

Prologue

“**Y**ou’re a liar, Toni,” Francine Amen said, forcing a calmness she didn’t feel to project in her voice. She pressed her palms down on the counter that separated the kitchen from the dining room in the two-bedroom apartment that she shared with her childhood friend Toni Roberts. “I don’t believe you.”

Toni, standing on the dining room side of the counter, took a step closer to her roommate. “Why would I lie to you, Francie? Tell me that.”

The plea in her friend’s soft brown eyes was almost more than Francine could bear. “I know you, remember? You and me go way back. It wouldn’t be the first time you’ve lied about something like this.” Francine didn’t turn away from the stricken look on her friend’s face. She knew her words needed to be spoken. “Well, if we’re talking about truth here, we should talk about truth.”

Toni wrapped her arms around her midsection and said, “You may not believe me, Francie, but I *am* pregnant and Bishop Payne is the father. We’ve been having an affair for months.”

Francine laughed a dry laugh. “An affair? Come off it, Toni. Bishop told us all how you’ve been coming on to him. And you know what? He didn’t condemn you for it. He asked us to pray for you. And what do you do to him in return? You come up with these

lies. I pray to God you haven't told anyone else this pack of garbage. That man has a wife and kids, and all of them have done nothing but love you. You have to know the damage these lies of yours will do to them."

"I'm not lying, Francie," Toni said, her eyes clouding with tears. "You know me," she pleaded. "You have to believe me. I knew nobody else would believe me. I've known for weeks now, and I've wanted to tell you so badly, but I just couldn't. I know what people say about me around here. I've overheard them saying I'm not a real Christian, that I don't have the fire. I heard it from them, but I never thought I'd hear it from you. You're the one who shared the gospel with me. You're the one who told me that life in Christ could be different. You know I've changed."

Francine's heart ached for her friend, but she couldn't let emotions deter her. Toni had to suffer the consequences of her actions. Tough love was exactly that—tough. "If you've been having an affair with Bishop like you say you have, then you haven't changed that much after all, have you?"

Toni turned away, seeming to deflate right before Francine's eyes. "You know how he is, Francie. He can be so charming. I loved him as the man of God he seemed to be, and then I simply loved him. It was like I couldn't help myself."

"I don't believe you and neither will anyone else. I don't know what you think you're going to get out of this."

Toni turned back to her. "I need a friend, Francie. I need someone to hear me out, be on my side. He wants me to have an abortion. He said he'll deny anything ever happened between us."

"I can't help you, Toni. I won't be a party to whatever game it is you're playing."

"But you're all I have," Toni pleaded. "I can't go back home now. This would kill George and Momma. I have nowhere else to turn."

Francine inhaled deeply. "Not this time, Toni. Not this time. I've stood by you through a lot of your drama, most of it of your own making, but not this time. This time you're on your own."

Toni opened her mouth as if to defend herself, but then she shook her head. “What does it matter?” she said, the defeat in her voice wrenching Francine’s heart.

As Francine watched, Toni turned her petite frame away and headed off, shoulders slumped, toward her bedroom. Francine closed her eyes and issued a brief prayer on Toni’s behalf. She didn’t know what had gotten into Toni, but she prayed her friend would soon see the error of her ways and repent. Francine loved her, but she couldn’t support her. Not this time. She and Toni had grown up together, been friends for as long as Francine could remember, but Francine had to face facts. Toni wasn’t ready to give her life to the Lord, and Francine couldn’t be held back because of it. She heaved a deep sigh, knowing that even though it hurt, she had done the right thing. She could have ignored Toni’s actions, but that would not have been love. She knew from Psalms that the harsh truth from a friend was better than sweet words from an enemy.

As she reached for the phone to call Cassandra, her friend and prayer partner, to tell her about the conversation with Toni, Francine heard what sounded like the backfire of a car, followed by a loud thump, both coming from the direction of Toni’s room. Wondering what Toni was doing to make such noise, Francine forgot the phone and headed for her friend’s room. When she got no answer to her knock, she turned the doorknob. She screamed as she realized the sound she’d heard hadn’t been the backfire of a car at all.

One

Three months later

Francine Amen straightened her shoulders and exhaled a deep breath as she walked from her room on the patient wing of the Southwest Ohio Mental Health Clinic, through the patient activity ward, on her way to her morning appointment with Dr. Jennings, her therapist of record for the last eighty-five days. As she made her way across the breezeway, she gave slight nods of greeting to the patients and nurses much too familiar to her.

The stale odor of despair mingled with the fresh, but antiseptic, smell of Lysol that characterized the patient area contrasted greatly with the cinnamon aroma that greeted her when she passed through the glass double doors that served as the boundary between the mentally unwell and those who treated them. Sometimes the casual elegance of the lobby outside the staff offices—potted plants, rich artwork on the walls, deep-cushioned chairs and settees in bright multicolored patterns—was almost enough to make her forget where she was and why she was there. Almost but not quite. Straightening her back even more, Francine strode toward the sign-in desk with one thought on her mind: In three days she would leave this place that had become an unlikely home and refuge for her.

“Morning, Francine,” the duty nurse, Margaret, a grandmotherly woman of about sixty, said to her. “Dr. Jennings hasn’t gotten here yet, but we’re expecting her any minute now. You can go on into her office.”

“Thanks, Margaret. How are you this morning?”

“Busy, but good. I hear you’re leaving us on Sunday. You know, I’m happy to see you go, but we sure are gonna miss you around here.”

Francine smiled. “Believe it or not, I’m going to miss you too, but that doesn’t mean I want to stay any longer.”

The older woman chuckled. “I know what you mean. Now, you go on into the doctor’s office. I have to run some papers over to the patient wing. Dr. Jennings will probably beat me back here.”

Francine followed the older woman’s directive and went into the doctor’s office to wait. As she took her seat on the couch, she remembered her first visit to this office. Then she’d wondered if she was supposed to stretch out on the couch. She smiled at her ignorance. Before her stay here, her knowledge of therapists had been limited to what she knew from prime-time television. Fortunately for her, Dr. Jennings was neither Frasier Crane nor Bob Hartley.

Francine looked toward the door as it opened and the bubbly Dr. Jennings stormed in. “Sorry I’m late,” the five-foot redheaded dynamo said. Then, without preamble, she took a seat in the chair across from Francine and said, “So, you’re going home Sunday.”

Home, Francine thought, back to Georgia. A place she hadn’t visited in the last five years. This hospital was more familiar to her than home was. “That’s what they tell me.”

“So how do you feel about it?” Dr. Jennings glanced down at the yellow legal pad that seemed to always be on her lap, a habit Francine found unnerving. It was as if the woman couldn’t remember Francine’s issues and had to check the pad to remind herself.

How do I feel about it? Francine thought to herself. She was ready to leave, but ready to leave wasn’t a feeling. She’d been in

therapy long enough to understand the difference between feelings and thoughts. “I’m a bit anxious,” she said, glancing down at her recently manicured hands, courtesy of the hospital services staff, “but I guess that’s to be expected.”

“Why anxious?”

Francine shrugged her shoulders and glanced out the plate glass windows overlooking the recently mowed north lawn of the institution. “Why shouldn’t I be anxious? I’m a thirty-three-year-old woman running home to her sister after being let loose from the funny farm. I think that’s enough to be anxious about.”

When the doctor didn’t respond, Francine turned to her. “What? No more questions?”

Dr. Jennings looked down at her pad again. “This is your time, Francine. If you want to spend it making sarcastic remarks, go right ahead.”

Francine turned the corners of her lips down and sank back into the couch. She rubbed her hands down her jean-clad thighs. “Okay, you’re right. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Dr. Jennings said. “Recognize what you’re doing.”

Francine knew Dr. Jennings was referring to the way she used sarcasm to handle emotions and situations that made her uneasy. “I’m anxious about going back home. I don’t look forward to living with my sister. I don’t look forward to seeing the people that I was so ugly to before I left. I dread seeing Toni’s family.”

Dr. Jennings leaned forward, in full empathy mode. “I know that’ll be hard for you, seeing Toni’s family again.”

Hard was a mild word to describe what Francine felt about seeing Toni’s mother and brother again. The last time she’d seen them was when they’d come to Dayton to get Toni’s body. They’d come to her wanting answers about what led their daughter and sister to suicide. By then, Francine had learned that Toni had indeed been pregnant, and the reaction of her friend Cassandra to the news had pretty much convinced her that Toni hadn’t been lying about Bishop Payne being the father. Toni’s family had been

devastated after they'd dragged those gory details out of Francine. Out of their devastation had come their accusations. Francine, who had already tried and convicted herself, accepted their condemnation without a word of self-defense. The last thing she remembered from that day was George, Toni's brother, calling her a murderer. Her next memory was waking up in this hospital, her arms restrained, her sister asleep in the chair next to her bed.

"Hey," Dr. Jennings said, interrupting her thoughts. "You've come a long way in your therapy, Francine. The biggest step in that journey for you was accepting that Toni's suicide wasn't your fault. That's ground you cannot afford to lose."

Francine met the doctor's gaze. "I know I didn't cause Toni's death, but knowing that only makes my guilt bearable. The fact remains, if it were not for me, Toni would still be alive. That's something I'll always have to live with."

"Thinking like that isn't good for you, Francine," the doctor warned. "You have to know that."

Francine let the familiar words settle in her spirit. "You tell me it's not my fault, but all I hear is that it's not *all* my fault. Toni was in Dayton because I dragged her here. She was in that church because I encouraged her to be there. She trusted Bishop Payne because I trusted him. And when she needed a friend, I wasn't there for her."

"But you didn't put the gun to her head."

"I know that," Francine said. "Toni did that all by herself, but she did it because I didn't believe her, because I refused to believe her. I was the only person she had, and I wasn't there for her."

"So you're going to beat yourself up about that for the rest of your life?"

Francine shook her head. She knew she had to try to be like Paul and forget the sins of the past and move forward. "No, I won't do that, but I will take responsibility for what I did. That's why going home is going to be so difficult. I have to make amends for the hurt I caused, to Toni's family, yes, but to the others as well."

That's the only way I'll be able to live with myself. Unfortunately, I have no idea how they're going to respond to my overtures."

"You're not responsible for how they respond," Dr. Jennings said. "You're only responsible for your own actions. You have to remember that."

Francine signaled compliance with a downward tilt of her head.

"So have you decided where you're going to start?"

Francine squeezed her eyes shut. Then she quickly opened them. "Cassandra."

"Are you sure you want to tackle her first?"

Francine tipped her chin up. Cassandra had been her closest friend at Temple Church. In fact, Cassandra's testimony about how she'd come to be a member of Temple Church and her devotion to God had been a major factor in Francine's decision to join the group. Francine had looked up to the woman as a mentor in Christ and cherished her friendship. Therefore, her betrayal had hurt the most. "I have to do it. I have to confront her. I have to hear the truth from her."

"What are you going to say to her?"

"I'm going to ask her if she knew."

"Do you think she did?"

Francine's heart ached at the answer to that question. "I know she did. She had to have known. I can still remember the look on her face when I told her what Toni had told me. She knew. I could tell by the look on her face that she knew, and I have a feeling she wasn't the only one who knew."

"So why ask her if you already know the answer?"

"Because I have to hear the words from her and I have to know why. I loved them all. They were my family. I walked away from my biological family so I could be a part of their church family. I have to understand how they could do what they did, how they could sit by and let Bishop Payne do the damage he did when they knew what was going on. I have to know. I need to make some sense out of it in order to get on with my life."

Dr. Jennings looked down at her pad again. “You know, Francine, there’s a real possibility you won’t be able to make sense of it. At least, not in the way you want. What if you don’t get the answers you need?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess I’ll have to deal with it, but I have to try. I can’t walk away without trying.”

The doctor flipped the top sheet of her pad over. “Have you lined up a therapist at home the way I suggested?”

Francine looked down at her folded hands. “My sister did the legwork. She’s very worried about her crazy sister.”

The doctor lifted a brow.

“Okay, maybe Dawn doesn’t think I’m crazy, but she is worried about me.”

“It’s natural. She loves you.”

“I know she does.”

“And?”

Francine looked up and met the doctor’s eyes. “It makes me feel guilty. I hadn’t spoken to her in five years, but when I needed her she was right there. Cassandra did one thing right when she called Dawn. I’m not sure what I would have done without my sister’s support. She’s been a good sister to me, even though I haven’t been a good sister to her.”

“From what I’ve seen of your sister, I don’t think she’s keeping score. She only wants you to get better.”

“It certainly looks that way,” Francine said. She and Dawn had always had a complicated relationship. Though they were fraternal twins, Francine the older by a couple of minutes, they had never really shared the symbiotic closeness that many twins experienced. Mostly, they’d been competitive. The differences in their appearances only added to the competition. Tall and sleek, Dawn had a polished, sophisticated look with stark features, while the petite Francine was muted in comparison. “She’s my sister and she loves me, but you never know with Dawn. She always seems to be working some angle.” Francine lifted her shoulders in a light

shrug. “Maybe she’s working through some residual guilt from marrying my fiancé.”

“I thought *you* ended that relationship.”

“I did, but she didn’t waste much time stepping in, now did she?”

Dr. Jennings jotted something on her yellow pad. “I thought you and Dawn had talked this through. Your living with them is going to be difficult enough without these feelings lurking beneath the surface.”

“Whoopee, what fun that’s going to be!”

Dr. Jennings arched a brow.

“Okay, I’ll stop with the sarcasm. I don’t look forward to moving in with them. I hate the fact that I’m flat broke. I hate even more the reason I’m flat broke. When I left town with Bishop Payne and the others, I was so sure I was doing the right thing. I knew I was right and I didn’t lose any time telling everybody else how wrong they were. Lord forgive me, I was so self-righteous. I can hardly believe I said some of the things I did. And now I have to go back and face all my mistakes. It’s a bit daunting.”

Dr. Jennings studied her quietly. “You know, Francine, this anxiety is not a bad thing. You do have some challenges ahead of you, and recognizing them will only make you better equipped to meet them. Now, back to the therapist. Did you find one with a Christian orientation?”

“Dawn had a couple on her list, but I didn’t pick one of them.”

Dr. Jennings leaned forward. “Why not? Your faith has been a large part of your life for all of your life, Francine. It’s reasonable that what’s happened has caused you to reevaluate a lot of what you believe, but if you’re going to be whole again, you’re going to have to work through the faith issues in a rational way.”

“You may be right,” Francine said, “but I’m not ready for anyone to explain what the Bible means to me, or to interpret what God is saying. I did that with Bishop Payne and look where it got me. Thank God, I know now that’s something I have to do on my own.”

“Not all religious people are like Bishop Payne or the others at Temple Church.”

“I know that in my head,” Francine said, “but my heart is another matter. I have to do this my way.”

“All right,” the doctor said. “I’m not going to push.” She glanced at her pad again. “I guess that ends our session for today. We’ll meet again before your Sunday discharge.”

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As Sylvester Ray entered his home Friday evening, he rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, trying to wipe away the stress of the day. As manager of Amen-Ray Funeral Home, the family business he co-owned with his wife and sister-in-law, he had a lot on his shoulders. Though the business had recovered the ground it lost during the fallout of Francine leaving town, things were not going as well as he knew they needed to go in order for the funeral home to thrive. A quick solution would be to sell out to Easy Rest, the public company that had taken over a large number of smaller funeral homes in the Southeast, but he wanted that to be the answer of last resort. He knew that a move like that at this point in time would more likely than not lead to the end of his marriage of four years. He had no doubt that his wife, Dawn Amen-Ray, would consider such a decision the last straw. So Sylvester was left to find another solution if he wanted to keep his wife. And he did want to keep her. Doing so just seemed to get more difficult every day.

On his way through the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of mineral water. He drank it as he walked past the closed door of the upstairs bedroom that was now his wife’s and on to the master bedroom that was now his alone. His eyes widened in surprise and welcome when he saw Dawn standing in the doorway of the closet they had once shared, their bed littered with her clothes. His heart quickened at the sight of her in a pair of denim cutoffs too short and too worn for her to wear anywhere but in the house. The sight of her and her long, sleek, cinnamon-toasted legs made him yearn for the times when things had been good between them. Then he would have pulled her into his arms

and they would have spent the rest of the evening making very good use of their king-sized bed. But things weren't good between them and he had as much a chance of getting her into that teak bed as he did of finding a million dollars under one of the pillows.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She turned to him, her bright brown eyes full of the accusation they usually held for him these days. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

He sighed as he walked fully into the room. He drank the last of his water and then tossed the bottle into the teak wastebasket in the corner of the room. How many times would he have to ask for forgiveness? Would she ever forgive him? Did it even matter? "It looks like you're putting your clothes in that closet, but I'm sure that's not the case since you no longer consider this room yours."

She turned away from him and continued with her clothes. "You know Francine is coming home."

He dropped down on the edge of the bed. "So that's what this is about? You're going to put on a happy face for Francine. You don't want her to know we're not sleeping together."

She turned a glare on him. "Do you?"

"Why should I care what Francine thinks about our marriage? I care what we think about it. I care what you think about it."

She turned away again. "There was a time when you cared a lot about what Francine thought."

Yes, he'd been devastated when Francine had deserted him, but out of that devastation had come his relationship with Dawn. "That was a long time ago, Dawn. We're married. I love you."

"So you say."

He got up, went to her, and turned her to face him. "I do love you. What do I have to do to make you believe me?" He read her answer in her eyes and dropped his hands away from her. "I can't undo it, Dawn. I made a mistake. Can't you forgive me?"

"It's so easy for you to say. *Forgive me, Dawn. I love you, Dawn,*" she mimicked. "But you know what? It's not easy for me to believe you're sincere. You were telling me you loved me for

months, and loving me physically, while you were having an affair right under my nose, with somebody I knew. How can I believe anything you say? Would you believe me if the tables were turned?”

Sylvester felt the resentment rise up in his throat. Dawn often taunted him with the idea of her and another man. “I would want to. I would want to believe that we could get back what we’d lost. I’d want to believe that.”

“But could you? Would you really want me if you knew I’d been with someone else for months, that I’d been with you *and* somebody else for months?”

Sylvester turned away from her. The idea of her with another man turned his insides. He didn’t even like to think about it. His repulsion at the idea of her being with another man was the only thing that kept him holding on to a marriage that seemed, at times, unsalvageable. He could imagine the hurt, betrayal, and yes, anger, he’d feel if she’d done what he did, so he was willing to give her time to forgive him. He just didn’t know how long he could hold on without some sign of encouragement from her.

“I didn’t think so.” Dawn stomped into the closet. “Men! I can’t believe you. You go out and do what you do, not expecting to get caught, and when you do, you expect to be forgiven. You tell me I’m being cruel, but I know for a fact that I’m treating you a million times better than you’d be treating me if I’d had an affair.”

“You don’t know how I’d react.”

Dawn propped her hands on her hips and stared him down. “Puh-leez, Sylvester. I remember how you reacted when Francine left town with that traveling minister. She was out of your system so fast it made my head spin. I still wonder if you didn’t go after me to get back at her.”

She’d questioned his motives when he’d first begun to pursue her. He’d convinced her then that what he felt for her had nothing to do with the feelings he’d had for her sister. Now all of her insecurities were coming back, and it was his fault. He still didn’t know why he’d done it. Why had he put his marriage in jeopardy

for a few hours of sexual release with a woman he didn't even really care about?

Dawn tapped one slender foot against the plush carpet. "Tell me, Sylvester, do you still have feelings for Francine? Am I going to come home one day and find you and her—"

"Don't say it, Dawn. She's your sister, for goodness' sake. If you don't have any faith in me, at least have some in her. Besides, if you're so worried, why're you inviting her to stay with us?"

"You know why. It's her home and she has nowhere else to go. You know she has no money and no job. She gave all her money to that church and she lost her job a long time ago because she was too busy ministering to go to work." She dropped her hands to her sides. "And I was supposed to be the irresponsible sister. Who would have ever thought it would turn out to be Francine?"

"Not me, that's for sure. Francine was as predictable as Wednesday night Bible study."

"Until our grandparents died."

Sylvester felt the grief his wife still carried for the grandparents who'd reared her and Francine. Both women had taken the deaths hard. Dawn had settled down and tried to become the granddaughter they'd always wanted her to be, while Francine had broken out of the mold they had for her and had begun to spread her wings. Though Francine's actions had been more self-destructive in the end, Sylvester knew Dawn had her own set of demons. He knew she had many misgivings about her relationship with the older couple, many wrongs she wished she'd righted before they died, but she hadn't had the chance and that haunted her. He saw it in her eyes now, the regret, making him want to pull her into his arms and tell her that it would be all right. But he didn't have the right. She'd push him away as she'd done many times before. He stripped off his slacks in preparation for bed. "Are you sleeping in here tonight?" he asked as he passed her on the way to the bathroom, though he knew the answer.

"I'll sleep across the hall until Francine gets here."

"Surprise, surprise."

Ignoring his comment, she said, “I’m going to leave to pick her up straight from the Leadership Team meeting tomorrow morning, so we’ll have to go in separate cars.”

He turned back to her. “Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you? I can still get away.”

She shook her head. “I can handle it on my own!”

Sylvester grunted his assent as he closed the bathroom door. Though he loved his wife and knew he had to pay for his mistakes, he didn’t know how long he could continue to live in a loveless marriage.