

Uncorrected Proof

Prologue

Isaac lay on his cot rubbing his chin. His last morning as a federally mandated, underpaid license plate maker. Most would have been elated. But Isaac needed time to think. Time to put together what his new life outside of prison would look like. So as the morning bell shook the prison walls, and hundreds of men stood to be loosed from the cells that held them bound, Isaac continued to rub his chin and ponder. He stretched his well-toned chocolate body and exhaled. Isaac was in an uncomfortable place. He'd given his life to Jesus, and meant every word of his declaration. But did he really have what it took to live for the Lord outside the confines of prison?

Two things Isaac wanted; no needed more than the air he breathed: To walk upright before the One who claimed his soul, and to be forgiven by the one who had claimed his heart. Sweet Nina Lewis, his baby's mama. He thought he was strong, until she taught him how to withstand the storms of life. Thought he had all the answers, until she taught him how to bow his knee and wait on God to bring the answer.

The bell stopped ringing and his cell unlocked. In about an hour he would be released. Time to teach Miss Nina Lewis a few things. Isaac made up his cot, then got on his knees. Most of the inmates joked about his morning routine, but Isaac could find nothing routine about his relationship with Jesus.

"Oh Father, here I am, the one You cleansed. Thank You for being so faithful. Thank You for loving me in spite of all the things I've done. You're great and mighty, Lord. Help me to walk upright before you – You are a holy God and You require Your servants to be holy. May my life bring You glory, may I never grieve the Holy Spirit You have placed in me. In Jesus name I pray, amen."

After he finished communing with his Savior, he walked through the morning sort of mechanically. Didn't even notice the plaster falling from the walls or the scratchy soap as he showered and shaved. He said his final good byes without catching a whiff of the mixture of urine, humidity and sweat that usually clung to the air. "You keep walking with Jesus," Pete, his old cellmate told him.

T-bone strutted over to him. "Don't worry about the prison ministry. I'm in this joint for another year at least. I'll hold it together."

Isaac picked up the Bible and an assortment of workbook material the chaplain had given him. "You'll need this stuff."

He walked away. No looking back, no regrets. He'd served his time and done God's will. Time for a new chapter. He'd received letters from countless preachers over the last year. Many had heard about the revival going on in this place.

He was grateful for all that God allowed him to do while in prison. But right now his son, Donovan, and Nina were on his mind. He wasn't sure if Nina could let go of the past and accept him back into her life. But he would do anything to make that happen. He tried to convince her that he was different every time she brought his son for a visit. But Nina made it clear that she wasn't interested, she was only trying to keep him connected with his son.

He picked up his two hundred dollar check for his five years of service. Yeah, that would go a long way toward all that back child support he owed. His hand tightened around the check. He wanted to ball it up and throw it in the guard's smug face. The prison doors opened. He felt like Mel Gibson in *Brave Heart*, screaming freedom!

Putting the check in his pocket, he rolled his eyes and walked out. Walking up the street toward the pick-up zone, the brisk March wind swirled around him. He zipped his jacket and stuffed his hands in his pocket, all the while hoping that Keith would not be late. Entering the pick-up zone Isaac spotted a broken down Ford Taurus, a red Lincoln Navigator with spinners and a black and gray Cadillac Seville. Keith was in none of them. The guy in the Navigator got out and headed his way.

His smile showed off his gold plated mouth. His jeweled hands seemed out of place with his baggy Nike jogging suit.

"Isaac, my man. How's it going?" He offered his hand. "I've been out here over an hour waiting on you to pop that spot."

Isaac glanced at the outstretched hand. Sucked his teeth while sizing up the hustler in front of him.

The hustler conceded. He rubbed his hand to the side of his pants. "You don't remember me? I'm Mickey." He put his hands in the air, indicating someone about chest level to where he now stood. "Remember little Mickey Jones? I worked for you on Williams Street."

Mickey had gotten taller, a little more fuzz on the face, but Isaac made the connection. With recognition came a flood of memories. The Williams Street turf war was the source of Isaac's nightmares. The whole thing was wicked from the start. Isaac had been losing money on Williams Street. A quick investigation told him that a hustler name Ray-Ray had moved in on his turf. By the time the episode was over, Isaac had been shot, Valerie, one of his girls and Ray-Ray were dead. The only good memory he had of that night, was Nina birthing his son.

"Yeah, Mickey, I remember you." They did the black man's handshake. Isaac nodded in the direction of the Navigator. "I see you've come up in the world."

His gold teeth glistened as he smiled. "Well, you know, I couldn't be a runner forever. You taught me better than that."

"You can't stay in the game forever, Mickey. The game gets played out, one way or another."

Mickey shook his head. "Nobody ran them streets like you did. You ain't played out, Isaac. That's why I came to get you."

A silver Mercedes pulled up next to the Navigator.

Mickey continued. "I already got you a house." He handed Isaac the keys to the Navigator. "I bought it for you. You don't have to worry about a thing. Me and you, Isaac. We'll own the city of Dayton."

A suit stepped out of the Mercedes. Brooks Brother's down to his shoes, with a Sunday go-to-meeting hat on his self-assured head. He trotted his well-to-do self in Isaac's direction.

Isaac looked at the keys. Studied the jewels on Mickey's hands. "Looks like you already own Dayton."

Mickey lit up the friendly skies with his smile again. "Man, there's room enough for the both of us. I started in this business because of you."

Isaac flinched. Life would be so sweet if he didn't have to think about how many dead men walking he had started in this business.

"Isaac Walker?"

Isaac turned toward Mr. Well-to-do. Maybe I'm getting a Mercedes next. *How much of this do you think I can take, Lord?*

"That's me."

The man extended his hand.

Isaac glanced at it, but his hands didn't feel like moving from his side. Something about shaking a man's hand Isaac didn't take lightly. Shaking a man's hand connected you with him. It says, "I agree with you." And Isaac wasn't agreeable all the time.

"I'm Bishop William Sumler. Your friend, Keith asked me to pick you up."

I've got to work on my trust issues. Isaac took Bishop Sumler's hand and shook it gladly. "I thought Keith was picking me up."

"He had some car trouble. I told him I wanted to meet you in person anyway. So I made the trip for him."

Mickey got fidgety. Glanced around. "Look, Isaac, can we get going? I don't want to hang around this place any longer than necessary."

Bishop Sumler eyed Mickey as he moved a little closer to Isaac. "Is this young man a friend of yours?"

"Yeah," Isaac told him. "Me and Mickey go way back. As a matter-of-fact," Isaac lifted the keys in his hand, "Mickey just brought me a car to roll out of here in."

Bishop Sumler's high yellow cheeks reddened. "So you don't need a ride?"

"That's not what I said." Isaac plopped the keys back in Mickey's hand. "Thanks for the offer. But I'm a new man now. I can't go back to life as usual."

Bishop Sumler put a possessive hand on Isaac's shoulder. "God is pleased with you. Just keep looking to Him for answers."

"That's what I intend to do." Isaac smiled at Mickey. "Thanks for looking out for me. I'll catch up with you another time – shoot the breeze or something."

Mickey backed away. "All right, man. But if you change your mind, you know where to find me."

"Didn't I always?"

Mickey gave a small, nervous laugh. "Yeah, I guess you did." He opened the door to his Navigator. "Well, keep holding it down. I'll see you on the other side."

“I sure hope so.” Isaac knew they were thinking of two different sides. Mickey wanted to see him back on the gang-banging, drug dealing side. While the other side Isaac hoped to see Mickey on had pearly gates and streets of gold.

“You ready?” Bishop Sumler asked.

Isaac hesitated for a moment. Something in Mickey’s eyes, in his nervous laughter made Isaac uneasy. He wanted to catch up with him and tell him about life after the game. Let him know that there is a man named Jesus who could change his whole world. But he let it go. “Yeah, let’s get out of here. I’m ready for something new.”

Three years later

Nine long hours on the road had beat him down. All Isaac wanted to do was grab hold of his pillow and power nap himself into the land of the unconscious. Opening the door to his two-bedroom roach motel never felt better. Actually, he didn't have roaches, but Isaac expected them any day now. Oh, how the mighty have fallen. If anyone had told him that accepting Jesus meant giving up everything and starting from scratch, he would have rebuked that devil. But here he was, trusting God for gas to get to work.

Three steps into his apartment the floorboard creaked. Another five steps, creak. Two more steps, creak, creak. His slumlord promised to fix that months ago. Isaac pulled at his tie as he shook his head. "You can't trust nobody but Jesus."

He moved to Chicago to help Bishop Sumler build a church. The work kept him off the street and gave him something productive to do for the Lord. He was comfortable in this town. Chicago was home. But Chicago was so expensive there was no way he could live in the manner he'd lived before Christ. The best he could do was deal with his slumlord and buy a can of Raid.

On the road, he was king. Traveling with Bishop Sumler gave him privileges a young struggling preacher wouldn't normally have. Bishop Sumler wasn't no Hotel Six kind of man. When a congregation put him up for the night they had to dig deep in their pockets. And if meals were included, even Isaac the armor bearer had steak that night.

Unbuttoning his good as new, but-still-used-to-be-somebody-else's Italian knit shirt, he stepped into the bedroom and flicked on the lights. He'd asked Cassandra to check on his apartment while he was away. To make sure the TV and DVD stayed where he'd left them, and to water the one lonely plant that had bothered to stay alive in this dump. But he did not ask her to warm his bed. "Cassandra!"

She jumped. The cover fell off her well-toned, mocha body as she stretched and yawned. "What took you so long?"

Had he given a nutcase the keys to his apartment? Something had to be wrong with her. She was in his bed, acting as if this was where she belonged. Talking 'bout, 'what took you so long' like they had been married for years. "Um, Cassandra, can you tell me why you slept over?"

She wiped the sleep buggers from her big brown eyes, then looked at him as if to say, you know what's up. "I've been waiting for you, baby. Now, I know you're tired." She pulled the cover back as she scooted over.

His eyes feasted on her black silk, low cut negligee.

“Climb on in, baby. I warmed that spot just for you.”

His mouth opened. No words escaped, but a little drool did swim down his chin. Wiping his unsanctified mouth and turning toward his bathroom, he told her, “I’ll be right back.”

He buttoned his shirt as he stepped into the bathroom. Looking to heaven he asked, “Lord, why have you allowed this? How much temptation should one man have to endure?”

He fell to his knees, elbows touching the toilet seat lid, hands entwined, head bowed. “Oh God, my Lord and my King, You know that I am just a man. I can’t handle this kind of temptation, yet it keeps coming my way.

You know me, Lord. I want to go out there, toss Cassandra up and repent later.” He waited a minute to hear what God would say to that. No answer came, but Isaac knew. He was born to do God’s will, even when it conflicted with his own.

He stood, shook off the old man and slowly opened the door. He hated feeling like a peeping Tom in his own house. But there he was, door cocked open, peering out at the woman sprawled across his bed. Laying on her stomach, the roundness of her backside was in full view. He closed the bathroom door like a punk and fell back on his knees. “I can’t do this, Lord. My body hurts from wanting. How can you allow me to suffer like this?”

Isaac closed his eyes as his mind turned to Jesus, bruised and beaten. Hanging on a cross for the sins of the world. “I am not worthy to suffer with You.” He hung his head low. “But if You could endure death by crucifixion, surely I can crucify my body.”

This time when he stood, his old nature was truly under subjection. He opened the bathroom door with boldness. “Cassandra, you got to go!”

Cassandra jumped as Isaac’s words vibrated off the bedroom walls. “Wha... what’s wrong?” She giggled nervously. “It’s still dark out, Isaac. I can’t go now.”

Isaac grabbed her ankle length skirt and turtleneck off the dresser and threw them at her. “Get your clothes on and get ta’ steppin.” She opened her mouth to protest. “I’m not throwing out jokes, Cassandra. But I will throw you out if you’re not dressed and gone in two minutes.”

She rolled her eyes and got out of his bed. “Whatever, man. You’re the one missing out.”

Isaac shook his head as he watched the praise leader at his church squeeze into her long conservative skirt. He thought Cassandra was different. But she was just like all the rest, trying to get in his pants. That thought almost made him burst out laughing. All his life he had been a sexual predator. But he was doing his thing for Jesus now. No room for compromise. Straight and narrow was the only walk his Lord would accept. He had slipped once. But he vowed never to let it happen again.

“Denise said that you used to love for her to surprise you like this when you returned home.” Cassandra put on her shoes and continued pouting. “What’s wrong? You don’t think I’d be as good as Denise?”

“Just give me my key and get out.” She took his key off her key ring and threw it at him. Isaac sat on his bed, shoulders slumped, and allowed his heart to fill with shame as Cassandra slammed his door. “I don’t know how I got caught up again. But it’s been two years since that thing with Denise. I

thought You cast sins into this great sea, and stop thinking about them. When will I stop paying for that mistake?"

To whom much is given, much is required.

Isaac fell back on his bed and sighed. "I'm sorry, Lord. I never meant to hurt You. I'll get this thing right, if it's the last thing I do." He wanted to talk to his Lord a little while longer, plead his case. But his eyelids won the battle and sleep consumed his soul.

Dreams were much better than reality anyway. When Nina was the star of the show playing in his head, Isaac could sleep for days. She was wearing that hand-me-down blue jean dress that looked so good on her. She walked toward him smiling. No, she didn't just walk. Baby-girl strutted with purpose. Confident of who she was and what she wanted. He always did like a woman who had her mind made up.

"It's time, Isaac," she told him with fire in her eyes.

He gave her an I-got-you-now smile as his dimples dipped into all that chocolate. "You ready for this?"

Her head bobbed.

He reached out for her, but it wasn't Nina anymore. It was his mother. She was falling. Oh, God he couldn't catch her. Her head hit the glass table. The table shattered and his sweet, sweet mother lay in a pool of blood.

"Nooooo!" Isaac bolted upright. Panting, as sweat drizzled down his face. He ran his hands from his forehead to the back of his head.

Bam. Bam. Bam.

Before he could calm his nerves Isaac realized that some lunatic was trying to knock his door down. The clock on his dresser told him that the roosters hadn't scratched their throats yet. The sound would have normally irritated him, and curled his fists. But right now he was grateful for anything that would pull him out of bed.

He trodded through his bedroom and through the creak, creak, creak of his living room. The bamming stopped once he stepped in the living room. He'd never be able to sneak up on a burglar in this mug. He rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hands, looked through the peephole then flung open the door. "Man, it's five in the morning. What's the emergency?"

Keith stepped in looking haggard and worn. "I've been trying to call you."

"You must have been dialing the wrong number. I've been home since about two."

Keith picked up Isaac's phone and put the receiver to his ear. "No dial tone."

"What do you mean there's no dial tone?" He grabbed the phone to investigate. "Ain't that about nothing. Man, I know I paid this bill."

Keith raised his hands. "Calm down, maybe something's wrong with your line." He walked away from Isaac. "Let me check the phone in your bedroom."

Isaac looked to heaven. "This suffering for Christ stuff is getting old."

"Here's the problem," Keith hollered from the bedroom. "You had the phone off the hook."

Isaac clenched his fist. "Cassandra must have done that. I'm so tired of these Holy Ghost filled jigga boos. I'm gon' have to get me a woman off the street. Maybe she'll respect the fact that I'm trying to live saved."

"Another one trying to give you the midnight special?"

Isaac shook his head. "I ain't gon' lie, Keith. I almost took it." Keith smiled, then he started looking like something was wrong again. Real wrong. "What's up, man? Why you stalking me at this hour?"

Putting the phone back on the receiver, Keith sucked in his breath. "Sit down, Isaac."

"Just tell me what's up." He got in his mac-daddy stance. "I can take it."

"I'm not joking, Isaac. I really think you should sit down for this."

Isaac folded his arms across his chest. "Look, I'm a man. I can take your news standing up."

Keith opened his mouth, then closed it. He stood there contemplating his choices. He shook his head. Sometimes there was just no reasoning with Isaac. "There's been a shooting."

Isaac unfolded his arms. "Someone at the church?"

Keith shook his head.

Isaac hunched his shoulders. "Don't just stand there. If it wasn't someone at the church, who was it?"

Moisture creased the edges of Keith's eyes. "I-Isaac can y-you please sit down."

"Just spit it out. Good Lord, come on with it already."

"Someone drove by their house about one o'clock this morning. Nina must have been waiting up for Donovan. As soon as he stepped on to the porch she opened the door. The neighbors said she was yelling at him when the shooting started."

Isaac's knees buckled. "Are you trying to tell me that my family is dead?"

The moisture escaped Keith's eyes and ran down his cheeks.

Isaac's legs gave out and he fell to his knees. "Oh God, not my family."

"The last I heard they were in surgery."

Isaac pulled at his shirt until it tore from his body.

Keith wiped his face with his shirtsleeve, then tried to pull Isaac up. Isaac yanked away from him. "Come on, man. Dayton is hours from here. We've got to get going."

Isaac didn't hear him. Couldn't hear anything from the turmoil going on in his head. For as long as he'd known Nina, his life had been about loving her and their son. A decade hadn't changed that. Nina's unwillingness to come back to him hadn't changed that. And now some bullet was supposed to end the dreams he had for his family.

He looked toward heaven, where his help comes from. "God, do what you want to me. I can take it. But not my family. Please don't destroy my family like this."

