

CHAPTER SIX

“**T**hank you, God, for hearing and answering our prayers. Lord, I praise You for healing my baby. You are worthy, Jesus. You are worthy of all praise and glory. Thank you, Lord. Hallelujah to Your name, Jesus.” Angel prayed out loud as she stood at the altar of the church embracing Lester with one arm clutched tightly at the bottom of his back, while her other arm held Moses and Joy to her side.

At Sunday morning service a week after Moses’s fall, the pastor asked the Nobles to come forward and share the miracle of Moses’s healing. After Moses testified about his leg, Angel worshipped God with the words she uttered and wept as she thought about His faithfulness to her family. Angel held her family close and prayed silently that nothing would ever separate their bond.

Angel returned to the rhythm of life as a career woman, wife, and mother, but she did not return the same. She got up earlier in the morning and knelt by Lester’s side of the bed and prayed for him and their marriage. Then she walked the narrow hallway to the children’s room and knelt in the middle of the floor and prayed for Joy and Moses. Rising from the floor, she always stopped in Gran’s room last, and Gran was always waiting by her bed with a Bible. There the two read scripture and prayed for their family. Angel couldn’t let go of the supernatural high she experienced and the rush she felt when the doctors could no longer find the mass in Moses’s leg. She replayed the fall, the emergency

room visit, and that joyous day when the doctor gave them the good news.

She watched her family get better. They were more passionate about life and concerned for one another's well-being. Angel was grateful she didn't have to break up fights between Moses and Joy on a daily basis like the days before the fall.

Angel found herself boisterously singing praises to God and telling everyone she knew how blessed she was to have her family. Before Moses's accident, she felt like the tightly woven family was beginning to unravel. It was still one beautiful piece of embroidery, but there was a string that was waiting to be pulled and slowly undo the years of sweat put into every stitch. It was like God put this moment in their lives to appreciate each other and focus on all they had instead of what would happen next. Angel was convicted about her late hours at work and vowed to wrap up earlier, so she could make Lester and the kids the priority.

Since Lester got a new job he wasn't at home as much with the children, and Angel felt she should pick up the slack and not leave the children alone so much with Gran, though she knew she didn't mind. Angel rejoiced when Lester announced he got a new job where he managed a community outreach for male adolescents. Lester repeatedly described every detail of how he designed social programs to increase the number of high school graduates from disadvantaged homes in Baltimore City to Angel. He wouldn't come up for air as he described the young men he worked with at the community center. As his shoulders straightened and his chest puffed up like a proud peacock, his eyes beamed with pride. Angel saw how having a career Lester was passionate about made his life more meaningful. She knew their family meant a lot to him, but understood his vocation gave him an identity. She remained silent when he was unemployed because she knew he was ashamed he couldn't provide for his family. Angel was thankful Lester finally found a job where he was positioned for a purpose. It wasn't just about the money, but about the message of hope he could model for the males in the

program. She could tell how much this job meant to Lester as he shared how he saw himself in the young men at the center.

Lester still preached some evenings and weekends, therefore his schedule was often hectic, but Angel was determined to maintain order in their home. Angel attended services with him when she could and encouraged Lester as she balanced the demands of being superwoman. She overlooked his late nights and retreats out of town as him doing the work of the Lord and providing for their family.

With Lester working they were getting closer to their savings goal to move out of Gran's house and into their own home. She felt blessed they could stay with Gran, because she watched the children when Angel and Lester were too busy and helped Angel with cooking and cleaning. However, with her sister Emma moving in, there was very little space, and they wanted Joy and Moses to get a better education. They couldn't afford private school much longer, so they desired a move to Baltimore County where the public school curriculum was equivalent to private schools in the city.

With their hectic schedules, Lester and Angel tried to keep Saturdays free for family outings. On one particularly crisp Saturday in October, they planned to go to the park and the cinema for a kid-friendly comedy.

While they were eating breakfast, there was a knock at the front door. Lester rose to get the door, but Gran insisted on getting it since she had already finished her meal. On her way to the front door, Gran straightened out the cloth on the dining room table that was slightly uneven. Angel followed Gran out of the kitchen and stopped in the dining room where she had a clear view of the door. She grabbed a cleaning rag to provide a decoy while she eavesdropped to see who was at the front door.

"Well, Pastor Davis, what a surprise to see you this morning." She patted her hair down and straightened her apron to make herself presentable for the senior pastor of her church. It was rare for the senior pastor to visit anyone's home without an invitation and without calling first.

“Good morning, Mother Sword. How are you?” asked the pastor as he kissed Gran on her cheek.

“Blessed and highly favored in the Lord.” Gran waved her right hand as if she was going to testify to how good God had been to her.

“Well, praise the Lord. You are looking quite well. I would like to speak to Lester and Angel in private, if that’s all right with you, of course.”

“Sure, Pastor. They’re eating breakfast with the kids. I’ll get them for you. Have a seat.”

Angel hurried back to the kitchen and waited for Gran to announce Pastor Davis.

“Angel and Lester, Pastor Davis is here to see you,” Gran yelled as she walked to the back of the house. “I’ll sit with the kids while they finish eating breakfast”

“I wonder what Pastor Davis wants.” Angel leaned her head toward Lester.

“I have no idea,” Lester said as he and Angel walked toward the living room.

“Good morning, Pastor. To what do we owe this pleasant surprise?” Angel asked as she hugged Pastor Davis.

“Good morning, Pastor.” Lester shook his hand as they all sat down.

“Well, I’m not here for pleasantries, so I guess I’ll cut to the chase. What I have to say is hard for me because I love you two like family, but as your pastor I have to maintain a standard in our church.”

“What is this about?” Lester asked.

“Lester, a young woman stopped by the church last Saturday with her six-month-old son. She told me you fathered her child, and you refused to acknowledge your son or her. Her name is Sheila.”

Lester leaned forward, and crossed his arms while he nervously tapped his right leg. His clenched jaw told Angel he was hiding something.

"The child is not mine," Lester proclaimed as a bead of sweat formed on his forehead.

"Is that all you have to say?" Angel leaned forward, almost falling out of her chair as she locked eyes with Lester, forcing him to look at her. She couldn't believe this was happening to her as the words poured out of Pastor Davis's mouth like kerosene on a flame that engulfed her heart. *How could he do this to me, to us?* Angel thought as she felt every inch of her body tie into knots of pain.

"I didn't come here to start a war in your home, but I had to address this situation directly because this will not be tolerated in our church. The little boy looks exactly like Moses and I don't think that is a coincidence."

"If you feed a child long enough it will look like you, so looks aren't really a solid indicator of genetics, Pastor," Lester said. "With all due respect, I don't appreciate this accusation."

How can he be so calm when he's being accused of something so horrible? It must be true, Angel thought as she bent over and placed her head on the pillow she'd put in her lap.

Adrenaline rushed from her forehead to her heels with every exchange between Lester and Pastor Davis.

"Do you know Sheila? Yes or no?"

"I know several Sheilas, sir."

"Okay, I see we are going to play games. Do you know a Sheila Matthews? Brown skin, shoulder-length hair, about thirty-five years old?"

"I do."

"Could you have fathered her child?"

There was an intense moment of silence where the only distraction was Lester's deep breathing and Angel's tears falling down her beautiful brown cheeks. Lester huffed and shrugged for several moments before he cleared his throat.

"It's possible."

"What?" Angel screamed as she jumped up, ready to lunge at Lester, but Pastor Davis stood up and firmly forced her flailing arms by her side and held her back so she couldn't grab Lester by the throat.

“How could you do this to me? I’m your wife, the mother of your children,” Angel said over and over again until it became a whisper. Once she whispered it repeatedly, she screamed until the words bounced up to the ceiling and hit the floor with rage.

“Calm down, Angel. Have a seat and hear Lester out,” Pastor Davis said as he helped her to the closest chair. “We don’t want to alarm your mother and the kids.”

“Explain!” Angel demanded as she leaned back in the antique chair with her eyes closed.

“I’m sorry.” Lester reached for Angel’s hand, but she snatched it away.

“I should have known all those late nights at church were nothing but a cover for your mess. You disgust me. We haven’t been married for ten years and you’re running around on me. No wonder you can’t keep a job—you’re too busy making babies.”

“Angel, I’m sorry you found out this way,” Pastor Davis said. “I’m going to leave, so you two can have your privacy. Lester, as the senior pastor, I am going to sit you down for one year. That means you will not preach at our church or any other church. You will not officiate weddings. You will not teach Bible study at our church or anywhere else, and you are required to come before the church and confess your sins. If you want to stay at the church, all of this is mandatory.”

Lester stood up and responded to Pastor Davis’s demands. “Wait a minute. Who are you to sit me down? Why do I have to confess to the church? The only person I have to confess to is God. What about the scripture in Matthew seven where it says, how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?”

“I can’t believe he has the gall to quote scripture. Help me, Lord. Please help me get out of this without losing my mind,” Angel mumbled as she wiped the drops falling from her chin and nose.

Pastor Davis rose to stand eye to eye with Lester. He opened his pocket-sized Bible and flipped to a passage. “Brother Lester, I want you to remember what it says in Matthew eighteen, verses fifteen through seventeen. ‘If your brother or sister sins, go and

point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.’ As the leader of Bibleway, it is my responsibility to keep order and peace in the church. I am not trying to embarrass you or point out your faults, because yes we all have faults. But I can’t have a woman come to me with a child that looks exactly like you and tell me you fathered him, but that you will not acknowledge her or this child and act as if it didn’t happen. As ministers we are supposed to set an example and that is what I am doing by sitting you down for one year.”

Angel hunched over and cried. She couldn’t believe how quickly her world had turned upside down. She wished this day had never happened.

“Pastor Davis, I’ve looked up to you as a father in ministry. I thank you for all you have been to me and my family, but I will not sit down or confess before the church. My family and I are leaving Bibleway and we will join another church.” Lester extended his hand to Pastor Davis to shake it.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Lester. We consider you family. Your children were baptized at Bibleway. I married you and Angel. You don’t deal with problems by running away, but as the man of your household I respect your decision and wish you and your family the best. I’m sorry about all of this, Angel.” Pastor Davis exited the front door that Lester opened for him.

“Do you believe him? What nerve to tell me I have to sit down for a year.” Lester shook his head in disgust.

Angel tried to keep herself from screaming at the top of her lungs to wake from what seemed to be a nightmare, but she knew Gran and the kids were still in the kitchen and she didn’t want to alarm them.

“What should he have said?”

“Excuse me?” Lester’s eyes widened.

“What should Pastor Davis have done and said, in your opinion?”

“Nothing. It is none of his business.”

“I see. Well, it is my business as your wife.” Angel wiped her face, then gripped the arms of the chair so she wouldn’t stand and be tempted to squeeze the life out of Lester’s thick neck. “I will not tolerate you cheating on me. So you decide what life you want to live. Do you want to be a husband, father, and minister? Or do you want to be a rolling stone? Let me know.”

“Is that how you talk to your husband? With all we’ve been through, you just disrespect me because of a mistake I made?”

“So you accidentally met up with a woman and slept with her and fathered her child? A mistake is hardly the word for the mess you’ve created. What about this poor child? Are you going to see him? Start paying child support? Maybe we should pray about taking him in and raising him with Joy and Moses.”

“Woman, are you crazy? The child is not mine.”

“According to Pastor Davis, the child looks just like you!”

“What does that mean? That does not prove a thing. I am sorry for putting you through this.” Lester kneeled by Angel’s chair and grabbed her hand, but she snatched it away and turned her face to the window. “I love you and the children.”

Angel shook her head from side to side. She turned from the window and looked at Lester. She grabbed her chest to calm the beating of her heart, and declared, “I don’t think you know what love is, and that explains how you could betray me and break the covenant you made with God to love me like Christ loved the church.”

“You’ve shown me how to love. The children opened my eyes to love. You know family means everything to me. There is no place else I want to be. Please forgive me,” Lester begged as he stayed on his knees beside Angel and looked at her with those piercing eyes that always convinced her to believe whatever he said.

“Not this time, Les. You have crossed the line and ruined our relationship.”

“What did Paul say? When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.”

“You have the nerve to quote the Bible. Who did I marry? So much power and you can’t keep your pants on?”

“I’ve had enough. I apologized and I don’t want to discuss this any more. As a Christian the only thing you are supposed to do is forgive me. I’m going out for some air. Tomorrow we will start looking for a new church.” Lester jumped up and slammed the door behind him.

Angel fell to her knees, buried her face in the worn seat cushion, and wept. She cried until the tears dried and there was nothing left inside her tired body to release. Her eyes were red and puffy from the rough wad of Kleenex she used to wipe her face. She didn’t want to be in a marriage where there was no trust, but she didn’t want her family split in two. Angel never thought Lester would cheat on her. She put so much effort into making him happy. How could Lester be so selfish? She cringed when she thought about the life he created with some other woman and felt faint at the notion of explaining this child to Joy and Moses.

“Lord, please give me the strength to forgive Lester for what he’s done. Help me move on in peace, so our family won’t be broken. I pray if this child is Lester’s, you will make it known and give this little boy a place in our hearts and home.”

“In Jesus’ name. Amen,” Gran said softly as she hugged her tightly from behind.