. We were both a couple of failures! If only we could turn the clock back all those years and do it over! We'll find out on Friday evening if we're any better now than we were back then," Felix lamented.

"Oops! We're both going the wrong way on a road that's supposed to stay positive. Let's say together what we agreed to do in this project," suggested Nathan.

They said it in unison, "We will help each other to be the best we can be, and give Esther the chance to choose the man she thinks would be the better husband for her."

"It is a big goal, but we can do it with God's help." stated Nathan. "After she chooses one of us, the other man will cheer them on, and then start looking for the best woman God has for his wife. It's extremely important for us to stay unified in this project and to remain friends after it's over."

Felix smiled and nodded. "Yes, we've been friends since first grade and we definitely desire to stay friends for the rest of our lives! In addition, I guess we need to understand and accept the possibility of her rejecting both of us for whatever reason she might have."

"Correct, she could already be engaged or may have decided to never marry, or who knows what other reasons there might be," Nathan agreed and looked somewhat dejected.

Felix added, "She might decide she doesn't like either of us, but we'll never know unless we try, and we have decided to try hard!"

Nathan concurred, "Yes, so let's pray. Jesus, thank you for being here with us as we've been discussing our plans and our agreements. Please keep us focused and help us to do your will in this situation."

"I agree, Lord," said Felix, "Thank you for the ideas to use at the beginning of our upcoming date. Please guide everything we do and say through the whole date. We pray in Jesus name. Amen." Felix stood up, put his hand on Nathan's shoulder, gave it a gentle squeeze, and then left the room to get ready for bed, since tomorrow was a workday.

During breakfast Thursday morning, Ruth asked, "Esther, would you like for me to give you a summary of the teaching time at my Wednesday evening small group? It's probably similar to what was taught in your group on Monday since the small groups all try to stay on the same page."

"Thank you, Ruth," replied Esther. "I would like that. I'll take notes on what you say so I can have it in my notebook."

So Ruth began, "As is often the case, after singing several songs, the teaching time goes along so well with them and the scripture verses they usually list with the title in the hymnal. The first song we sang was 'Surely Goodness and Mercy,' based on Psalm 23, especially the last verse, *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*" Esther smiled.

Ruth went on, "Then we sang 'Anywhere with Jesus.' The verse for it was 1 Peter 2:21b, which says, as I personalize it, *Jesus suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow his steps.* Even if we might have to suffer by following Jesus, we'll be better off following him than going the way of the world."

She continued, "The third song was 'Where he Leads I'll follow.' The verses were Mark 1:17,18. *Jesus said (to Peter and Andrew) 'Come after me and I will make you become fishers of men.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him.*"

Esther inserted, "They had no idea how hard it was going to be for them for the rest of their lives, but they didn't even question Jesus. They just followed him."

Ruth replied, "I agree and I don't think I could have done that without asking questions and getting more information. The last song was 'Peace, Perfect Peace' with the verse in John 14:27, which you already know by heart.

Esther responded, "Yes, and I know it would have helped me a lot to listen to the teaching time instead of reliving all those memories and being so upset about those two men being in the same group I'm in. I'm glad we decided to be in separate groups this year so you could catch me up on what I missed by being so distracted. I especially like that song and the verse I now quote in John 14:27 where Jesus says, *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you, it is not a peace like the world gives. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*"

Ruth responded, "I agree. Verse four in the song is exceptionally good for your situation, because it states, God is always on the throne even when our future isn't known. The main emphasis of the teaching was to be ready for any changes the new year might bring to us. We need to pray and follow the Lord's guidance every day."

"Yes, I'll try to remember to do it every day," Esther replied.

"Good, I will too," stated Ruth. "The rest of the meeting was the usual explanation of how small groups operate and the importance of keeping praises and prayer times confidential, and only using names of the people who are in the group."

Esther smiled and said, "Thank you again, Ruth. Now I feel caught up with the rest of my group, and it's a good feeling."

Just before leaving the office on Thursday, Maria ran up the stairs to ask Ruth what she and Esther would like to have for lunch on Saturday so she could buy it while she did her normal shopping on the way home today. She enjoyed shopping for those supplies along with the rest of her food and looked forward to having both of her friends come to tell her about their date and then eat lunch together.

As she was putting her groceries away, her calico cat was rubbing up against her legs and was generally getting in the way. Maria stopped what she was doing and picked her up. She immediately started purring as Maria stroked her soft fur.

"I think you need more attention than I was giving you. Are you hungry? I'll get you some supper just as soon as I'm finished here. I'm so happy God gave me a good job with a Christian boss, this nice compact apartment, a loving cat to greet me when I get home, and good friends coming to visit on Saturday. Thank you Jesus for all the blessings! Please help Esther and Ruth as they go on their date Friday. Keep them safe and guide them about what to say and do. May your will be done in all things."

Maria put the cat down, washed her hands, finished putting everything away, and then fed her pet before getting her own supper.

Before leaving work on the ranch Thursday evening, Nathan asked for permission to come an hour early the next day. "That way I could leave an hour early so Felix and I can get ready to go meet Esther and Ruth at the Healthy Eating Restaurant at 5:30 PM. I'm definitely nervous about the evening, so would you two pray for us, that we'll do and say only what Jesus would want us to in this situation?"

Oscar answered, "Yes, of course, for both questions. You've told us how important this is to you and Felix and that you both only want to do God's will for everyone concerned. So relax and trust God to do what he does best, as I paraphrase Romans 8:28. *God will work out everything for good because we love God and have been called according to his purpose.*"

Vera added, "You'll probably be pleasantly surprised at the ways he works things out. We would be interested to hear about your date if you'd like to tell us on your next workday afterward."

"I'll be sure to tell you all about it even if it doesn't go the way I'd like it to go. Have a good evening. I'll see you tomorrow," Nathan responded.

When he got to the apartment he shared with Felix in Pine City, Nathan asked, "Did your boss agree to let you come in and leave an hour early tomorrow?"

"Yes, he was very nice about it. That's something I really like about this city and especially the rural areas around it. The people are usually friendly and willing to help," answered Felix.

It was Friday evening before Esther was ready for it to be, and she didn't know where the week had gone. She dressed carefully and she and Ruth were out the door and on their way to the restaurant.

"What if they don't show up? Felix might think it would be a good joke on us," commented Esther.

"No problem, we'll just go ahead in and eat a quiet, relaxed dinner on our own and enjoy it," Ruth responded.

Esther laughed and it relieved her stress. Shortly thereafter, they parked and saw their dates waiting near the door, so they went to join them with smiles to hide their nervousness.

Felix greeted them. "Welcome Ruth and Esther. Let's go inside where we can hear when they call our reservation."

Small talk passed the few minutes as they waited. "Mendoza, party of four," the hostess called. They followed her to a comfortable looking booth. The men sat on one side and the ladies on the other side. The hostess left menus for them to look at and said she'd be back shortly with water for them, and to take their orders. The four of them got busy and studied the menus so they'd be ready to order when she returned. After their orders were taken all of them took a sip of water at the same time as if it had been choreographed. They all laughed about it, and it helped to break the ice.

Nathan found his voice and complimented the ladies, "Ruth and Esther, you both look lovely this evening. It's so good to be able to see you again. Thank you for agreeing to have dinner with us this evening. I've been thinking back on our fun times together at the Yardley Dude Ranch. The memories are mostly good ones."

Esther responded, "Thank you for the compliments. Both of you look very nice also. We have many good memories of our times together at the dude ranch too. I especially enjoyed horseback riding in their beautiful valley."

"Even when that horse ran away with you?" asked Felix.

She laughed and answered, "Yes, I liked it even then. I appreciated the way both of you were concerned enough to come and help me. Vera had taught me what to do if the horse I was riding ever ran

away with me, so I tried it and it worked. She said to get the horse headed uphill and then urge it to go even faster, which would tire it out so it would be willing to stop when you said 'whoa' and pulled back on the reins. It was an exhilarating ride! Vera had also told me to take the horse back to the place where it had spooked, and get it used to that area so it wouldn't happen again. Do you remember, we found a scarf caught in a bush and it was fluttering in the breeze?"

Felix nodded. "Yes, you dismounted, retrieved the scarf and put it in your pocket. Then you remounted and we went sedately back to the ranch where we all had to walk the horses around the ring several times to cool them down and do extra grooming on the horses because they had gotten overheated."

"Ruth didn't run her horse, so she didn't have as much to do," remembered Nathan.

"That's because I was there when Vera told Esther what to do with a run away horse, so I just waited for all of you to return," explained Ruth.

Nathan commented, "Oh, I understand now. Horseback riding was also my favorite thing to do at the dude ranch. Along with it, I enjoyed rowing on the lake in those flat-bottomed boats. The lake was great for ice skating in the winter."

Esther remarked, "Yes it was. We enjoyed doing those things also. On our next trip to the dude ranch, Vera told me they had trained that horse to not be afraid of fluttering scarves or anything else. I don't think it ever ran away again."

Ruth shared, "One of my favorite memories is looking forward to our weekends at the ranch, driving there, and coming around the last corner where the whole valley just opened up in all of it's beauty. I've never found a more delightful or excellent place to spend a weekend." Everyone nodded agreement.

Their salads arrived at their table just then and Nathan asked, "Is it all right with you if I pray before we eat?" They both nodded, so he continued, "Father, thank you for this time we get to have together to renew our acquaintance and restore friendships, and for all the food we'll be eating. Please bless it to our bodies, and our bodies to your service. I pray in Jesus name. Amen." The others added "amen" and started eating. There was a comfortable silence for a few moments.

Ruth remarked, "This salad is delicious. I even like it without dressing because it's so fresh. What memory do you have about your times at the dude ranch, Felix?"

He realized this would be a good place for his apology, so he said, "This memory isn't a good one. I remember doing too much teasing most of the time, and I do apologize for doing that. Please forgive me. I'm really trying to stop teasing, but I know it will be hard for me to change."

Both of the ladies smiled, thanked him for the apology, and told him that of course he was forgiven.

Nathan said, "The one memory I would change if I could, is that while we were having so much fun at the ranch, Felix and I were not believers, so we didn't give God the honor he deserved. About five and a half years ago my family and Felix went to hear an evangelist at a big stadium in a bigger city near here. He explained the gospel in such a clear way, that we all finally understood what Jesus had done for us and our need to believe in him. So we all went forward and accepted Jesus as our Savior, and we've been learning how to serve him ever since in a good church and small groups."

Ruth and Esther looked at each other in pleased surprise and Esther asked, "What was the name of the city, and what month was it?" After he told her, she continued, "My family and I were there at the same time. He was only there the one day, and I praise and thank the Lord that the same thing happened for our family, except for Jason, who wasn't with us. But we kept praying for him and he finally became a believer near the end of April last year, and Jesus healed him."

"Wow! This is really amazing and wonderful. It was a glorious coincidence that we four became believers on the same day at the same place even though we didn't know about it until right now," said Nathan. "Plus we're overjoyed to hear about Jason also coming to the Lord and being healed of his bipolar disorder."

They all nodded and would have had a rousing praise time if they had been in an appropriate place for it. Instead, they quietly praised God for his goodness. The waiter came and removed empty salad dishes and another one brought their orders, so they were again comfortably silent as they started eating and thinking about what they had just learned about each other.

Nathan broke the silence. "I have another memory I regret. I'm sorry I wasn't able to keep in contact with you after high school when our times at the ranch no longer coincided. It was my own fault, because I was so shy that I was never able to ask for your last name or where you lived. I'm so glad I finally thought about asking the Yardleys if they remembered your family and knew where I could find you. They very graciously told me and I am extremely thankful."

“Don’t worry about it, Nathan,” Ruth responded, “Many teenagers are shy. The Yardleys are nice people and are part of our good memories.” Then Ruth asked, thinking that maybe Nathan needed a rescue from his embarrassment. “What did you both do after high school?”

Felix answered, “We both went to the university in our city. I got my degree in farming and agriculture. My minor was coaching sports. Nathan got his degree in counseling children and teens, and his minor was horse care and training. We’ve been working in those fields since graduation. What have the two of you and Jason been doing?”

“Your fields of study sound very interesting. The three of us got our degrees in accounting by attending the university here in Pine City while we lived at home to help save money. So we’re all busy helping people with their bookkeeping,” answered Esther. Plus we’ve been learning a lot at Grace ‘n’ Faith Church and in small groups about how to live the way Jesus desires for us to live.”

Nathan felt much better after his admission, and what Ruth had said helped even more. He commented, “It’s unusual for all of the siblings to major in the same thing, but it sounds like it has worked well for you three. I agree with you, Esther, the right church and good small groups are immensely helpful. I moved here in September and went to church with Oscar on Saturdays and to his small group also on the night it met during the week. He and Vera have to go separately, so one of them can always be at the dude ranch, so she goes to church on Sundays and to a small group on a different night of the week than Oscar.”

Felix explained, “Before we moved here we had been attending a church and small group in the city where we lived. When I moved here in October, I joined Oscar and Nathan. In December, we began attending Church #4 with Vera and in January, we were put into the same small group that you are in now, Esther.”

“I think this church is amazing,” Nathan commented, “the way it uses one building for 12 different church services on the weekend, each with it’s own pastor who also has a job to support his family, but they all work together and stay on the same page.”

Felix agreed, “Then they grew so fast last year that another building and school were built to make room for continued growth. It has another 12 churches with their own services. I don’t know anything about the schools, but I’d like to find out sometime.

Esther suggested, “You might want to ask Julie Blake about the church school. She’s in our church and teaches there, or you could ask at the church office. I think they have a booklet about the school.”

“Thank you for the information, Esther,” responded Felix.

Ruth remarked, “I’ve heard some people say that a church like ours couldn’t happen because it would be impossible to get so many people to cooperate and work together. But it isn’t impossible with God. Grace ‘n’ Faith Church is proof of that.”

The rest nodded emphatically and since they were finished eating now and Nathan asked, “Would you like to have some dessert?”

“Only if it’s something very light. Ruth, would you order for me while I go to the ladies’ room? Please excuse me,” said Esther.

Nathan grabbed this opportunity to question Ruth, “Do you know whether or not Esther has decided to remain single?”

“She’s still praying for God’s leading, but has told him of her desire to be married if he would bring the right man into her life,” Ruth responded.

“Thank you, and how about you?” he asked next.

“I prefer to remain single,” she answered, wondering where this line of questioning was going to lead.

Nathan continued, “I didn’t mean to be intrusive with those questions, but I needed to know the answers so I can ask the next question. Would you be willing to continue going with us as a foursome so Esther would be more comfortable?”

“First, you need to tell me what you’re planning. What is your goal?” Ruth inquired. Felix quickly explained their joint project to Ruth and she nodded. “I’ll agree to accompany the three of you so you can let her choose, but only if you tell her what your plan and goal is. I know she would not like to be in the dark about it.”

Nathan looked to Felix for his agreement and said, “All right, we’ll explain it all to her. Thank you very much, Ruth, for telling us the information and for agreeing to go with us. Would you please pray for all of us as we undertake this plan of action?”

“Of course I will,” she replied. “Here comes the waiter. Let’s order and eat dessert before you explain it to her.” They nodded.

Esther returned to the table and soon their desserts were delivered. Small talk was enjoyable as they ate, and as soon as coffee or soft drinks were refilled, Nathan began, "Esther, Felix and I talked to Ruth while you were gone, and she agreed that she'd join us in a plan we'll explain to you. We hope you'll agree to try this, and we'll understand if you need some time to think it over. So please listen, and know that we only want the best for you and our intentions are completely honorable."

Esther looked completely confused, but she nodded. Therefore Nathan explained to her about the joint project he and Felix had. They even recited in unison to her about their agreement. "I know this might seem sudden to you, but we've been looking for you for years. We finally found you, and today we were all pleasantly surprised to learn that we're all believers. Now we would like to know if you will give us a chance to let you choose. If you decide that neither of us would be best for you, please be honest and tell us," Nathan said.

Esther swallowed and responded, "I feel highly honored that both of you would make a plan like this and work together to help each other, leaving the choosing to me. Thank you for telling me about your plan so I could know what to expect. I have to admit to being so surprised and uncertain that I am hesitant to answer right now. Could I take a day to pray and think about this and also talk to my parents and Pastor Don to get their input?"

"Certainly, and we apologize for any upset this might cause for you," answered Felix. "I guess we didn't envision how you might feel about our plan."

"Thank you, and I forgive you. There's no way to know ahead of time how others might respond to something we plan," Esther replied. "Thank you both for the trip down memory lane and the delicious dinner and dessert. I'll call tomorrow evening."

Ruth added, "Yes, thank you both. She has a lot to consider and contemplate, so I think we should leave now."

Nathan responded, "You're both very welcome, and we thank you for coming and being willing to listen to and reflect on our plan. We'll be home tomorrow evening."

Everyone said goodbye and the ladies left.

Felix and Nathan watched them go and wondered how it would all turn out for them and for her.

"Maybe we didn't do a very good job of thinking through this whole project. I never imagined it might cause Esther distress, but she did look really tense at the end," mentioned, Nathan.

Felix responded, "Well I guess we're destined to live and learn the hard way about everything, even though our intentions are good. I hope she will give us a chance to prove ourselves."

"Same here! Let's go pay the bill and go home so we can pray some more about the whole plan," suggested Nathan.

"Where are we going?" Esther asked when she realized they weren't headed to their apartment.

"I thought it would be best to go straight to Dad and Mom. We can ponder and study this better with them, than trying to figure it out on our own," replied Ruth.

At least it wasn't late, so they didn't have to get their dad, William, and mom, Anna, out of bed. When Ruth and Esther finished telling them this unbelievable story, they all took turns praying about it in the way it would be done in a small group, just like a conversation including God.

Then William clarified, "Did you say they both left their other city and jobs, moved here and got new jobs to carry out this plan after they found out where Esther lived?"

"Yes, Dad, that's what they told me while Esther was in the ladies' room. Then they asked me if I'd be willing to accompany them on all the dates so Esther would feel more comfortable," Ruth answered.

"And you said 'Yes.' Thank you for being willing to do that for me, Ruth. I know I'd be worried about going with them alone. I'll be uneasy even with you there, but you'll make it tolerable. I've never been so astonished and confused and disoriented in my life. What do you think I should do, Dad and Mom?"

Anna asked, "Do you still desire to be married?"

"Yes, Mom, I do, but only if I can be sure it's what God wants for me and he gives me the right man," replied Esther.

"How will you know which man is the right man?" Anna asked her daughter next.

"I already read the book you gave me in high school another time when Maria and I were discussing this topic last summer. It has a lot of good traits to look for and guidelines for me to use as I get to know a man," she answered.

Ruth commented, "I overheard Fiona Anderson talking to a single young lady in my new small group this week. Fiona was saying that after she came home from taking care of her elderly great aunt, she basically had a list of things to look for and tests for Matt to pass before she would agree to marry him, if

he asked her. He passed all of them with flying colors, and they are now very happily married and are expecting their first child.”

“I’d like to talk with her and get some more ideas of things to look for. I’ll call her sometime soon and see if I can visit with her and write down her ideas in my notebook.” Esther remarked.

William inquired, “What are some ways you can find out about those traits in a man?”

Esther smiled when she realized what her parents were trying to get her to acknowledge. “I can observe them in small group and on every date we go on with Ruth as my support. The part I like the least about this plan, is that I must choose between them and I don’t want to be the one who would hurt either one of them. It makes it so much harder, knowing they both love me.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Anna declared. “Some women enjoy leading a man on and then dumping him. I’m glad we raised two ladies who are sensitive to others’ feelings.”

Ruth smiled her thanks to her mom and stressed to Esther, “Remember what they said in unison about helping each other be the best they can be so you could choose the one who would be the better husband for you. They’ve already accepted the fact that only one of them can be chosen and are giving you that privilege without fighting over you. They told me they’re committed to staying friends all the way through this and then cheering on the one you choose.”

“Wow, that is a good thing for me to remember as I observe them. Actually, this is an amazing opportunity. I’ll get to see and compare both of them at once on each date and at the small group,” Esther observed.

William agreed, “Exactly correct, and you’re a mature lady who is a Christian, so Jesus will help you all the way.”

“That’s right,” said Anna. “I remember you telling me you had a crush on both of them while we were at the dude ranch.”

“Yes, I did. But not on both of them at the same time,” Esther laughed. “Each one was truly appealing in different ways. Nathan was quiet and shy, and I didn’t really know what he was thinking. He said he regretted being so shy that he couldn’t even ask me my last name. Felix was a big tease and I did not enjoy that as a teen. He apologized tonight and Ruth and I both forgave him. He said he’s really trying to change,” explained Esther.

William inserted, “Both of those traits could be hard to live with if they are carried to excess. So there is the first thing in each of them you need to look for and evaluate. But it sounds like you’ll need to give each one some time to make the change.”

“Thank you, Dad. I’ll be sure to do that,” Esther responded.

Ruth remarked, “Both of them were exceptionally polite and seemed sincere about their belief in Jesus, and in their desire to make this joint project work. They were even sorry if their plan caused upset for Esther.”

Esther nodded and added, “At first we were concerned that they might be con artists or crooks, but since they both admitted to their faults and asked for forgiveness, I don’t think they are.”

“Therefore, what’s your final verdict in this case?” William inquired.

Esther answered, “I think Nathan and Felix deserve a chance to do their joint project, and I need to be a conscientious, fair judge. How do you feel, Ruth? Do you really want to be involved in this plan of theirs? I know I could not do it without your help!”

Ruth replied, “You are my dear little sister and I desire to see you happy. I’ll do whatever I can do to keep you safe in this endeavor. I don’t want you to get hurt in any way. Maybe we’ll even be able to enjoy these dates. I can’t imagine two men wanting to take a self proclaimed thirty-one-year-old spinster and her younger sister on dates. They must be certain of their love for you, Esther, and that is a real compliment to you.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way, but you’re right like you usually are, my wonderful big sister. Thank you for your willingness to help in this situation. Thank you, Dad and Mom, for listening and guiding us to an answer to this dilemma.” she said.

“You’re welcome!” they said. Then Ruth and Esther went home to the apartment they shared and had a peaceful night of sleep.

Saturday morning Maria awoke looking forward to a visit with her friends and also wondering what they’d tell her about their date the evening before. She glanced at the clock and gave a little gasp. Apparently she had slept in and only had an hour to get ready for her guests. She jumped out of bed and scurried around straightening things up after a quick breakfast. At least she had planned their lunch the

night before and had it ready to put in the slow cooker, which she did and started it so it would be ready by noon. She was ready with time to spare, and they arrived on time.

“Welcome, Ruth and Esther. Both of you look rested and well. Please come sit in these comfortable chairs and tell me all about your date last night,” Maria invited.

Esther declared, “You are not going to believe this story. In fact I’m still unsure after living it.” She and Ruth took turns telling Maria about everything that had happened at the restaurant and then at their parent’s home.”

“You’re completely right,” stated Maria. I would have a very hard time believing this story except that I know for sure that you both always tell the truth. It reminds me a little bit of the way your brother told me about his love and desire to marry me, when he had me come to his office that day last spring. Only this is double for you, Esther. TWO men basically declared their love and intentions, and now you have to date them together and choose the one you think is better to be your husband! No wonder you’re overwhelmed! But, it could be a great adventure for you.”

Ruth agreed, “I’ve never heard of this kind of thing happening before in my lifetime, but it does have the possibility of being a great adventure.”

“I can’t imagine dating two men at the same time! Esther, you’re much braver than I could ever be!” exclaimed Maria.

Esther stated, “I’ve decided that it might not be so bad. Ruth will be with me every time as my support, and I’ll be very busy observing both men so I can make the right choice. But we are also going to get Pastor Don’s counsel on the matter this afternoon.”

Maria inserted, “It’s really a good idea to talk to Pastor Don. He has helped me so many times!”

Esther said, “I’m glad. So let’s pray about it right now and then we can eat lunch and talk about other things. I think I’m about saturated with this topic for now.”

After they had taken turns praying about the unique situation, Maria thanked the Lord for the food, and they enjoyed regular visiting about other topics while they ate the lunch she had prepared and they helped with the cleanup.

After lunch Ruth and Esther stopped at the Ross house for a 1:30 PM appointment they had made before going to see Maria, to talk to Pastor Don about the situation. They greeted his wife and children and then went into his office where they told him the state of affairs.

Pastor Don responded, “I agree with you. This is decidedly unusual. Nathan and Felix came here together to discuss their plan with me and I’ll tell you the same thing I told them. ‘The most important thing you should do is pray to ask God if this could be his will for you.’ I won’t tell you the rest of the conversation so as to not betray their confidentiality. Let’s pray about it together now and trust God to give you his answer.”

When they finished, Esther again felt she should give Felix and Nathan a chance to do their project and ask God to help her be a fair judge to choose one or maybe neither of them to be her future husband. She’d also continue to ask for God to make his will clear to her about singleness or marriage.

Then Ruth and Esther went home to do some of the weekend housework that was waiting for them.

Later, that Saturday evening, Esther called Nathan’s phone number and was happy she didn’t get his voice mail. “Hello, Nathan, this is Esther. If Felix is there also, would you turn on your phone’s speaker so he can hear this at the same time?”

“Hello, Esther. Yes, Felix is here and is listening to hear what you’re going to say. Thank you for calling.” answered Nathan.

“Nathan and Felix, I’ve talked to my parents and my pastor, and we’ve prayed about your plan. We feel it would be a good idea to have Ruth join us on the dates and I’ll do my best to get to know you both and then choose the one I think would be the better husband for me. The hardest part for me, will be the choosing. I don’t desire to be the one who will hurt the man who isn’t chosen. And, if for some reason I don’t choose either of you, it would be even harder. So in advance I wish to apologize for however it turns out,” Esther finished, took a deep breath and tried to relax. It had been harder to tell them her answer than she had imagined it would be.

Both men said something like, “Thank you, Esther, for agreeing to give us a chance to carry out our plan.”

Then Felix stated, “Don’t worry about the choosing. We already know that only one can be chosen and maybe neither.”

Nathan added, “Yes, relax, Esther, and know that we’ll be praying for Jesus to lead all of us every step of the way. Maybe you’ll even be able to enjoy our times together.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Thank you both for reassuring me. If I remember to not focus on having to choose, I’m sure I will enjoy our times together. I’ll let you go now, and see you at the small group Monday evening,” Esther responded.

“Very good,” said Felix.

“Have a nice evening,” Nathan added.

Felix hung up the phone and the men had a little praise session ending with more prayers for guidance and wisdom to proceed.

Sunday all of them were in church and Esther could see them sitting on either side of Vera near the front of the church. She forced herself to not look their way or be distracted by them. Her self-discipline paid off and she was able to worship and listen carefully to the teaching time, taking notes on the most important parts so she could review them later.

Then just before the end of the service, since Maria was sitting next to her, Esther whispered an explanation to her about where the men were sitting so she could get a look at them, before the people started moving around.

“They’re both very handsome,” Maria whispered to Esther.

Esther nodded and then kicked herself for blushing. She was acting like a teenager. It had been years since she had been on a date, except for the one with Tony last summer, and nothing had come of that one either. Sometimes she wondered if she’d ever get married. Then she repented and asked God to forgive her for not being able to leave the whole question of being single or married in God’s more capable hands.

On Monday Nathan arrived early at the ranch to tell the Yardleys about the date he and Felix had with Esther and Ruth. They were just as amazed as the others had been, when they had listened to the ladies describe the date.

Oscar asked, “Did both of you really quit your jobs and move here just to be able to date Esther and let her choose the one she likes better?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but this is very important to us. The last time we were all here together, Felix and I told each other that we’d like to marry Esther when we graduated from the university, but that we knew only one of us could actually do it.” Then he recited for them the agreement he and Felix had made.

“Felix has helped me as we’ve been looking for her for all these years since graduating from the university, and we’ve been comparing her with all the other girls we’ve met in between. Not one of them measures up to her. She’s not only beautiful, she’s also intelligent, talented, sensitive, articulate and gracious. Most wonderful and most important of all is: we found out on the date that she also shares our faith in Jesus,” Nathan explained.

Vera responded, “Wonderful, thank you for explaining. We understand, and we’ll certainly pray for God to bless your venture and for only his will to be done for all of you.”

“We’ll truly be grateful for your prayers and God’s help. Now it’s time for me to get to work. What are your plans for today?” After listening carefully to Oscar’s answer, Nathan left the kitchen and went outside to work.

Oscar asked Vera, “Do you think we should mention any of our ideas to him?”

She replied, “I don’t think so yet. I’d rather get to know him better, since it has been so many years. I wish to see if his life matches what he told us about being a Christian now.”

“I agree. He’s been working here since the first week in September, and I can see that he’s a good worker who learns quickly and likes to please us,” concurred Oscar.

“Let’s keep the rest of this discussion until after supper so he doesn’t walk in here and catch us talking about him. I’ll look forward to talking more about our ideas then too,” suggested Vera.

“Good, I’m getting excited about those!” he exclaimed.

At lunchtime in Pine City on Monday, Maria resisted the urge to ask Ruth more about the two men and the date they had on Friday. She would share more if she so desired. Instead, they discussed things they had liked about the service at church yesterday.

Ruth said, “We sang some of my favorite songs that go so well with a new year just getting started. The scripture verse, Psalm 90:12 says, *teach us to number our days, so we may apply our hearts unto wisdom*, has been one of my favorite verses for a long time. That verse and the song ‘Another Year is Dawning’ were a good lead in for the teaching time. I like all the verses in that song because they’re an excellent

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