



Prologue

The Amen Sisters

Angela Benson

“You’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, Francine. 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.