

A Love for Tomorrow

Uncorrected Proof

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Prologue

“Our wedding is next week, Michael. How can you possibly have cold feet now?”

Serenity Williams asked her fiancé with her hands on her hips.

“This isn’t about cold feet, Serenity. You’re not listening to me. I’ve been trying to tell you for weeks that I can’t marry you.”

This was not happening to her. This was some crazy dream that she was going to wake up from any minute, because there was no way that the good reverend, Dr. Michael Randolph—the man she loved and had been planning to marry for the past three years—could be standing in front of her one week before the wedding, trying to call it off. But, just in case this wasn’t a dream, Serenity decided to play along. “Okay, Michael. Please tell me exactly what I haven’t been listening to.”

Michael took off his black fedora, revealing his full head of wavy, black hair.

“Can you sit down on the couch with me so we can talk?”

She didn’t want to sit down and talk; she wanted to get married. Michael owed her a wedding. After all, she had spent five years with this man. They had dated for two years and then gotten engaged. That had been three years ago. She had told her friends that she and Michael had decided to wait until his ministry got off the ground before

getting married, but, in truth, it had been Michael's decision to wait. Now that his ministry was growing, what did he want her to do now—wait another five years so he could work on expanding his church so that it reached megachurch status?

Michael sat down on the couch and held out his hand, gesturing for Serenity to join him.

She sat down next to him but said nothing.

“Serenity, the first thing you need to understand is that I love you more than life itself. It is because of how much I love you that I can't go through with this marriage.”

When am I going to wake up? Serenity held up her hand. “Wait a minute, now. I'm totally confused. Are you really telling me that you can't marry me because you love me too much?”

“Let me finish, honey,” Michael said. He took a deep breath and then trod on. “We've put off our wedding for three years now, because I've been hoping you'd get over your competitive ways. It's this constant rivalry between us that's driving me crazy. I'm afraid that the love I have for you will fade because of the competitive spirit you have.”

“The competitive spirit *I* have?” Serenity exploded as she stood up. “I'm not in competition with anybody. I'm just doing what God has called me to do.”

“That's what you tell people. But it's obvious that you are competitive. You wouldn't be where you are today if you weren't.”

“Okay, so what if I am a little competitive? What does that have to do with you and me? You're the pastor of a church. I don't have a church; I travel all over the world preaching, and I have a television ministry.”

“See? That’s what I mean,” he said, pointing at her. Then, he stood up, too.

“You’re always throwing the fact that you have a TV ministry in my face. And you love it when other preachers invite you to speak at their churches. You’ve even been trying to get behind my pulpit for the past year.”

“That is not true. I have never asked to preach at your church. I have more speaking engagements than I can accept in a year, so I certainly don’t need to beg anybody for the opportunity to preach.”

“See, there you go again. Every time you open your mouth, it’s always to say something about what you’re doing in ministry and how you’re in such high demand.”

It wasn’t true. Serenity had never bragged about her ministry. At least, not in the way Michael was making it sound like she did. Yes, she was grateful that God had allowed her ministry to grow in the manner in which it had over the last two years. And, yes, she expressed that gratitude to anyone who would listen. But she wasn’t bragging. She was trying to communicate to others that she understood how blessed she was. Serenity’s father was a bishop who presided over seven megachurches and ten smaller to medium-sized ones. He had often tried to get her to take over one of his churches as a pastor, but she didn’t believe that God was leading her in that direction.

She had stepped out in faith when she’d started her television ministry on a newly developed cable channel. Her television program was part Oprah, part Joyce Meyer in style. She interviewed many pastors and teachers of the gospel. And then, when she was invited to minister, she brought along her camera crew and broadcast those events on her program, as well. She and Michael had discussed the format of her show at its inception.

At the time, he had thought it was a great idea. He'd even told her that he could see her show going big time.

He just hadn't told her that, when it did, he would hold it against her. "Michael, please don't do this. Maybe we need to see a marriage counselor so we can work this out before the wedding."

"Don't you find the fact that we need a marriage counselor before we even get married a bit ludicrous?"

"Yes, but I also find your jealousy of a ministry that God's hand is on to be just as ludicrous." She took a deep breath, tried to calm herself, and said, "Look, Michael. I'm thirty-four years old. You're forty-two. We both agreed that now is the perfect time for us to have children. I've waited for you for five years. Why are you backing out now?"

"I'm sorry, Serenity. I just can't marry someone whose ministry overshadows my own. The next thing I know, people will be calling me 'Mr. Williams' instead of 'Pastor Randolph.'" He shook his head. "I just can't deal with that."

This was real—Michael was calling off their wedding—and Serenity felt as if her world was coming to an end. "What do you want me to do, Michael? Do you want me to give up my TV ministry? Is that it?"

He put his hat back on. "No. That won't work. You've created such a following now that, even if you weren't on TV, preachers would still be calling for you to speak at their conferences."

"I don't understand. I thought you loved me."

Michael didn't respond. He picked up his car keys and walked out of the house without looking back.

If he had turned around, he would have seen the tears that flowed down Serenity's face and the longing that she felt way down deep in her heart. But Michael didn't care about that. He cared only about being overshadowed. Why hadn't she seen this coming? Her best friend, Melinda Marks, had tried to warn her two years ago, when she'd said, "Trying to do the will of God and the will of your man gets hard sometimes."

At the time, Serenity had thought that Melinda was referring to her relationship with Bishop Steven Marks. Steven and Melinda had been engaged long ago, but Steven had felt that he couldn't marry a woman who wanted to preach the gospel rather than stay at home and be a wife and mother. So, he'd called off their wedding. But God's will had prevailed in that situation, and Steven and Melinda had finally gotten married eighteen months ago.

As she wiped the tears from her eyes, Serenity told herself not to worry. Michael would come to his senses, and they would be married on Saturday, as planned.

But on Thursday, her father, Bishop Lawrence Williams, called and informed her that Michael's secretary was phoning everyone on the guest list and letting them know that the wedding had been cancelled. That's when Serenity finally faced the fact that Michael wasn't coming back. He had allowed his ego to override their love, and she was crushed.

"Why didn't you tell me, sweetheart?" her father asked.

"I thought he would change his mind. I just didn't believe he was serious."

Serenity had been calling Michael for the past three days, leaving messages on his answering machine and voice mail, letting him know that she still loved him, and that she still wanted to go through with the wedding. Why should she have to wait ten years for

Michael to come to his senses, as Melinda had done with Steven? Serenity was convinced that if they just went ahead and got married, they would be able to work everything out later.

“Why is he doing this?” her father asked, cutting in to her thoughts.

“He says I’m too competitive—that he can’t marry a woman who overshadows him and his ministry.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry to hear that. But if that’s the way he feels, then he doesn’t deserve you. I believe that, if you’re meant to marry a preacher, God will send one who can handle your anointing.”

Serenity didn’t respond to her father’s remark, and they brought their conversation to an end. But, as she hung up the phone, she had made a very clear resolution. She wouldn’t waste another minute of her life on another ego-driven preacher.

Pastor Phillip McKnight was a man who had been greatly blessed by God. There was no other explanation for the extraordinary life he’d led. He’d played sixteen years of professional football, being traded only twice and winning a Super Bowl championship with both teams. The last team he’d played for had been the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. He’d been thirty-seven and still fit enough to play, if he wanted, when he’d voluntarily retired. But Phillip had other things on his mind. He’d earned millions of dollars from his winning football career, and now he wanted to live out the rest of his life serving God and winning souls for the kingdom.

When he arrived at the church he pastored, New Destiny, he entered the building, eager to check on the progress of the construction workers. He had given up a lot to build

this church, but Phillip had no regrets. In his lifetime, Phillip had experienced fame and fortune, the likes of which most people only dream about. But none of the things he had accomplished ever truly fulfilled him. Then, one day, he'd met Jesus, and it was like the blinders came off. Phillip began to see things so much more clearly. He received new direction for his life.

Jimmy Dayton, the foreman for the construction company, met Phillip in the fellowship hall. "I've got something to show you," he told Phillip excitedly.

"Lead the way," Phillip said, hoping that at least one of the rooms in the church was finally finished. They had been making plans for the building for a year and a half, but construction hadn't started until nine months ago. Right now, New Destiny was holding its services in a high school gymnasium, and Phillip was getting ready to come home.

Jimmy opened the double doors to the sanctuary, and Phillip walked in, his eyes beholding the beauty of the navy blue wall-to-wall carpet and the matching cushioned pews, which spanned the three-thousand-seat sanctuary. The glass podium he'd ordered was in the pulpit area, waiting for him to stand behind it and preach the Word. He turned to Jimmy. "This looks incredible! What else is finished?"

"Just your office, but the structure is solid enough for your congregation to have services here."

"This is the best news I've had all week!" Phillip exclaimed. "I'm glad I stopped by today. How soon can we start holding our services in here?" The excitement in his voice was evident.

“Probably in about two weeks or so,” Jimmy said. “We need to get a couple more things done before the safety inspection.”

“Okay—but hurry up! I can’t wait to have our services in this sanctuary,” Phillip said before heading for his new office, where he sat down behind the desk. He finally felt like they were making progress. That sense of satisfaction enabled him to take out the envelope he’d been carrying around all day in his pocket and put it on his desk. He looked at the envelope for a full ten minutes before picking it up and opening it.

Slowly, Phillip unfolded the divorce decree and stared at it for a few moments before throwing it back on his desk. Then, he leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and prayed for strength.

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No, this man is not keeping me waiting like this, Serenity thought as she looked at her diamond-studded Gucci watch. It was one of her favorite accessories. The watch had been priced at two grand, but Serenity had talked the store manager into halving the price. Her father always told her that a woman should treat herself to something special every now and then. So, while she was on her honeymoon in the Bahamas—without the groom—she purchased this gorgeous watch without a second thought. She loved the look and feel of Gucci on her wrist.

But her beautiful timepiece was telling her that her interviewee was twenty minutes late. The infamous Pastor Phillip McKnight had cancelled the interview they'd scheduled for two weeks ago so that he and a group of evangelists, ministers, and church members could travel to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to help with the disaster relief efforts after the terrible earthquake that racked the country and claimed so many lives. Serenity wholeheartedly understood Pastor McKnight's desire to be in Haiti during the country's time of need. She had even set up a disaster relief fund on her own Web site, encouraging the viewers of her Christian talk show, *Walk This Way*, to donate money. But Pastor

McKnight had been back in the States for three days now. What in the world could have caused him to be late for their rescheduled meeting?

Serenity hadn't wanted to interview Pastor McKnight in the first place. She was more comfortable with female preachers and teachers on her show, and she thought that her viewership, consisting predominantly of young to middle-aged women, would benefit most from hearing about the accomplishments and visions of other women around their age. But her producer kept telling her that women were also interested in men who served the Lord. So, here she was, being mistreated by another arrogant pastor who thought the world revolved around his inflated head.

Well, enough was enough. Serenity would not wait a second longer. She was going to gather up her camera crew and head back to Chicago. But, as she stood up, the office door opened, and a broad-shouldered man with skin the color of milk chocolate rushed through it. She had seen Pastor McKnight on television when he played for Tampa, but that football helmet must have blocked her view, because she had never imagined that the man was this fine in the flesh. Serenity sat back down and tried to process everything she knew about Pastor Phillip McKnight. He was a former football player who'd started building the church he now pastored a year before retiring from the NFL. She also knew that he was divorced.

"Sorry I'm so late," he said with an apologetic smile. "I got a flat tire on the interstate and had to change it."

That explained the dirt smudges she saw on his dress shirt. "I thought you forgot about our interview," Serenity said, not willing to let him off the hook too easily.

Phillip stretched out his hand, and she took it. As they shook, Phillip said, “I could never forget an appointment with Serenity Williams. Even four flat tires couldn’t even keep me away.”

Serenity pulled her hand out of his grip. The man was charming, but he was a preacher, and that made her mistrustful. It also made him off-limits. Every since that swollen headed reverend, Michael Randolph, had dumped her because her ministry was more successful than his, she had sworn off preachers. Even her brother, Larry the egomaniac, freely admitted that he wouldn’t be able to handle a wife who made more money or was better known than he. Falling in love with a preacher was for women who looked good in straitjackets and liked bubble-wrapped rooms. Best just to get this interview over with and forget she’d ever met Pastor Phillip McKnight. “So, would you like to talk in here first, or would you like to show the camera crew around the church so they can shoot some footage for the show?”

“Umm...well, I—I guess we could talk first, if that’s okay with you,” Phillip said, stumbling over his words.

“Are you sure, Pastor McKnight? Because, if you’d rather work with the film crew first, I’m okay with that.”

“No, no—please, sit back down. I’d like nothing more than to speak with you right now.” He sat down behind his desk and then said, “I forgot to charge my cell phone.”

Why did I say that? Serenity wondered as she looked at him with questioning eyes.

Phillip pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and set it on his desk. "I would have called to tell you that I was going to be late, but my cell died on me."

"Okay," Serenity said. She had already moved on and wished he'd do the same. She pulled her notepad and pen out of her purse. "This is a pretty big church building for such a young ministry. Most preachers begin their ministries in storefronts or other smaller locales. What made you decide to go so big so soon?"

"No small talk, no chitchat, just get straight down to business, huh?"

Serenity put down her notepad. "I wasn't trying to rush you, Pastor McKnight. It's just that my father taught me about the value of time, and I try not to waste it."

"Your father seems like a wise man. That's why I have a meeting scheduled with him next week. I'll be sure to let him know that his daughter still follows his advice."

Serenity's curiosity was piqued. She wanted to know why Pastor Phillip McKnight would leave the warmth of Tampa, Florida, to come to Chicago during the season of snowstorms and winter chills, but she didn't ask. Instead, she said, "Make sure to bring a heavy coat and a pair of gloves. They don't call it the Windy City for nothing."

"I plan to. Your father already warned me about the weather. But he promised that your mother would fix a warm meal for my trouble."

With a furrowed brow, Serenity said, "My mother normally tells me when she and my father are hosting out-of-town guests. I'm surprised she didn't say anything about your visit." Then, as if shaking off the shocking news, she picked her notepad back up. "Shall we continue, then, Pastor McKnight?"

Phillip put his elbows on his desk and smiled at Serenity. "Would you do me a favor?" he asked.

“That depends. What do you need?” Serenity asked with a wary grin on her face.

“Would you please call me Phillip? I don’t think we need to be so formal, especially since I’ll be meeting your parents next week.”

Okay, the suspense was killing her. There was no way she was going to be able to wait until she was finished with her work to call her mother and find out why Phillip was coming to dinner. “So, why are you and my father getting together next week?”

“I guess I’m kind of looking for a spiritual father, of sorts. I’ve been a pastor for only two years, and I’m getting to the point where I really need some godly guidance and mentoring.”

“Are you saying that you’ve decided to voluntarily bring the church you built under another man’s leadership?”

Phillip shook his head. “I don’t see it as the church I built. This church was built by God and the people of God, and I just want to continue to honor Him in all that we do.”

Most of the pastors Serenity knew weren’t eager to submit themselves to another man’s leadership. Michael, for example, had always complained about the things her father would ask him to do when he’d presided over Michael’s church. Even her thick-headed brother complained about their dad poking his nose into his business from time to time. Serenity had to admit, Pastor Phillip McKnight seemed somewhat different. But there had to be something wrong with him—after all, his ex-wife had left him for some reason, right?

Serenity had finally agreed to do this interview in part because she’d figured it would give her an opportunity to show her viewers how egotistical and pride-filled Pastor

McKnight was. This might just be her chance. She leaned closer to Phillip and, in the most innocent voice she could muster, said, “You sound like a reasonable man, Pastor McKnight. One would wonder why your wife divorced you.”

Phillip flinched, then said, “I’ve got an idea. Why don’t you wait for me in the sanctuary? I’ll change my shirt, and then we can give the camera crew a tour of the facility while you interview me about the ministry.”

She didn’t miss his emphasis on “about the ministry,” and she was immediately horrified at what she’d said.

Phillip had changed the subject, and she was more than willing to move away from it, as well. “You keep extra shirts at work?” she asked.

Phillip stood up and pointed at the dirt spots on his shirt. “Never know when I’ll get all grimy changing a tire.”

“My father keeps extra clothes at his church office, too.”

“Smart man,” Phillip said.

She laughed as she stood up. “Okay, I’ll wait for you in the sanctuary.”

Before she could turn away, Phillip said, “You have a beautiful smile, Serenity. You should always keep a smile on your face.”

The compliment made Serenity uncomfortable. She turned and headed out the door as quick as her three-inch heels would carry her.

Why did I say that? Phillip wanted to bash himself in the head for speaking like that to a woman who obviously wanted nothing to do with him. Serenity Williams had practically run out of his office, as if he’d told her he had swine flu or something.

Phillip took off his soiled shirt, reached into his closet, and grabbed a blue button-down. As he put it on and then turned to the mirror to examine his self, his thoughts turned back to Serenity. He had been watching her program for more than a month now—not every day, but he made a point to watch whenever he could. Somehow, he'd never imagined that her hazel eyes would sparkle as brightly as they did in person. And that smile of hers almost took his breath away. Actually, Phillip wished it had taken his breath away, for then, he wouldn't have been able to embarrass himself with stupid talk.

How could he have come on to Serenity like some high school jock with a crush on the prom queen? He lightly slapped his cheeks with his fingertips. "Get yourself together. Go out there and act in a professional manner," he instructed himself, pointing a finger at his reflection in the mirror.

Phillip left his office, determined to conduct himself in an upright manner. Serenity might very well be one of the most beautiful women he'd seen in a long time, but he was a man of God, and he knew how to control himself. "Okay," Phillip said, clasping his hands together as he stood in the sanctuary, looking from Serenity to the camera crew. "Is everybody ready to get this tour started?"

"We sure are." Serenity stood up and introduced Phillip to the camera crew, which consisted of two guys. "This is Lenny," she said as she pointed to a tall, slim Conan O'Brien look-alike. "He'll be snapping pictures." She then pointed at a slightly balding African-American man wearing blue jeans and a shirt with palm trees on it. "Bob will be shooting all the footage."

"Hello, Lenny. Hello, Bob." Phillip nodded at each man.

"So, where do you want to start?" Serenity asked him.

“Well, you’re already in my pride and joy.” Phillip lifted his arms and did a full circle on the plush carpet of the sanctuary. “This is the first space that was finished, after the office complex. We wanted to be able to have services here, even while the construction crew was pounding their way through the rest of the building.”

Serenity looked from the pulpit to the many pews that lined the first floor and then to the balcony. “This is a beautiful sanctuary. I love the navy and burgundy colors you chose. Very bold, but still warm and inviting.” She turned to Phillip and asked, “How many people can you fit in this sanctuary?”

“It seats about three thousand.”

“For such a young ministry, that is an awful lot of members to have.”

“Oh, we have only about eighteen hundred members, but I believe that we will quickly grow into the place.”

“Sources have said that you put up five million of your own money for this project, but I’m surprised that a bank would loan you the rest of the money you needed without the membership to back it up,” Serenity said.

“I’m still raising capital to finish the building. We’re a work in progress, as you will see.”

“So, the bank wouldn’t loan you the money?”

“We’re in a recession. They loaned me half of what I needed, and I have to come up with the other half.”

“But you’ve already put up so much of your own money. Do you think you’ll get to a point where you’ll say enough is enough?”

Shaking his head, Phillip said, “I would give that and much more to the vision God gave me.” What he didn’t say, though, was that following God’s purpose for his life had already cost him dearly. Phillip had been willing to give the money but watching his wife walk out the door had been the hardest thing he’d ever done. “Let’s move forward, shall we?”

Phillip led them to the office suite and let them snap pictures of the staff members as they went about their various tasks. Then, he showed them the spaces that would one day be the youth center, the nursery, and the fitness room.

“I have never seen a fitness room in a church complex,” Serenity said, signaling Lenny to continue snapping pictures of the equipment.

Phillip picked a fifty-pound weight off the floor and put it back on the rack where it belonged. Although the room was not yet finished, several men in the church had set up the equipment and begun using it, anyway. Guys didn’t need much—just some barbells and a bench press. Ladies, on the other hand, would want to pretty the room up, get rid of the dust and clutter, hang mirrors, and so forth. “I believe in the importance of staying in shape—taking care of God’s temple,” Phillip said.

“I guess you do,” Serenity said with a thoughtful look on her face. Then, she snapped back into professional mode with another question. “So, what does a day in the life of Phillip McKnight look like?”

“I’m not very complex. I get up around six in the morning. I go for a run, then I dig into the Word of God and pray, have a quick breakfast, and then come to the church. Once I’m at church, I either plan my sermon or do some other work around here.”

“Speaking of your sermon,” Serenity said, “what time do you want us back here tonight so that Bob can film the message?”

“The service begins at seven, but I normally don’t start preaching until about seven forty-five.”

“Okay,” Serenity said as she held out her hand to shake Phillip’s. “I think we got some good footage today. So, we’ll wrap up for now and finish everything this evening.”

As Phillip took Serenity’s hand in his, he had to remind himself that this was a business meeting and not a first date. He wanted to kiss her hand, but he restrained himself. When he released her hand, he noticed the Gucci watch on her wrist. His ex-wife had liked expensive things, too, and Phillip couldn’t help wondering if Serenity was just like the woman who’d left him and taken half of his hard-earned money with her.