

## Uncorrected Proof

# FORGIVEN

## Prologue

Crouched down between a rusty old Lincoln with a playboy symbol on the driver's side door and a red Pontiac with a busted rearview window, while a maniac wielded a tire iron that had already clipped her in the leg once, Diane Benson decided it was time to call her husband and beg for his forgiveness.

She had left Cleveland, Ohio about eight months ago after leaving her three oldest children with her husband, Joe Benson. She then drove to Pastor JT Thomas' house and left her three month old daughter with him and his wife. The way Diane saw it, every child needed to be with his or her own daddy and she didn't care how JT and Cassandra's life was disrupted. JT got what he deserved anyway. What kind of man pastors a church while sleeping with the deacon's wife? But JT hadn't only been sleeping with her. Diane

could have understood if he had slipped into sin because he just couldn't resist her voluptuous curves and Angelina Jolie pouty lips. But that hadn't been the case.

JT would sleep with anything in a knee high skirt willing to kick her pumps off and get busy. Too bad she got pregnant before she figured that one out. She had been prepared to leave her husband for JT so they could start a new life with their baby. But JT suddenly developed a conscience and realized that a husband's place was at home with his wife. He expected her to just continue living a lie with Benson. JT never imagined that she would tell Benson the truth. But she had, and Benson beat the snot out of him.

Soon after JT got his beat down, Diane had become fed up with the whole matter. So after dropping Lily off with her daddy, she left town with Brian Johnson. Brian had been the mechanic at the auto dealership her husband owned. But Brian was fixing more than automobiles and Joe hadn't had a clue about it. Brian had been her side kick. When JT wasn't acting right, she spent her free time with Brian. She may have imagined herself as first lady of Faith Outreach while fooling around with JT, but Brian was the one who made her weak at the knees. She couldn't lie if she wanted to, that man held some type of demonic power over her and she lived to do his bidding. Actually, Lily could have been Brian's baby just as well as JT's. But Brian said that since she had been sleeping with JT more than him around the time that she'd gotten pregnant, Lily more than likely belonged to JT. Funny thing was, when the DNA test came back and it proved that Brian had been right; JT was Lily's father, Brian got so mad that he up and left her in Jacksonville, Florida with only twenty dollars to her name.

That's when she met Darryl Mills. Darryl was a house flipper. Since the economy turned and not many people were buying homes, he'd given Diane the key to a fabulous

four bedroom home in the suburbs. Diane loved the house and was trying to figure out how she could convince Darryl to give it to her instead of putting it back on the market. Diane almost had Darryl convinced, until his nosy wife figured out that she was living in the house rent free. That's why Diane was crouched between two cars right now. The maniac with the tire iron was Darryl's wife.

“You might as well come out from between these cars. ‘Cause I really don't care if I bang these cars up, just as long as you get banged up in the process.”

Crawling on the ground, trying to move further into the jam packed parking lot and away from the tire iron, Diane said, “I don't even know you, lady. Why are you doing this?”

“You know me well enough to sleep with my husband,” the woman said as she angled her obese body between the two closely parked cars and swung at Diane.

Thankful that the woman missed her that time, Diane stood up and ran as quickly as she could through the maze of cars.

Darryl's wife was simply too big to move any further in between the Lincoln and the Pontiac, so she couldn't catch Diane, but she screamed as loud as she could, “I'm throwing all your stuff out of my house and onto the street. If you come back here to get any of it, I'm going to shoot you.”

Once Diane was a safe distance away from certain death, she used the cell phone that Darryl bought her to call Benson. When he answered she said, “Hey, Joe, I was just calling to check on the kids. How are they doing?”

“They miss you, Diane, that's how they're doing,” Joe told her.

“I know. I know,” she said, like a woman who’d learned her lesson. “I should have never left them. I miss all my babies.”

“You received court papers about a custody hearing for Lily last week.”

“What?” she said as if she couldn’t believe this was happening to her. “What am I supposed to do, Joe? I don’t even have a way to get back to Cleveland right now.”

“The hearing is next month. I’ll get you an airline ticket. Just tell me where you are.”

That’s what she wanted to hear, but she tried to tamp down her excitement as she said, “I don’t know, Benson. The only reason I didn’t turn around and come right back home eight months ago was because I was scared about how you would treat me.”

Benson was almost seven feet tall, bulky and strong, but with his wife, he might as well have been a midget. “Have I ever given you a reason to fear me? It’s not just the kids missing you, Diane. I miss you. Just come home.”

“What about Lily? I can’t just forget that I have another child.”

“I wasn’t sure that you wanted Lily since you left her with JT.”

“She’s my child,” Diane said angrily. JT wasn’t just going to run over her with some custody hearing, telling some judge that his wife would be a better mother than she was.

Benson cleared his throat. “Just come home, Diane. We can work on getting Lily back from JT once we’re back together.”

“Okay, Benson. I’m in Jacksonville, Florida. Go online and order the ticket and I’ll pick it up at the airport.” Diane smiled as she hung up the phone. Benson had always been at her beck and call. She would go home, but she would also make JT pay for the

agony she felt had been inflicted on her because of his refusal to leave his wife and marry her. And she would start by taking Lily away from him.

## One

“What are you doing?” Mattie Davis asked when she walked into her daughter’s bedroom and saw her throwing her clothes into a suitcase.

Cassandra Thomas turned to face her mother. With a smile on her face she said, “I’m going home.”

Looking heavenward, Mattie proclaimed, “Lord, Jesus, my child has lost her mind again.” Mattie sat down on the edge of Cassandra’s bed. Her head was bowed low as she shook it from side to side. “Why do you want to ruin your life? I don’t understand this at all.”

“Stop being so dramatic, Mother. I’ve been away from JT for six months. It’s time I went home.”

JT Thomas had once been the pastor of Faith Outreach Church, but once his sins had been exposed, he’d been suspended and then he resigned from his position. JT was now restored back to God and an upstanding citizen who went to work at a community center everyday and held a monthly Bible study in his home for men struggling with

infidelity and he'd also just started his own church. And yes, Cassandra was willing to admit it; she had fallen in love with her husband all over again. So why shouldn't she and her two sons, Jerome and Aaron, go back home where they belonged?

"I suppose this means you're willing to be a mother to that child he had while still married to you," Mattie stated.

"Yes, Mother, I will be just as much Lily's mother as I am Jerome and Aaron's. I've thought long and hard about this, and the way I see it, if another woman was willing to be a mother to me after you and Bishop Turner fooled around and had me, then how can I deny a child my love, just because I didn't give birth her?"

Mattie's shoulders slumped. "You enjoy throwing that in my face, don't you? Okay, I made a mistake. Your father was a married man. But does that mean you have to pay for my sins for the rest of your life?"

Cassandra sat down next to her mother and put her arm around her shoulder. Her mother was a petite woman of little more than five feet, but she had a loud, boisterous voice that made her seem seven feet tall at times. "I'm not trying to throw anything in your face, but I'm in a predicament and I need your help to get out of it."

"What predicament? What are you talking about?"

"Well, it seems to me that you and Bishop Turner did to Susan what JT and Diane Benson did to me. Susan forgave you and Bishop and found a way to continue loving her husband. All I'm asking for is the chance to do the same thing with my husband."

"But how can you forgive what that man has done to you?" Mattie asked, refusing to see that she had done the same thing to another man's wife.

“The same way that I forgave you for all the years you lied to me about who my father was. The way I see it, Mother, forgiveness is a choice.” Cassandra stood up, zipped her suitcase and pulled it off the bed. “Thank you for putting up with me and the boys for all these months, but I’m going home, Mother.”

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Cassandra put her key in the lock and opened the door. She stood in the entryway and looked around the modest home. It was certainly not the five bedroom, seven thousand square foot home she shared with JT before moving in with her mother. JT had sold their home after she moved in with her mother. He moved back into the first home they purchased together. It was only thirteen hundred square feet with three bedrooms and a basement, but Cassandra had loved everything about this home. Jerome and Aaron ran into the house and started screaming for JT.

When JT walked from the kitchen into the living room, the boys ran to him. He bent down and Jerome and Aaron jumped on him. “Daddy, Daddy, guess what?” Jerome said.

Laughing, JT said, “I can’t guess, so please hurry up and tell me.”

“We’re home for good!” Jerome shouted.

“You are?” JT asked playfully.

“Yes, Mom said so.” Jerome turned to Cassandra and asked, “Isn’t that right, Mom? No more sleeping at granny’s house during the week and here on the weekends. We get to be here with Daddy all the time now, don’t we?”

The excitement in her son's voice brought tears to Cassandra's eyes. How she wished that she had never moved him away from his father, but at the time, she had no idea that she would ever come home again. So she and JT had agreed on shared custody. Just as Jerome had said, she had the boys during the week and JT had them on the weekend. "Yes, honey, we are home for good."

JT smiled as he stood and walked over to Cassandra. "I made dinner."

"You did not," Cassandra said as she put down her suitcase and walked into the kitchen. Not once, in the nine years she and JT had been married, had he ever volunteered to fix dinner. He expected his meals to be on the table the minute he was ready to eat, but he didn't bother to help with anything remotely related to kitchen duties.

As Cassandra lifted the lid on the skillet, JT said, "It's just Hamburger Helper."

"No," Cassandra said as she grinned from ear to ear, "what we have here is a miracle."

"Do you think the boys are ready to eat?" JT asked Cassandra.

"They haven't had anything since lunch, so I'm sure they're ready. What about Lily, is she sleeping?"

"Yeah. I put her down for a nap a while ago though, so I better go check on her."

Cassandra put her hand on JT's arm as she said, "No, let me go check on her."

"Okay, if you're going to get Lily, I'll help the boys wash their hands."

"Mr. Helpful, huh? Be careful, JT, I just might get used to this," Cassandra told him as she headed upstairs.

Lily was sitting up in her baby bed. Her big brown eyes were filling with tears as she opened her mouth to proclaim that she was awake and didn't appreciate being left

alone. Cassandra took her out of the baby bed and held her close as she rocked the screaming child.

“There, there, Lily, it’s not that bad.” Cassandra sat down in the chair next to Lily’s bed and continued to hold the child until her sobs subsided. She saw JT’s features in Lily, just as she saw them in Jerome and Aaron. Funny thing was, looking at Lily and knowing that JT was her father didn’t bother Cassandra anymore. Now she knew for sure that she was ready to be a mother to Lily. She began to sing to her, “*There’s a Lily in the valley and you’re bright as the morning star.*”

JT hollered up the stairs, “The boys are starving, are you two coming down so we can eat?”

“Sounds like your daddy is starving and trying to blame it on the boys.”

Cassandra bounced Lily on her lap and then said, “Come on, honey, let’s go eat,”

JT was standing at the bottom of the stairs waiting on them. “What were you two doing up there?”

Cassandra rubbed JT’s stomach as she put her feet on the bottom step. “Sorry, I forgot how hungry you get.”

“I’m a growing man. I need to eat on the regular.”

The boys were seated at the octagon shaped table that was only big enough for four chairs. Cassandra placed Lily in her high chair and then told JT, “We need to pick up Aaron’s high chair from my mother’s house in the morning. He really isn’t big enough to sit at the table.” Only six months had passed since she last lived with JT, so the children hadn’t grown all that much. Jerome was now four years old, Aaron was eighteen months and Lily was ten months.

“Yeah, he does look a little awkward in that chair,” JT said as he watched his son’s legs dangle in the air. They were about two feet away from the ground, so there was no way that Aaron would be able to get out of that chair without help. JT put a plate of Hamburger Helper in front of each child.

“You help Aaron and I’ll feed Lily,” Cassandra told JT.

Dinner was a big hit. The boys absolutely loved it. Lily’s noodles and hamburger pieces had to be chopped up, but she loved the meal as well. After dinner, the family watched TV in the family room until bath time. Cassandra was bathing Aaron and Lily when JT walked into the bathroom with her suitcase.

“This was still by the front door. Does it have the boys’ stuff in it or yours?”

Cassandra pulled Lily out of the tub and started drying her off. “Some of my clothes are in that suitcase. I knew the boys had clothes here, so I figured we could go pack up their stuff together.”

“That’s fine. I’ll just put your suitcase in our bedroom.”

Alarm registered on Cassandra’s face. She lifted her hand to halt JT. “Let me finish up with the kids before we make any decisions.”

With a raised eyebrow, JT said, “What decisions?”

She finished drying Lily, handed her to JT and then took Aaron out of the tub and dried him off. “Let’s put them to bed and then we can talk.”

They put the kid’s pajamas on and then laid them in their beds. Jerome had already bathed and was sound asleep. JT grabbed Cassandra’s hand and pulled her out of Jerome and Aaron’s room. “Let’s talk.”

They walked into their bedroom. Cassandra saw her suitcase in the corner and froze. JT gently pulled her the rest of the way into the room. “What’s wrong?” JT asked.

“Nothings wrong, I just thought that we might want to wait a little while before I moved back into our bedroom.”

“Where are you going to sleep, Cassandra? We only have three bedrooms in this house and they’re all taken.”

Wringing her hands and looking everywhere but at JT, Cassandra said, “I thought I would sleep in the room with Lily for a little while.”

JT sighed as he let go of Cassandra’s hand and sat down. He looked at his wife as he said, “That’s not going to work for me, Sanni.”

There had been a time when Cassandra had asked JT not to refer to her as Sanni anymore. That nickname meant a lot to Cassandra. It made her feel special and like she really mattered to JT. When he had done all his dirt, she no longer felt special, but times were different now.

“I don’t plan to sleep in Lily’s room forever. I just want to make sure this is going to work between us,” Cassandra reasoned.

JT shook his head as he stood up and walked toward Cassandra. He put her hand in his. “I want a real marriage, and that includes you sleeping in here with me.”

“But... but what if something happens? What if we can’t make a go of this?” Cassandra asked with fear in her eyes.

“I know I let you down before, Sanni, but I’m a different man now. I will never hurt you like I did before.”

What had Cassandra said to her mother earlier? Something about forgiveness being a choice? Maybe trust was a choice also. Maybe she needed to throw caution to the wind and just lean in. She wanted to forget about the past and move forward with JT as if nothing had ever gone wrong in their relationship.

When she didn't answer, JT said, "Have a little faith, baby. We are going to make this work."

Mattie was screaming inside Cassandra's head, telling her to look before leaping. She tried to deny the voices in her head and go with the feeling in her heart. "Okay, JT," she said. "We will have a real marriage." Cassandra then closed her eyes and allowed herself to be swept into JT's arms. She loved this man and wanted to spend the rest of her life making love to him. Cassandra silently prayed, *please, God, if this is a dream, don't let me wake up.*