

Uncorrected Proof

Yesterday's Promise

One

Her father's eyes were closed when Melinda walked into his hospital room. As she approached his bed and sat down on the chair beside it, she noticed for the first time that his hair was no longer salt-and-pepper but completely white. The wrinkles beneath his eyes, which had long made him look distinguished, were now more pronounced and distracting. *When did all of this happen?*, Melinda wondered as she picked up her father's frail hand and pressed it to her cheek.

Bishop Johnson's eyes fluttered as he turned toward his daughter. "Hey, baby girl. When'd you get here?"

"Just a few minutes ago. I'm sorry I wasn't able to get here earlier."

“You had to handle my responsibilities at the church. Don’t worry about it. I had plenty of visitors this morning.”

Melinda sat down in the chair next to her father’s bed and hung her purse on the arm of the chair. “I have some good news, Daddy. I’ve been asked to speak at the Women on the Move for God conference in August!”

“That’s great, baby girl! But I have even better news.”

Melinda raised her eyebrows. “What, the doctor gave you a clean bill of health and said that you’ll live to be a hundred?”

Bishop Johnson shook his head and then blurted out, “I found you a husband.”

“Excuse me?” Melinda said in as even a tone as she could manage under the circumstances. After all, she was a thirty-seven-year-old woman living in the twenty-first century. Fathers didn’t go out and find husbands for their daughters in this day and age. “Please tell me you’re joking, Daddy.”

“No joke to it,” Bishop Johnson said as he hoisted himself into an upright position. “I’m an old man, Melinda. I haven’t got many years left. I’d like to see at least one of my grandchildren before I die, you know?”

Melinda couldn’t deny that her father was showing signs of aging. But that didn’t mean death would sneak into his hospital room and suck out his last breath while she stood there and watched. “You talk as if you’ll die tomorrow.”

“I could. The next heart attack could be my last.”

Melinda rolled her eyes. “It was an anxiety attack, Daddy. Stop being such a baby. The doctor says you’re fine.”

Bishop Johnson shook a shaky finger at Melinda. “Now, you listen to me. I’m eighty-two years old. I know what’s best for you, and that’s why I called Steven Marks.”

Melinda bolted out of her chair and moved away from her father’s bed. She put a hand to her mouth and shut her eyes, trying to block out the same feeling of humiliation she’d experienced when Steven had dumped her ten years ago. *This has to be some kind of horrible joke*, Melinda thought. But her father was a serious man who rarely joked with anyone.

“Calm down. It’s not as bad as you think,” he said. “I didn’t come right out and tell Steven I wanted him to marry you. He’s a smart young man...he’ll come to that decision on his own.”

“Why are you even talking to me about Steven, Daddy? That man walked out on me and married someone else. Do you really think I’d want him back now, just because his wife is dead?”

“Pride goes before destruction, Melinda.”

She really hated when her father tried to rein her in by quoting Scriptures. “What does being prideful have to do with not wanting to marry a man who rejected me?”

“I have more to tell you. Would you please sit back down?”

Melinda inched back to her seat and slowly settled into it. If this marrying Steven Marks thing was supposed to be a buffer for the rest of her father’s message, then she’d be truly petrified. She glanced at her father with a look of apprehension.

“This last hospital stay has convinced me that I need to retire.”

Melinda rolled her eyes. “I’ve been telling you for years now to retire. I can pastor Omega, and Pastor Lakes can take over as bishop.”

“Let me finish,” Bishop Johnson said, holding up a hand to silence Melinda. “I know the ministry goals that you have. I also believe that there is a way for you to do God’s will and also have a family. Plus, Steven’s church did not support him during his grieving process. They want him to leave, Melinda. So, after prayerful reflection, I’ve asked him to take over for me as bishop.”

Melinda must not have heard him right. He couldn’t have just said that Steven Marks, the man who’d called off their wedding because she’d refused to give up her dreams of preaching the gospel, was going to be the new bishop of Omega Christian Church. In Melinda’s mind, this could mean only one thing: her sin had finally caught up with her.