

KIMBERLY M. MILLER

*Their future lies
in forgetting the past*

Forgiving Tess

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

For Mom and Dad

1

*For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the
Lord: walk as children of light.
Ephesians 5:8*

The doors squeaked open and Tess Carson stepped outside where a wave of heat hit hard, making her want to dive back into the air-conditioned safety of the bus. She wondered whether her skin was melting already as sweat trickled down her arm and dripped onto the pavement.

Tess was annoyed at everything and yet trying desperately not to be. The trouble was that her life, the humidity, the stiff-backed bus seats, and especially Uncle Stu—who'd dragged her along on this mission trip—seemed bent on reminding her of all that continued to war against her. It was the first time she'd been away from Maple Ridge in nearly two years and she wasn't sure she was ready. Not that she was given a choice. Uncle Stu made sure she was coming along; otherwise, he promised he wouldn't bail her out again.

And she believed him.

"Come on, let's get settled." Uncle Stu walked by, his backpack shouldered on one side of his body. He wasn't a tall man, but his presence made up for it. He was kind, firm, and lately the only person remaining who was willing to give his niece another chance.

Tess drew a deep breath, certain her hair was

rapidly turning to thick and unruly frizz in the humidity. As if she cared what anyone thought of her appearance anymore.

"I still don't get why you hate me," Tess muttered as she tugged her backpack higher on her shoulder. While she didn't care that she'd left a majority of her minimal wardrobe at home, it did bother her that this pit stop after graduation from nursing school meant she was forced to wait even longer to begin applying for work that would take her away from trouble, and into the rest of her life.

It was a move she needed desperately.

"That's not how you change, Mouthy," Uncle Stu said, using his nickname for her—one, he insisted, she deserved.

Humph. Tess never cared much for Uncle Stu's wisdom, no matter how right he always was.

"I can change without frying to death."

Stu glanced at the group of people from his church who volunteered to go from Pennsylvania to the small town near Cocoa Beach to help rebuild a youth center for their sister church there. Tess slowly followed him toward the bunkhouse.

"You won't fry to death," he muttered. "And I'd stop complaining. Nearly everyone else took time from work—some of them vacation time that they could be spending lying on a beach instead of working near one."

Tess searched her uncle's deep brown eyes and nodded. Everyone else danced around the subject instead of getting to it, but not Stu. He'd told Tess the truth and refused to hold back even when it was hard.

Maybe that was why she trusted him.

"You're right. I'm working on it. I promise."

Stu nodded and reached out to give her a big hug. "Love you, kid. Come on." He started walking toward the large building. They'd arrived at a church campus that wasn't far from the church they'd come to help rebuild from the aftermath of a tropical storm. The neighboring congregation offered to allow the use of its activities building to feed the workers, who would sleep in bunkhouses that were situated behind the main church building. Since it was only a short walk to where they'd be working, it was a great set up.

Tess followed her uncle until she realized she'd left a bag in the cargo hold of the bus. "I'll catch up," she said. "I forgot the extra Bibles."

Stu nodded and kept going as Tess turned and ran back to the bus where several members of the team were divvying up their luggage. She hung back, waiting for a chance to grab her bag. She wasn't likely to make friends with many of the people on the trip, which was better anyway. Tess burned a lot of bridges in the last few years, and making amends was difficult. Besides, if she didn't make friends, there would be no problem keeping them.

"Need a hand?" a deep voice asked behind her.

Tess turned and found herself facing a broad chest. She raised her head and was stunned to find the familiar blue eyes of her childhood friend, Joshua Thorne, a man she hadn't seen in over twelve years. What was he doing here? Tess blinked rapidly as her knees went weak. She drew a breath in an effort to find strength. Inwardly she groaned. Those distracting dimples were even sweeter now.

Josh had lived next door to Tess and her family for seven years of their childhood, and he'd been best friends with Tess's brother, Brody. The boys played on

softball and basketball teams together—and of course a little football too, while Tess, who was five years younger, trailed after them trying to keep up. But the friendship was so much more. They'd hung out together. And if there was anything to be said about kids, the real learning and bonding took place in those moments when they were doing nothing. That was when they were doing everything.

In a flash, Tess remembered that his birthday was August tenth, he loved her grandmother's blueberry muffins, and he hated when Tess taunted him about his terrible pitching record from his sophomore year. All in all, not bad for not having dreamt of him in so long. There was a time when he entered her dreams every single night.

Tess's mouth opened but she was unable to form any words. Instead she stared up at him stupidly, thinking that he'd gotten even more handsome since he left—when he was eighteen and heading to college and she was mourning the loss of the guy she was certain would one day be her husband. He'd been a cocky boy, followed by a gaggle of giggling girls who were certain he was in love with them all. It made Tess so jealous that she'd gotten into more trouble than she wanted to remember ruining his dates, as only a smitten teenage girl could. Tess worked to say something, cursing herself that the words still refused to emerge.

Surely Uncle Stu knew about this. Why hadn't he warned her?

"Um, hi..." she said weakly.

"I'm guessing Stu didn't tell you this is my church?" Josh asked with a smile.

Tess shook her head. Why did it appear as if he'd

walked straight off a movie set? She swallowed hard, now wishing her hair didn't look like she'd taken a bath with her toaster.

"He...didn't mention it," she said softly. Josh nodded as Tess turned to grab her bag, glad for the distraction. Her childish love for him was the stuff embarrassment was made of—complete with foolish, homemade gifts and ridiculous gestures. Surely he remembered it all as well as she did. Her stomach tied itself in knots as image after image of her pranks played in her mind. It was pointless to hope he'd forgotten. Reluctantly, Tess turned back to find he was still smiling.

"You look great," he said, eyes twinkling.

So, he was a liar. At least he wasn't completely perfect. There was some solace in that. Tess shook her head. Had he grown after he left for college? Staring up at him was giving her a painful neck cramp. "Your dimples look great too," she said, cursing herself when Josh laughed. She blew a stray piece of hair from her eyes and continued, hoping he would be distracted. Maybe a flash hurricane would make something fall on her. "Wait," Tess rambled. "I mean, you go to church here?"

"Kind of. I'm the youth pastor."

Tess's stomach sank. Another score for him and another strike for her. "Youth pastor? Wow. Congratulations, that's...impressive," she said awkwardly. "Um...yeah. So, I better go. I'm sure I'll catch you later." Tess started to walk away.

Josh took her arm and swung her back around, and she nearly dropped the Bibles she was holding. He grabbed them to steady her. "Hey! We got a lot of catching up to do." Josh kept hold of her elbow.

Tess prayed he'd let go and she could melt into the pavement.

Instead, he steered her past a group of girls who were wearing matching green t-shirts, probably members of his youth group. They watched Josh territorially before turning back to each other with whispers and giggles. They'd made themselves comfortable at a picnic table and seemed uninterested in moving. "You girls could help the team with the luggage." Josh called over his shoulder. "Clarissa...Lydia...Taylor...Lila... get a move on."

The girls scrambled off the picnic table and went to the remaining ministry members who were struggling with various items.

"You sure do have a way with them," Tess said as he led her into a tiny office and closed the door.

Where did Uncle Stu go?

Tess gulped as she drank in the walls, covered in sports memorabilia and pictures of Josh and his family, as well as a few that included Tess, her brother Brody, and even their parents. She peeked up at Josh and smiled, aware that there wasn't one picture of him with anyone who could be mistaken for a wife, fiancée, or girlfriend. Interesting. None of her business. But, interesting. "Um...what's up?" Tess asked, reminding herself that she was a grown woman, not a kid sick with puppy-love.

Josh pulled her into a hug. "I can't believe you're here. Stu said you were coming but I asked him not to say anything, so it would be a surprise." He stepped back, his hands still on her shoulders. "So, surprise!"

He smelled amazing. Tess wondered if it was possible for her entire body to be on fire. Or maybe she was getting a glimpse of what hell was actually like.

Although she was certain of her salvation, it never hurt to be reminded of how far she'd come. "Yeah..." Tess tried to sound cheerful as she watched Josh go behind the desk and flop into his chair as if exhausted and relieved all at the same time.

He was still grinning. Would it kill him to stow the dimples for a while?

"Please sit," he said. "I've been so excited you were coming that I hardly slept."

"Really? You were that excited about *me*?" Now Tess smiled as she lowered into a worn chair and tried to wrap her mind around what he'd said. She'd spent years pining for him. Granted, back then things couldn't possibly have worked out. The words he'd spoken were ones she once longed for, but likely ones that were based on his idealized view of a childhood that long since passed them both.

Surely, she could hold him at a distance and run away before he discovered all the ways she was no longer an innocent child.

Tess squirmed while Josh continued staring at her, grinning goofily. She drew a deep breath and tried to assess the situation. There were a few options. She could run and hide, hitch her way back home, and be gone to who-knows-where before Uncle Stu even got back. But of course that meant when Stu did find her—and Tess was sure he would eventually—he'd wring her neck and disown her. Since he was the only family left who still had any faith in her, that plan wouldn't work.

Of course, Tess could simply tell Josh everything and get on with it. Although it might embarrass him, at least Tess wouldn't have to lie. And that was exactly what she might do if this sickeningly sweet reunion

continued.

With a smile that could win her an Oscar, Tess met Josh's eyes and decided to ignore the problem entirely. She was going back home when her work on the youth center was complete, and Josh would be staying in Florida. They'd never see each other again, or at least not for a long time, preferably after Tess moved as far away as possible and Josh and the rest of the world forgot about her so she could start her life over.

"It's great to see you, Jed. But it sure is a...surprise." Her childhood nickname for him slipped out so easily Tess hoped he didn't catch it.

Josh laughed. "No one's called me that in a long time, Tornado," he said with a wink.

Tess blushed. Josh often called her a 'pig-tailed tornado' when she'd made yet another mess he and Brody were forced to clean up. It was one more reason she'd fallen hard for him. Well, that's what her childish brain concluded anyway.

"And no one calls me tornado either." Even if they still thought of her that way. She glanced around his office. "Listen, this is great and I do want to catch up but shouldn't we get back? I need to give someone these Bibles, and isn't there a barbecue?"

"Oh!" Josh stood quickly. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking." He took the Bibles from her and set them on a chair nearby. "I'll take care of these," he said. "Come on. You must be hungry."

"It's not that..." Tess said. "I figured you'd need to work." She didn't understand what went into being a youth pastor, but she was certain it didn't include reminiscing with your old friends while the team that came to help you re-build a youth center waited for dinner.

Josh smiled and Tess warmed again, blaming the heat on embarrassment.

"You're right," he said. "How 'bout we eat, and once things quiet down you and I can slip away for a cherry ice cream cone? There's a great place not far from here."

Against her better judgment, Tess nodded. She never could turn down cherry ice cream. "Sure. I'll harass you in private." Where did that come from? Already she was flirting with him? Tess mentally kicked herself while Josh chuckled.

"Great. I can't wait to find out what you've been up to, and Brody...your grandma." Josh opened the office door. "Let's go get you some food so you don't faint. I'll bug you for information later."

Tess smiled and nodded as she slipped out of his office. "Yeah. Let's go get dinner," she muttered.

2

*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
Psalm 27: 1*

Josh was certain he'd lost his mind the minute Tess arrived. He'd acted like a complete idiot lacking any self-control. How many times did he insist on tripping over himself before she gave him the kick he deserved? He wished Stu warned him.

The pig-tailed tornado with skinned knees and a sassy attitude was a stunning, grown-up, full-fledged woman. He wasn't sure why he didn't expect it when he heard she was coming, but it never once occurred to him.

Josh shook his head as he walked with Tess toward the activities building where much of the team was already making themselves at home with plates full of barbecue chicken and cheesy potatoes. While it smelled wonderful, Josh barely noticed. He couldn't manage to think straight as he desperately tried to quit staring at the beautiful woman who was walking beside him.

Sure, he'd expected Tess to grow up, maybe into a bigger version of the child who'd caused so much trouble. But to find she'd become the exact representation of everything he'd ever found to be attractive seemed astoundingly unfair. Her dark hair

fell in graceful waves around her neck where it didn't quite want to stay up in the makeshift bun she'd swirled it into on top of her head. And her eyes...Josh couldn't help but stare. They were deep brown pools of chocolate he could get lost in. And when she smiled Josh's heart skipped. That never happened before with anyone else.

Why would God blindside him this way when all he'd wanted to do was reminisce over old times and make a connection back to the only community that ever made him think he was home? This was definitely not part of his plan. But of course, God was aware this was coming. And what's more, Josh was now certain that God had a sense of humor.

"I'll get Uncle Stu." Tess's voice shocked Josh into remembering he was still standing right next to her. His cheeks grew warm, but he hoped she didn't notice.

"Sure. We'll catch up later."

Tess smiled. "Sounds good."

Josh didn't tear his gaze away until he noticed a familiar presence beside him.

"Maybe you should get your jaw off the floor. The kids all think you've been hiding a girlfriend."

Sheepishly Josh hung his head to mask the warmth creeping up his cheeks. "That bad?" he asked Tom Fisher, his senior pastor, boss, and dear friend.

The older man nodded as he patted Josh on the back. "I know that expression well—see it all the time in our boys." Tom continued, "I take it that's the friend you were telling me about?"

Josh nodded as Tess and Stu walked to the food line. He couldn't be sure, but he thought her face was flushed, as if she was giving Stu an earful for not telling her she'd be running into him on the trip. As

she gestured her hands wildly, Josh grinned. She was every bit the wildcard he remembered. At least some things about Tess stayed the same.

"I'm anxious to meet her," Tom said as he followed Josh's gaze. "She's...passionate."

Josh chuckled as she continued ranting to her uncle, who appeared bored by his niece's latest tirade.

Stu glanced in Josh's direction and winked before turning to get a piece of chicken.

Tess continued talking and swinging her arms. Had she even taken a breath?

"I think she's taking her uncle to task for not warning her I'd be here," he said, not bothering to take his gaze off her. "It's been about twelve years since we've seen each other."

Tom whistled as he watched the scene. "Shouldn't she be happy you're here?"

Josh laughed. "Maybe, but not without warning. She was...how should I put it?" He searched his mind for words that would soften the blow. The truth was, Tess was a mischievous child, prone to trouble of all sorts. But what kid wasn't, really? Josh cleared his throat. "She was convinced from the day we met that she would marry me, and she pulled a lot of tricks to get my attention over the years."

"Such as?"

Josh laughed. He'd opened the can of worms and could only blame himself. "Whoopee cushions under seats, chalk drawings for me in the driveway, hiding my deodorant and hair gel. Oh, and there was the time she got creative with a garden hose and doused my prom date. It wasn't pretty." Josh turned to his friend.

Tom's green eyes danced with laughter. "And how old was she?"

“Probably twelve or thereabouts.”

Tom chuckled and clapped Josh on the back again as he handed him a microphone. “You’ll want to greet everyone in a minute, once the food line runs through.” He leaned toward Josh confidentially. “Doesn’t look as if she’s changed any.” The older man walked away, still chuckling as he headed for the food line.

“Sure doesn’t,” Josh muttered.

~*~

“You aren’t eating your chicken,” Stu said as he tucked into his potatoes, skillfully avoiding Tess’s murderous glare.

“I’m still waiting for you to answer me.” She drummed her fingers on the table top, not at all concerned with her growling stomach. They’d sat far away from everyone on their team since Tess had scarcely taken a breath once she got rolling. And thankfully, Josh was busy with his usual group of high school girls. It didn’t matter that he’d never pay them any mind, Tess was sure he still enjoyed the attention. She pitied those girls. Joshua Thorne was easy to fall for and tremendously hard to get over.

“You knew he would be here, didn’t you?” Tess demanded.

Stu shrugged as he reached for his drink. “It didn’t matter. This is part of the process, Mouthy.”

Tess growled to keep herself from saying what she wanted to. Now that she was renewed and reformed she knew she couldn’t resort to angry name-calling no

matter how much she wanted to. "I'm not sure I buy into your process anymore," she muttered.

"Eat or you'll pass out." Stu finished his potatoes and wiped his mouth.

Irritated, Tess took a bite to appease him. She glanced at Josh who was talking and laughing with a group of students.

Stu watched her watching him and smiled. "Josh is a good man. He's grown up, Tess, same as you."

Tess regarded her uncle, horrified, when it hit her. "You're trying to marry me off, aren't you? No one worthwhile at home will take me so you've dragged me all the way to Florida because Josh is so good he might be game. How many cows did you offer him?"

Stu rewarded her hysterics with a laugh. "He doesn't seem like the farming type," he said. "But you could do worse than to be a pastor's wife."

Tess raised an eyebrow. "Are you trying to give my father a heart attack?" She dropped her forehead into her palm and shook her head. "I. Can't. Be. Here."

Stu reached across the table and gently placed his hand on her arm. "This is moving on. You got no choice in it, kiddo."

Tess raised her head. She drew a deep breath and nodded as Stu went back to eating. She'd spent enough time in church and studying the Bible with him to be sure her uncle believed she was ready to be pushed ahead in her faith.

"Can't blame your old uncle for dreaming about your childhood wishes coming true. Besides, I did work out a dowry—I mean, in case. I figured a few rental properties should be a fair trade."

Tess groaned, even as she was beginning to calm down. Uncle Stu wanted the best for her. He didn't

possess an ulterior motive except the one he honestly shared.

“He’s not interested in me,” she muttered as she lifted her fork. “And I’m not interested in him. It’s been a long time.”

Stu snorted. “The man has no poker face. He was interested as soon as he looked at you, whether he admits it or not.”

Tess met Stu’s gaze as they shared a smile. “He never did have a poker face,” she said. “That’s why we always got caught.” Tess’s hope that she might enjoy herself—really and truly enjoy herself—for the first time in two years, began to take root.

But 2 Corinthians 5:17 came to her mind. She still struggled to remember verses, and yet when it came to that one, it was etched somewhere deep inside her, a lifeline she clung to daily. Quietly, she recited to herself, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” She mulled the verse for several long moments as she stirred the ice around in her cup. “But wouldn’t it be wrong to...not tell him? I mean...if he talks to Brody...” she began.

Stu shrugged. “If anything needs to be said it will come out in due time, the way any other topic would.”

Tess smiled as she considered not living in fear. Despite being paranoid she’d slip up again and disappoint everyone. Maybe the trip to Florida would be exactly what she needed to move to the next place in her healing. She could hardly fathom that something she’d so dreaded might in fact be the best thing to happen to her in a long time. “OK. I’ll enjoy being myself for a while. No worries, no drama, no apologies.”