

Uncorrected Proof

PROLOUGE

“Your husband is cheating on both of us.” Those happy home stealing words ricocheted through Cassandra’s mind as she drove to Faith Outreach Church to confront her husband, Pastor JT Thomas. She willed herself not to cry. Not to think about the five wonderful years of marriage she’d experienced with JT.

She pulled into the first lady’s parking spot, turned off the engine, and put her hand on her swollen stomach. No, she couldn’t even think about the child growing inside her. If her life with the magnificent pastor of Faith Outreach Church had been nothing but a lie, and if the woman that had the audacity to telephone her was telling the truth, then JT was going to admit it to her face.

Pressing her hand into the small of her back she ambled her way through the fellowship hall. The lower the baby dropped, the harder walking became. But Cassandra loved every minute of being pregnant. This was her second pregnancy. Their first child was a girl and she had died after only a few precious moments on earth. It was hard to deal with, but she and JT made it through; now they had other problems.

JT’s office was toward the back of the building, right across from the sanctuary. Another ten steps and she would see what the good pastor had to say for himself.

“First Lady, can I get you something?”

Cassandra smiled as she weebled around to greet Deacon Joe Benson, the almost seven foot, solid built man who didn't take down to anybody, but still managed to treat her gently. "No. I'm okay."

"Well, just let me know if you need anything," he told her.

I need a faithful husband, Cassandra thought, and wanted to beg Deacon Benson to go get that for her. But it wasn't Deacon Benson's fault that JT was one way behind the pulpit and quite another at home. So she patted him on the shoulder and said, "I will, Deacon Benson, thank you."

Opening the door to JT's office, she walked in without bothering to knock. Pastor Jerome Tyler Thomas was regally holding court behind his mahogany desk, while Carl Johnson and Deke Smalls poured over the drafts for the reconstruction of the sanctuary with him. JT was being groomed to become the next great televangelist, and the sanctuary was being renovated to accommodate all the equipment that would be needed to bring his vision forth.

She looked down at this muscular built, honey toned, greenish-grey eyed man that she adored and planted her feet firmly, which was hard for a weeble to do. "I need to talk to you, JT."

JT was focused on the plans before him. He glanced at his watch. "Can't right now, Sanni."

Sanni was JT's pet name for her. She loved the sound of it as it fell from his lips. It made her feel special. Every time he said it she was reminded of that sweet Bible passage that said, "*I am his and he is mine.*" But not today. Today, she was fat, pregnant, and married to a cheater. She stomped her foot. "Will you look at me?"

JT straightened and caught a glimpse of the tears bubbling over the lids of his wife's eyes. Carl grabbed the plans and rolled them up.

"We can review these after this morning's service, Pastor," Deke told him as he and Carl left the room.

Coming around the desk, JT's leg stiffened. He stopped, straightened it out and continued moving toward Cassandra with that slight limp that was characteristic JT. It was also the bone of another contention between them. JT wouldn't talk to her about the one physical imperfection he had. Whenever she asked about the limp, he would just grunt and say it was nothing, but nothing didn't leave a scar on the upper left thigh. And nothing didn't call her house claiming to be sleeping with her husband.

He hugged Cassandra, and then walked her over to his black leather couch. "Sit down, honey. Is something wrong with the baby? Are you having contractions?"

"No, nothing like that," she told him while sliding into her seat.

Looking at his watch again, he said, "Well, can it wait then? I've got to be in the pulpit in less than five minutes."

When they were first married, JT never allowed anyone in his office five, ten, or even twenty minutes before he had to preach. That was his time with the Lord. JT used to say that he couldn't rightly give direction to his congregation if he hadn't heard from God first. She'd admired and respected him for that. But that was then.

Today, she pulled herself off the couch and sneered at him. "Thought you'd get away with it didn't you? Thought I'd never figure it out?"

He grabbed his Bible off the desk. "I don't know what you're rambling about, Cassandra, but I have to go."

As he opened the door to step out his wife yelled, “Your woman called me this morning. She says you’re cheating on both of us. Is that true, husband?”

JT closed the door then advanced on his wife. “Why would you say something like that in the house of God?”

At five foot three she was no match for JT’s six foot physic, but she stood in his face and challenged him any how. “Why would you do something like that in God’s house? I mean, come on, JT. The Deaconess? Guess we know who she’s serving, huh?”

“No baby, you’ve got it wrong. I could never do that to you.” He tried to put his hands on her shoulder, but she moved away.

She wiped the tears from her coco cream face, then ran her hand through her bob length hair. “Not just me, JT. You’ve done this to God too.”

Turning away from her, JT lowered his head. “I’m not perfect, Sanni, but I do love you. If you believe nothing else, please-”

She shook her head. “No, I’m not listening to a word you have to say, not anymore. You’re going to pay for what you’ve done to me. I’ll go out there and let this congregation know what the good pastor is really like.”

He grabbed her as his eyes dilated with rage. “Oh, no you won’t. Do you hear me? Just shut your mouth and listen.”

“Let go of me, JT.”

They struggled. She tried desperately to pull away from him. JT inched her backward until he had her against the wall. “I’m not cheating on you, Sanni. All I ever wanted was to be with you. I moved heaven and earth to make it happen.”

“Why do you always say that? You postponed the wedding twice, how is that moving heaven and earth?”

“That had nothing to do with how I felt about you. For the love we share.”

Cassandra wanted to spit in his face for the heartache his love had brought her. For how he'd trampled on her dreams. But a pain shot through her so fierce, she forgot about JT and his whore mongering. Forgot how he and Bishop Turner had trained her to be a fine first lady, and let out a yelp that caused Deacon Smalls to peak his head into the office.

He looked toward JT. “Sorry to interrupt, Pastor. But the congregation can hear y'all. Just thought you'd want to know.”

JT released Cassandra. She grabbed her belly, fell on her knees, and screamed again. “Well tell one of 'em to call an ambulance instead of pressing their ear against my door. Can't you see that my wife's in labor?” JT yelled.

“Sorry, sir. We'll call the ambulance right away.”

As Deacon Smalls ran toward the phone, JT sat on the floor next to his wife. “Are you okay, Sanni?”

“It hurts, JT.”

He put her head in his lap. “Tell me what to do, Sanni. I'll do anything to relieve your pain.”

Margie Milner rushed into the office, her three inch pumps crushing down on the plush burgundy carpet. Cassandra pointed at the long dress wearing deaconess as her tears fell into JT's lap. “Get rid of her.”

“I'll do whatever you want, Sanni. Just please don't loose our baby.”

CHAPTER 1

November - 2009

“Why do you stay?”

Cassandra’s mother had asked her the same question for the last three years. Ever since she’d foolishly confided all their secrets. She used to tell her mother that she stayed for love, because her sons needed a father. Because she still remembered the man JT used to be, and would wait forever for him to return.

“Girl, I know you hear me talking to you,” her mother said.

Cassandra picked up her purse. “Look, Mama, today is the church’s anniversary and the first day of our TV ministry. Let’s just go to church and celebrate with everyone else. Okay?” It took them two years to raise the money for their television ministry and then another year to get the time slot JT wanted.

Mattie reached in the closet to get her grandchildren’s coats. “You can celebrate with that snake if you want, but I’m going to sit in the church nursery with Jerome and Aaron.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes. She was getting annoyed with her mother. Mattie was normally a wonderful person to be around, but when they discussed matters of the church, she became cantankerous and insulting.

“I know you’re not getting upset with me, Cassandra Ann?”

Cassandra laid Aaron, her eight month old son, on the couch and put his snow suit on him while Mattie took Jerome, her three year old, and put his jacket on him.

“Sometimes, I wonder why you even go to church, Mother. I mean, you don’t seem to like anybody there.”

“I go for comic relief,” Mattie told her daughter as she zipped Jerome’s jacket up. “Which reminds me; I’ve got a new joke for you.” Rubbing her hands together she began, “A pastor and an assistant pastor were in church on Sunday morning arguing over who had the most women.”

Cassandra raised her hand. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Mattie ignored her. “The pastor finally told the assistant pastor, ‘I know how to resolve this. Every woman that walks through the door that you’ve been with, you say the word *mark*, and each time a woman that I’ve been with comes through the door I’ll do the same. Then we’ll see who has the most marks.

“The people started arriving to church. One woman walked through the door and the pastor said, ‘Mark’. Another woman came through the door and the assistant pastor said, ‘Mark’. Some more women came in and the pastor said, ‘Mark, mark’. Then a few more women strolled in and the assistant pastor said, ‘Mark, mark, mark’.

“The pastor looked at him and said, ‘fool, that’s my wife and two oldest daughters. And the assistant pastor said, ‘I don’t care, I said, Mark, mark, mark’.”

The look of horror and astonishment on Cassandra's face escaped Mattie's attention as she laughed all the way to the car.

As they drove down the street, headed to church, Cassandra wanted to tell her mother that she needed to pray about the things she said concerning men of God. But she couldn't bring herself to chastise her own mother. So she silently prayed that God would have mercy on her mother and lead her in the right path. Then she tried a safer subject. "JT wants you in the sanctuary with us. Can you please do this for me, Mama?"

"Girl, who you kidding? Once that jackleg gets to skinning and grinning in front of that camera, he won't even know if God Himself showed up."

Sometimes Cassandra feared that God would strike her mother down for all her disrespect. She couldn't put it off any longer. "Mama, it's not right to speak about a man of God in such a way."

Mattie Daniels gave her only child a knowing smirk. "What you talking 'bout? I would never open my mouth against a man of God."

JT was in the pulpit gesturing and pontificating when Cassandra and her mother walked down the aisle and took their front row seats. The pulpit area had been redesigned about six months ago in preparation for the new TV ministry. It had once been cramped and overflowing with choir members. Now the choir sat in the balcony, and winged backed chairs lined the side of the pulpit. Only important people were allowed to sit in those winged backed chairs. Gone was the acrylic podium she bought her husband on their first anniversary. It had been replaced by a handcrafted red-oak monstrosity.

“Like I always say,” JT told the congregation. “Nothing gets done, unless somebody does it. Just like the Bible says, faith without works is dead.”

Cassandra resolved to sit through yet another of JT’s self-empowerment messages. But still found herself wondering where God fit in all his ‘nothing gets done unless somebody does it’ speeches? But Cassandra’s heart was heavy as she thought about how her mother insinuated that JT was not a true man of God. No matter what JT had done, Cassandra had always believed that he was a man of God, but what if her mother was right? What if JT made so many mistakes because he wasn’t a true man of God? She stopped listening to her husband’s message and searched the ‘important people chairs’ for Bishop Turner. Her eyes danced with joy as she spotted the bishop and then leaned down and whispered to her mother. “I can’t help it. I still wish that Bishop Turner had been my father. Why couldn’t you have met him before he married Suzie?”

Mattie flinched. “Hush, girl, I’m trying to make sense of this fool’s message.”

Cassandra knew that her mother was not intently listening to JT. But she also knew that her mother hated when she talked about Bishop. So she leaned back in her seat and dreamed a little. Her father had died before she was born, but, she didn’t miss him. Bishop Turner had always been there for her; just like a daddy. So, every night she would pray for God to make Bishop her daddy. She didn’t even mind if she had to share him with his two sons, just as long as he belonged to her also. As she grew older she came to terms with the fact that Bishop would never be her father, and accepted his role as godfather in her life.

Bishop had introduced her to JT. He even came home early from his Caribbean vacation to marry them. There were days that she knew with everything in her, that she only held onto this marriage to please her godfather.

She turned back to her husband and listened as he prepared to close his sermon. *What happened to you, JT? What became of all your big dreams? What happened to us?* None of those questions were appropriate for the first lady of Faith Outreach Church, but her heart was full of them anyway. Even as her husband finished his sermon, walked down to where she sat, took her hand and stood her up to plant a kiss on her lips, she wondered what happened to the feelings that used to soar through her when he did this.

“What did you think of my sermon, baby?” JT asked.

“It was all right,” she said as she pulled her hand out of his and made her way to the pulpit where Bishop Turner sat. Giving her godfather a tight hug, Cassandra sighed. “I’ve missed you. How can you stay away so long?”

“It was not on purpose, my sweet Cassandra. There are just too many fires to put out in the kingdom of God.” He took her head in his hands and placed a delicate kiss on her forehead. “But I promise, not a day went by that I didn’t think of you.”

“Don’t let Junior or Edward hear you say that. They would blow a gasket.”

They linked arm in arm and strolled toward JT’s office. “Don’t you worry about my sons; they know that I take my responsibility as your godfather very serious.”

Bishop had always been a prominent figure in Cassandra’s life. She knew he would do anything for her, that fact had always brought her comfort. Cassandra just wished that her husband took his responsibilities to her as serious as her godfather did.