

An Honest Heart

Invocation

The window was directly behind Bishop Morgan, and the late afternoon sun backlit his white hair in a glowing halo. Jennica tried to see his face, but her eyes had adjusted to the brightness of the window, and all she could make out were indistinct blotches of shadow beneath the ring of fire around his head. He held the phone in his left hand while he took notes with his right. The question he had asked her before the telephone rang raced around inside her head like a child chasing dandelion puffs in the wind.

"Are you honest in your dealings with your fellowman?"

She looked around the room. On the south wall were three small, framed pictures of the First Presidency. On the north wall was a picture of the Savior dressed in a red robe. The bishop's desk was cluttered with stacks of paper and half a dozen books. The credenza under the picture of Jesus was graced with a small tin can that had been covered with cardboard and which held a dozen handmade paper flowers, each with the name of a Primary child written on the petals in childish scrawls.

"Are you honest in your dealings with your fellowman?"

She interlaced the fingers of her hands and felt the sweat in her palms. Bishop Morgan spoke softly into the phone. *I wonder if I should wait outside, she thought.* But the bishop had made no suggestion that she leave. In fact, he seemed apologetic at the interruption. She pulled her hands apart and smoothed the wrinkles from her skirt. Her eyes were pulled to the picture of the Savior, and stared at him, took a deep breath, and tried to relax.

How do I answer that question? Her mind flew back to the days when she was a tiny child.

Chapter 1

"Jennica, you quit hittin' your brother," her mother shouted from behind the screen door.

"He hit me first," she pouted defiantly.

"Did not," her four-year-old brother replied. He lay on the ground trying to suppress tears.

"Did too," she said with all the power of her six-year-old voice. She placed her hands on her hips and thrust her chin forward toward Damon. "He started it."

"I don't care who started it," her mother said. "Both of you stop it. I don't want to catch you acting like heathens." Her shadowy form behind the screen door disappeared back into the kitchen, but over her shoulder she said, "Jenn, you help your brother up. And both of you say you're sorry."

Jennica signed loudly and then extended her hand toward her brother. Damon ignored it, stood up, and dusted off the seat of his pants. He was

wearing a pair of hand-me-down striped overalls. The knees were almost nonexistent, and the back pockets were missing. He wore no shirt, and the button was missing from the left shoulder strap, causing the front flap to hang forward. Suddenly, he lunged at his sister, but she sidestepped his attack and shoved him back to the ground.

"Sorry," she said. The sarcasm dripped from her lips like a Popsicle on a hot summer day.

Damon glared at her, holding back the tears. "Not either," he spat. "Neither'm I."

Jennica walked proudly across the backyard, throwing up cyclones of dust with her bare feet. She fought the urge to look back over her shoulder, though she was afraid her brother might launch another attack and catch her unaware. She reached the shade of the old pepper tree that stood in the southeast corner of their lot and scratched her back on the scaly bark. Her then T-shirt offered little protection from the silvery gray toothpicks that split off from the chunks of bark. She reached up, pulled down one of the fernlike fronds, snapped it free, and sat down with her back against the tree. Absentmindedly, she began picking the pinnate leaves apart. Her brother had disappeared.

The afternoon was hot and still. No cooling breeze could be felt. The sun, a bronze ball, fought to reach her bare legs through the shifting shade of the pepper tree. Jennica scrunched her shoulders against the trunk and felt sweat gathering on the back of her head and sliding, serpent like, down her pigtails. Bored, having pulled all of the leaves from the frond, she brushed them from her lap, stood up, and marched toward the back door of the house. She climbed the swaybacked wooden steps, pausing long enough to pull a sliver from the bottom of her left foot while balancing on her right. The screen on the door hung from its frame like the front flap on Damon's overalls. She heard her mother cursing softly in the darkness of the kitchen as she pulled open the door and padded across the worn linoleum.

"Mom, I'm bored."

Her mother stood at the stove, stirring a pot of soup. She glanced back over the top of the half-moon eyeglasses that perched low on her nose. The right lens was chipped and scuffed. She brushed a bead of sweat from the tip of her nose. "You know what?" she said. "So am I."