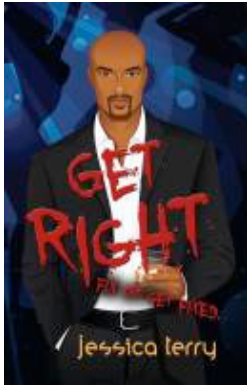


A stylized illustration of a man with a goatee, wearing a black suit jacket over a white shirt, holding a glass of whiskey. The background is dark blue with abstract, glowing blue shapes. Overlaid on the man's chest is the title 'GET RIGHT' in large, red, distressed, hand-painted letters. Below the title, the phrase 'FIX OR GET FIXED.' is written in a smaller, similar red font.

GET  
RIGHT  
FIX OR GET FIXED.

jessica terry



*Angelo Winans did anything but practice what he preached as he masqueraded as the pastor of a large church. But when his loved ones start to separate themselves from him, he has to come to terms with just what it is he's doing, as well as face some lingering demons. An older preacher enters his life and shows him the way with some tough love, but can this player change his game?*

## **Get Right**

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# **Get Right**

Jessica L. Terry

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## Chapter 1

Angelo had his arm over his eyes after a second round of lovemaking. It had been just what he had needed after the day he had.

He heard the click of a lighter, and he moved his arm from in front of his eyes. Candra was bringing the flame to the cigarette hanging from her still kiss-swollen lips, using her smooth hand to shield the exchange. Angelo instantly became annoyed. She knew how he hated cigarette smoke.

He slid his arm back over his eyes. "Put that out."

Candra exhaled, blowing smoke through tight lips. She folded an arm under her bare breasts and took another drag, holding the cigarette stick between her first two fingers. "Your *wife* might not like to smoke, but I do." She licked her lips. "Especially after good sex."

Angelo paused, mostly to avoid saying something inappropriate. In a low voice, he said again, "Put...that...out."

Knowing he meant business, Candra resisted the urge to suck her teeth as she leaned over and snuffed the barely-used cigarette out in the half-empty can of soda on the nightstand.

"Good girl."

Candra rolled her eyes before throwing the bed sheets from her legs and swinging them over the side of the bed. She wanted to go ahead and leave before Angelo put her out, and so she could smoke in private. Dealing with Angelo, she went through a lot of cigarettes.

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She grabbed the large t-shirt she had come upstairs in and slipped it over her head, raking her hands through her slightly disheveled hair.

"I'm going," she announced.

"Make sure you're ready on time in the morning," Angelo said, turning to his side so his back was to her. She was as good as dismissed.

Shaking her head, Candra left the room without another word.

Angelo waited a few minutes after she had left before he kicked the covers off him and sat up. Running a hand over his chocolate brown face, he stood and walked, naked, to his office. A frown marred his face when he checked his fax machine and saw nothing had come in. He immediately picked up the office phone.

A moment later his assistant, Roman, was on the line. "Good evening, Pastor."

"Where is my sermon for tomorrow?" Angelo demanded.

"I was just putting the finishing touches on it. I'm running a little behind tonight, I apologize..."

"No excuses. You know I like my sermon by nine o'clock every Saturday night so I'll have time to go over it. This is nothing new; I shouldn't have to tell you this, Roman."

"It won't happen again."

"It better not." Angelo hung up the phone. In the next two minutes, his fax machine started buzzing and several pages containing the next day's sermon slid onto the waiting plastic tray. Angelo grabbed the sheets, pulled his huge Bible from his desk drawer, sat down at his desk, and got to work.

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The next morning, as he did every day, Angelo got up at five a.m. to work out. He always closed his eyes through most of it; pushing out any frustration and even anxiety he had through the weights. His Sunday morning workouts were always especially more intense; even though he had been pastor of North Star Baptist Church for more than five years now, he still got nervous before he had to get up in the pulpit.

After his workout, he took a shower, slathered his body in shea butter, and entered his large walk-in closet to find something to wear. In twenty minutes, he was dressed sharply in a Sean John three-button black pinstripe suit, with shiny Stacy Adams on his feet. He checked himself in the mirror, running two fingers along his expertly-trimmed goatee, before he grabbed his Bible and headed downstairs.

He was glad to see Candra waiting for him at the kitchen table at 8:45 a.m., just like she had been instructed to do.

“Good morning,” Candra greeted him politely.

He responded with a curt nod. “Thanks for being on time.”

“Well, you know,” she shrugged, standing to her feet. “You don’t pay me to be late.”

“True.” Angelo grabbed his keys from the counter. “Let’s go.”

As they climbed into his Jaguar XJ, Angelo took quick note of Candra’s attire. She wore a conservatively stylish dark pink suit, the skirt stopping just above her knees, with low-heeled pumps and a wide-brimmed hat in the same shade of pink as her suit. Her jewelry was modest. She looked every bit the part of the First Lady.

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell you this, again, but make sure you don’t flirt with anybody today,” Angelo reminded her as he kept his eyes on the road. “It makes me look bad when you

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have the wandering eye. Don't think I haven't caught you checking some men out before."

"You know you are really cramping my style," Candra commented, looking out the passenger side window.

"That's all right," Angelo replied smoothly. "As long as I'm the one paying all of your bills, I can do that."

Candra didn't respond.

They continued to ride along in understood silence. Candra knew her role as pastor's wife; Angelo never let her forget it. He paid her very well to play the role because North Star Baptist didn't allow single pastors. Candra had been down on her luck and hadn't been able to find a job, and Angelo met her just around the time that he was being considered for the position of Pastor. Once he learned that he would need to be married, he offered to pay Candra to pretend to be his wife. Any time they were around or even might be around anyone from the church, she was to be by his side, acting like the faithful and dutiful spouse.

But since they didn't have any actual feelings for each other, neither had any interest in trying to see where a real relationship between them could go. She lived in his basement apartment, rent free, and was at his beck and call whenever he wanted physical attention or needed to go with him on some church-related excursion. She was not allowed to bring any other men to the apartment at any time. Angelo, on the other hand, could do as he pleased.

When they pulled up at the church, Angelo pulled his Jag into his reserved space and glanced over at Candra, who was spreading another coat of lipstick across her lips.

"Ready?" He asked her.



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Candra just nodded and started to open her car door, but Angelo stopped her with a hand on her arm. They were on church grounds now; she was to wait for him to come around and open the door for her, as a good husband would do.

He took her hand and they headed inside with smiles on their faces, effortlessly slipping into their roles as Pastor and Mrs. Angelo Winans.

“Good morning, Pastor. Good morning, Mrs. Winans,” they continuously heard as they made their way towards Angelo’s office. They each responded to the respective greetings in kind, seemingly as genuine and polite as ever. When they got to Angelo’s office door, they shared an obligatory peck on the lips before Candra went off to greet the incoming members and meet with the Ladies Auxiliary. Angelo shot her a look, silently reminding her of the warning he gave her in the car.

When he entered his office, his assistant Roman Gold was waiting on him, standing next to a small table that held juice and Angelo’s favorite pastries. Angelo typically only ate sugary treats on Sunday morning.

“Good morning, Pastor,” Roman greeted.

“Roman, good morning,” Angelo responded. He headed over to his desk. “What you got for me?”

“Cherry Danish, fresh from your favorite bakery,” Roman answered. “There’s also juice and coffee.”

“I’m not trying to mess with any coffee this morning. I’ll just take the Danish and the juice, thanks.”

“No problem.” Roman picked up the silver tray that held Angelo’s breakfast and brought it over to his desk, placing it in front of Angelo. He fluffed out a cloth napkin and held it out, waiting for Angelo to accept it and place it across his lap.

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“How many of these did you think I was going to eat?” Angelo asked, taking note of the six pastries. Angelo usually never ate more than two or three.

“I got enough for the First Lady, just in case she was hungry, also,” Roman noted.

Angelo grunted, picking up a Danish and biting into it. He didn't even think about having enough for Candra. If she wanted to eat, she needed to do so before they left, and she knew that. He certainly paid her enough for her to buy her own groceries.

After Angelo finished his breakfast, Roman gave him his fresh dental kit containing floss sticks, a toothbrush, toothpaste, and mouthwash, as he usually did after Angelo finished a meal. Angelo was very mindful about hygiene and never wanted to go anywhere unless he was smelling good from everywhere. After he had flossed, brushed and rinsed in his small adjoining bathroom, he headed towards the sanctuary, shaking the hands of a couple of deacons along the way. He already knew the sanctuary was full; it always was. Even after all this time, he still got a few butterflies before getting up in front of all of them.

But you would never know it by looking at him. Angelo Winans was a chocolate hunk who had close-cut black, shiny hair, chiseled features, eyes like Tyson Beckford and lips that left many women in his congregation fanning themselves and fantasizing. Around six foot one, Angelo was pure muscle, and the fact that he was bow-legged only added to his appeal to his female members. He spoke in a voice that demanded authority, a trait which he inherited from his late father, Dean.

As Angelo stood before his congregation of a thousand or so members, his hands gripping either side of the podium,

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preaching the sermon that Roman had written on the evils of lust and greed, he didn't miss the blatant desire that was emanating from quite a few of his female members. He noticed it but ignored it. He had learned his lesson a long time ago about sleeping with church members; a woman that he had started creeping around with during his first year as pastor had gotten a little too attached to him and started pressuring him to leave Candra and marry her. After an incident where she had managed to sneak into his office and wait for him after service one Sunday lying across his desk with nothing on but panties and heels, he knew he had to cut her loose. Thankfully, she stopped attending North Star shortly after and Angelo didn't have to deal with her anymore, but he knew that that situation could have gotten way uglier. So he just stopped messing with his congregation members altogether. It was just too messy and he didn't want to risk any scandals.

After he had preached and given the benediction, Angelo retreated to his office while a woman gave announcements about upcoming programs and reminding them that there were chicken and rib dinners for sale in the dining hall. He liked to have a few minutes to himself after a sermon to compose himself and come down a little from the high he got from causing people to shout and dance in the aisles at his words. Roman might have produced the script but Angelo always delivered it with perfection, oftentimes not even needing to look down at the papers on the podium in front of him. This was part of the reason he liked to have his sermon by a certain time on Saturday evening, so he would have time to learn it well enough so he wouldn't have to constantly refer back to it in the pulpit.

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Exhaling loudly, Angelo plopped down into his desk chair, leaning his head back. *You did it again, boy*, he thought to himself proudly, not being able to resist a smile.

He sat up after a few moments and his eyes strayed to the picture of his father that sat on his desk. Dean had died of prostate cancer a few years prior, and Angelo still admired him just as he had done when he was a child. Dean had been a pastor, also, but of a much smaller church. Angelo's brother, Darryl, was the pastor of a church across town, but he and Angelo hadn't spoken in a couple of years. Darryl didn't want anything to do with Angelo because he thought he was making a mockery of the ministry. He knew that being a pastor was nothing more than a job to Angelo, while Darryl took it seriously as a calling from God. Angelo wanted to have a better relationship with his brother, but Darryl seemed fine pretending that he didn't exist.

Before long, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Angelo called out, retrieving a bottle of water from the small refrigerator behind his desk.

Candra entered, closing the door behind her. "Nice job today."

"Thanks."

"About how long do you think you're gonna be before we can get outta here?"

"As long as it takes. Why, you got somewhere to be?"

"I just don't feel like being *here* all day."

"Comes with the job, baby," Angelo replied smoothly, gulping down half the bottle of water. "You know that."

Candra sighed. "Yeah, but that doesn't mean I like sitting in on all these meetings and overseeing these committees and

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stuff. I can deal with it most of the time but I'm just not feeling it today."

"Well that's too bad, Candra Meeks. You're just gonna have to suck it up. It's gonna be a while before I get out of here. Throw this away for me," he ordered, holding out his now-empty bottle to her.

Candra snatched it and tossed it into the trashcan, which was just as within reach to him as it was to her. "Can't you just drop me off and come back? I'm tired."

"I don't have time for that."

"Why don't you? Whatever you have to do can certainly wait thirty minutes or so. They're not gonna do anything without you. Aren't you the *pastor*?" She asked, clearly in a mocking tone.

Angelo's face tightened. He stood up and walked around his desk towards her, his eyes looking right into hers. "Watch your tone."

"I'm just saying..."

"I don't pay you to 'just say'."

Candra sucked her teeth. "I'm getting a little tired of you always throwing the fact that you pay me up in my face."

"Maybe if you remembered that fact and kept yourself in line, I wouldn't have to keep reminding you of it, now would I?"

"I do everything you ask me to do. But you don't ever wanna do anything for me."

Angelo's face twisted. "What am I supposed to do for you that I'm not already doing? You were practically on the street when I met you and now you live rent-free and I'm paying you handsomely, to boot. You knew what the deal was when you

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agreed to all this; you could've very well said no and be living it up in some shelter right now."

Candra shook her head. Angelo could be so cruel when he wanted to be. "All I'm asking you to do is run me home. In the time we've stood here talking about it, we could be halfway there."

"Look, I said no. Drop it."

She sucked her teeth again, this time with a frown. "That's some bullsh--"

Angelo grabbed her arm roughly, yanking her to him. She winced in pain. "How many times I gotta tell you to watch what you say to me?" he growled through clenched teeth. "Respect where you are and respect *me*. You got that?"

Just then, there was a quick knock on the door before Roman poked his head in. Angelo hand that was grabbing Candra's arm quickly went around her waist, and Candra in turn smoothly reciprocated the embrace. They both knew what to do and when to do it to keep up their charade.

"Excuse me, Pastor," Roman greeted. "Am I interrupting?"

"Maybe you should wait until I actually say 'come in' before you enter, Roman," Angelo said jokingly, even though he, Candra, and Roman knew he meant it. "The wife and I might have been kissing in here."

"Y'all betta not be carryin' on in the Lord's house," said Mother Jenkins, who waddled into the office behind Roman. Mother Jenkins was a rather heavyset woman who had been at the church for decades, and everybody respected her. A lot of people considered her a little nosy, but she just loved her church family and considered them all her children.

"No carrying on here," Angelo responded, planting a kiss on Candra's cheek before doing the same to Mother Jenkins,

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taking her wrinkled hands in his. “How are you today, Mother?”

“I’m blessed and blessed some more, suga,” Mother Jenkins responded. “Thank you for that Word *today!* I felt that deep in my spirit...I just hope those young folks was listenin’. Lord knows they some greedy and lustful thangs.”

Angelo chuckled. “Hey, so was I, back in the day. One day the Spirit will prick their hearts just like it did mine.”

Candra tried to clear her throat discreetly but Angelo heard it. He shot her a look as he went behind his desk.

“Is there something I can do for you, Mother?” he asked Mother Jenkins.

“I got some brown sugar ham, collards, pinto beans, yams, cornbread and coconut cake at the house. Why don’t you and Sister Winans come by and eat with me today?”

“Wow, you’ve got quite a spread over there, huh? That sounds excellent, Mother Jenkins, but the wife and I actually have some prior engagements today. We certainly do appreciate the invite, though.”

Mother Jenkins moved her huge large-print Bible from one arm to the other. “Y’all sho’ is some busy lil’ somebodies. Every time I invite y’all over you already got somethin’ to do. I’m gon’ get y’all over to my house one day, though.”

Angelo just smiled. Mother Jenkins invited them to her house for dinner every Sunday and every Sunday Angelo made up an excuse why they couldn’t go. This was one thing he and Candra agreed on; neither one of them wanted to go to her house and be bombarded with questions about their marriage or anything else.

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"All right, well, lemme get on outta here, then," Mother Jenkins said, turning towards the door. "Y'all have a blessed day, hear?"

"You too, Mother Jenkins," Candra responded warmly.

"Do you need me to walk you to your car, Mother?" Roman asked her as he opened the door for her.

"No, baby, I'm all right. I can get one of these other young men to do that. Stay in here and handle yo' business. Thank you, though."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mother Jenkins left and Roman closed the door after her.

"All right, what you got for me?" Angelo asked Roman immediately.

Roman handed him a note that contained the amount of the day's offerings. Angelo looked at the amount and smiled, calculating the amount that would actually go to his bank account.

"Must be good," Candra said, noting Angelo's smile. "Where's my cut?"

Angelo's smile disappeared. "You get paid at the end of the day, as always. And if you act up or piss me off, your pay is cut. You're already on thin ice with me today."

Candra closed her mouth. She knew Angelo wasn't kidding about cutting her pay, because he had done it before. And if she had to put up with him, she wanted to get every dime owed to her.

Roman ran down a few more things on Angelo's agenda before Angelo was ready to wrap things up.

"Everything sounds good," he said, locking his computer and closing the leather binder that held the other financial documents that Roman had provided for him. "Roman, I need



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you to give Candra a ride home. I have somewhere I need to be.”

“No problem.”

Candra didn't bother mentioning that he could've come up with this solution when she initially asked to be taken home.

Angelo and Candra held hands again as they exited the church, stopping to speak to lingering members along the way. When they got outside, Angelo gave Candra a brief hug and kiss on the lips before getting into his car. He didn't even wait to see her and Roman off before he pulled out of the parking lot, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket.

“Hey, Shanice,” he said after a moment. “I'm on my way.”

## Chapter 2

Angelo was more anxious to get to Shanice's house than he had been to get to church that morning. He sped along the Atlanta streets, anticipating holding her in his arms for as long as she would let him.

When he got there, she had dinner ready for him, which she usually did. Angelo grinned as he took in the spread containing things Shanice knew he liked; meat loaf, macaroni and cheese, green beans with bacon and homemade biscuits. His stomach was already growling.

He couldn't resist grabbing her and laying a deep, intense kiss on her. "It is so good to see you," he said, his forehead resting against hers.

"I know," she responded. She patted his back with one hand and grabbed his hand in her other. "Come on, let's eat. I know you probably haven't had anything but some doughnuts or something this morning."

Angelo chuckled. Shanice knew him too well. "It was cherry Danish, actually."

"Close enough."

They sat down to dinner. Angelo enjoyed the food but he enjoyed Shanice's company more. She was an ex of his who he had broken up with a few years prior because she wanted a commitment he wasn't ready to give. He had loved her, and still did, but he wasn't ready to totally commit to just one woman. But even after all this time, he still hadn't been able to get her out of his system. He knew she was a good woman, and was glad when she got over the initial hurt and anger

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from him dumping her and allowed them to be friends again. He could tell that she still had feelings for him, and at times he hated that he couldn't give her what she wanted.

"Where's Morgan?" Angelo asked, referring to Shanice's two year old daughter.

"She's asleep. She'll probably be waking up any minute now, actually," Shanice answered, glancing at her watch.

"I'm about to go wake her up now," Angelo teased, making a move to stand.

"No you will not!" Shanice stopped him with a hand on his arm. "You're gonna leave her alone. You're not the one who has to get her back to sleep later."

Angelo's smile faded a little bit. There was a big part of him that wanted to stay at Shanice's and never leave. He was just getting used to the fact that she had had a baby by another man; he had always imagined children with her. But she was always quick to remind him that he could've had the wife and family that he claimed to always want and he threw it away because he wanted to be a playboy.

"So I don't get to play with her? You know that's my baby," Angelo said, feigning hurt.

"If she was up, you know I wouldn't have a problem with you playing with her. But you're not about to wake her up just to play with her for ten minutes and then leave."

"Who said I was going to do that? I don't have anywhere to be tonight."

"But I do."

Angelo's eyebrows shot up. He wasn't expecting that. "Oh...you do?"

"Yeah," Shanice responded, with a tint of amusement. "What, am I not *supposed* to have plans or something?"

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“No. I mean, yeah, of course you can have plans. You’re a grown...single woman and everything...”

“True.”

“I guess I just figured...since you knew I was coming over here and all...”

“I knew you were coming over but it’s not like you were going to be staying all night. You never do that.”

Angelo looked at her intently. “Would that be such a bad thing?”

Shanice cut her eyes at him before standing up and starting to clear the dinner dishes. “You don’t do that for a reason.” She headed towards the kitchen. “And you know what that reason is.”

Angelo did know. Shanice had told him a while back that while she was willing to leave the past in the past and spend time with him as friends, she wouldn’t allow him to treat her like any other woman and just come over when he had a taste for her particular flavor, only to leave when he got his fill. He tried to let her know that he would never treat her like other women, because she wasn’t *like* other women, but she didn’t believe him. And he figured he couldn’t really blame her for that, seeing as how she apparently wasn’t enough for him and he didn’t want to commit to her or anybody else.

Angelo grabbed his plate and followed Shanice into the kitchen. He set the plate on the counter next to the sink, where Shanice was running some dishwater. He leaned against the counter, his behind resting on his hands. “So...” he hedged, looking down at her, “What are you getting into tonight?”

Shanice glanced up at him. “Why?”

Angelo shrugged. “Just wondering, that’s all.”

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Shanice began putting the few leftovers into plastic containers and bringing the dirty pots and pans to the counter. "Excuse me."

Angelo moved to the side so she could put the dishes on the counter. He was still waiting on an answer. She proceeded to start washing the dishes and Angelo thought she was just going to ignore his question, but she finally said, "Just out with a friend."

"A friend, huh?" Angelo paused, waiting on her to give a little more detail. When she didn't, he poked, "A *male* friend?"

"Mmm-hmm."

Angelo was instantly curious, his mind filling with more questions. "So...what are y'all gonna do?"

Shanice took a plate out of the clear rinse water and shook the excess water off before putting it on the dishrack. "Why, Angelo?"

"I'm just asking."

"Don't worry about what we're gonna do."

"Who's going to watch Morgan?"

"A friend of mine is coming to watch her."

"Why didn't you ask me?"

Shanice actually chuckled. "Right."

"What?"

"You know you're not trying to be over here babysitting. You just want to try to see who I'm going out with."

That was true, but Angelo didn't want to admit it. "What, I can't see this guy you're going out with? What's the matter with him?"

Shanice laughed. "You are too funny."

Angelo tried to get some more information out of her about her impending date, but she wouldn't really tell him

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anything. Finally, she said, “Angelo, really, you lost all rights to question me when you decided I’m not enough woman for you.”

There wasn’t anything that Angelo could say to that, and he knew it. He shut his mouth.

Shanice put away the last dish and dried her hands on a dish towel. “All right, time for you to go. I gotta get ready.” She headed out of the kitchen. “And thanks for helping me with the dishes, by the way.”

Angelo squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his head.

There was a slight frown on Angelo’s face the entire way back to his house. He figured Shanice was probably getting ready for her date right at that moment, styling her short, brown hair and putting on something decidedly sexier than the lounging dress that she had worn when he was over there. He wanted to know what she was wearing, where she was going, who she was going out with, but he knew she was right; he didn’t have a right to know all of that.

He was about ten or fifteen minutes from his house when he got a call from Roman.

“Yeah,” Angelo answered.

“Good evening, Pastor,” Roman greeted. “I have a prayer request for you.”

Angelo resisted the urge to groan. This was the last thing he felt like dealing with tonight, but it’s not like he could particularly say no. “From whom?”

Roman filled him in on the details. Mr. Bowman, who had been a member of North Star for probably longer than Angelo had been alive, had stage four prostate cancer and things

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were progressively going downhill. His family was requesting for Angelo to come and pray over him.

“Can’t one of the other ministers go in my place? I’m at least forty minutes away and I know Minister Jenkins lives closer to the hospice,” Angelo tried to delegate.

“Well...the family insisted that they wanted you specifically to come. They apologize for the late hour but frankly, they just have no idea how much time he has left.”

Angelo sighed and looked for somewhere to turn his car around. He didn’t feel like going, but it was part of the job of being pastor. And he could certainly sympathize with the family in their situation; he had lost his own father to prostate cancer, after all. His mind was just somewhere else, but he had forty minutes to get it where it needed to be.

When Angelo arrived at the hospice, there were several members of Mr. Bowman’s family in his room, some surrounding his bed, some sitting in the chairs or the couch in the room. Mr. Bowman’s eyes were open, but barely. Angelo felt a pang shoot through him when he got a sudden flashback of his father laying in the hospice years before, as the staff just tried to keep him as comfortable as they could since medically, there wasn’t anything else that could be done for him.

Angelo blinked, bringing himself back to the present. “Good evening, everyone.”

A few of them greeted him in kind, some giving him light hugs or shaking his hand. One woman, who was standing at Mr. Bowman’s side holding his hand, eyed him but didn’t say anything. She just nodded, with a tight and polite smile.

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“Pastor, thank you so much for coming,” Mrs. Bowman said, taking his hand and squeezing it hard. She led him closer to the bed. “We know the good Lord is about to take my husband home and we just wanted to have a Word prayed over him. We never know when...” Her voice caught.

Angelo squeezed her hand gently in return. “I understand. Thank you for allowing me to be among your family at a time like this.”

Mrs. Bowman smiled at him, her eyes wet with tears. Even though her husband had been diagnosed with cancer over a year ago and they all knew the end was near, there was nothing you could really do to prepare for a loved one passing, no matter how much warning you had. He could just imagine how hard this was for her; she and Mr. Bowman had been married for over sixty years.

Angelo stood on the other side of the bed from Mr. Bowman’s daughter, who was still eyeing him under her lashes. Noticing this without actually looking at her, Angelo kept his attention on his dying church member laying on the bed in front of him.

Placing a hand on his dry, wrinkled arm, Angelo asked everyone to bow their heads before closing his eyes and launching into his prayer:

“Father God...we humbly come to you tonight asking for your continued protection. Protection for what’s to come, Lord, as we know that the cancer wracking brother Bowman’s body is just your will, and as much as it hurts and as much as we might not like or understand it, we know that your will is going to be done regardless. We just ask tonight that you keep your hand on him, Lord, as he prepares to come home to you.



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“While our hearts may be hurting for losing a loved one, help us to try to remember all of the years of happiness we have had with brother Bowman, Lord...the blessing he has been to each person in this room. Keep our minds stayed on you and our faith steadfast during this difficult time, as we know that all of our days are numbered on this earth, and we’re just thankful that brother Bowman has spent his days being an advocate for you, a loving husband and father to his children, a tireless minister of your Word...”

Angelo’s prayer continued on for several minutes, his voice growing more and more fervent, drawing several ‘amens’ and ‘hallelujahs’ from around the room. When the prayer ended, everyone thanked him for coming and he stood and talked to a couple of people for a while before preparing to leave. He gave Mrs. Bowman a firm hug, encouraging her to stay strong, and then pulled open the door and stepping out into the hallway, glancing down at his watch.

He started heading towards the exit when he heard someone calling his name. “Excuse me, Pastor.”

Turning around, Angelo saw the Bowmans’ daughter coming towards him.

“Yes?” Angelo watched the attractive woman walk closer to him, his face even. In a quick, subtle sweep of the eyes, he took in her thin yet curvy frame, noticing the sway of her hips, the swell of her breasts, and the way her long sandy brown hair bounced around her face with every step.

When she got closer to him, she boldly took his hands in hers, gripping tightly. “I just wanted to thank you for coming out here on such short notice. I know my father appreciates it.”

“My pleasure, sister.” Angelo smiled down at her.

*Jessica L. Terry*

“Please, call me Laila.”

“Laila.”

“I know it’s late and I don’t want to hold you up but...it just really, really means a lot to me, to us, that you came to pray over my father tonight. I know you must have a lot of things to do and a lot of people to see.”

“I’m just doing the Lord’s work. I always try to be there for my members, or anyone else, really, when I can.” Angelo said this because he figured it was what he was supposed to say as the pastor; he knew it sounded better than admitting he really didn’t feel like coming out there but had something of a soft spot for cancer patients. Laila didn’t need to know that he had attempted to pass the task off to one of the associate ministers.

Laila gazed up at him and Angelo recognized the look; she wanted to do more than just verbally thank him for coming to pray over her father. But thankfully, she knew this wasn’t the time or the place to make a move, which Angelo was thankful for because while he found Laila attractive, he really just didn’t want to go there with her. But he figured he would let her know that when and if it became necessary to do so.

“Well, I better get back in there,” Laila said after a few moments. Her hands squeezed his. “Thank you again.”

“My pleasure.”

Laila quickly leaned up onto her toes to give Angelo a quick peck on the cheek before turning to head back to her father’s room. It wasn’t until she was back inside, with a lingering glance at Angelo over her shoulder as she pushed open the door, that he looked down and opened his hands, revealing a small scrap of paper containing her phone number.

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The next day was Angelo's brother Darryl's birthday. Angelo sat in his office chair, wearing nothing but a pair of basketball shorts, lightly tapping the cordless phone against the cherry wood desk while his eyes stared off somewhere in the distance.

He had been sitting in that spot debating on whether or not he should call his brother for the past hour. Everything in him wanted to go ahead and dial the number, but he knew that his call wouldn't be welcomed. Darryl hadn't really spoken to him in years, other than to brush him off or let him know how he didn't approve of the way he lived his life. He made it abundantly clear that he didn't want anything to do with Angelo until he changed his ways, but Angelo wanted to still believe that there was *some* part of him that missed his little brother the way Angelo missed him. They had never been best friends or anything but they had been pretty close before Angelo became pastor of North Star. Ever since then, Darryl wanted no parts of his brother.

After countless hesitations and partial dialings, Angelo bit the bullet and called his brother's number, biting his lip nervously as he placed the phone to his ear. He half expected no one to answer and was mildly surprised when his sister-in-law, Shondra, picked up the line.

"Hello?"

Angelo hesitated only slightly. "Hey, Shondra. It's Angelo."

"Of course I know who it is, brother-in-law! How are you?"

Angelo smiled at Shondra's warm greeting, feeling a little hope trickle through him. "I'm good, sis. Everything been going all right? Feels like I haven't spoken to you in forever."

"Yes, it has been a while, hasn't it? Too long. I'm blessed and happy, running after these kids every day."

*Jessica L. Terry*

“How are my nephews doing?”

“Rowdy as ever. You know you have a niece now, too.”

Angelo’s mouth fell open. This was the first he was hearing of this. Darryl had had another baby and hadn’t told him? Part of him figured he shouldn’t have been surprised, but the majority of him couldn’t help being anything but hurt.

“No, um...” He cleared his throat. “No, I didn’t know.”

“Oh...” Shondra paused, obviously suddenly uncomfortable. “I’m so sorry, Angelo...I thought someone had told you...”

“No,” Angelo replied gruffly. His emotions were toggling between anger and hurt.

“She’s almost two months old now and just the cutest thing. I’ll have to email you some pictures.”

“Yeah, please do,” Angelo cleared his throat again. “Um, is Darryl there?”

“He is, but he’s busy right now. I’ll be happy to take a message, though.”

Angelo’s mood plummeted. He was willing to bet his house that Darryl wasn’t so busy that he couldn’t come to the phone and speak to his brother for two minutes if he wanted to. The fact was, he just didn’t want to.

“Yeah, there’s a message. Just tell him I said happy birthday,” Angelo said rather glumly.

“Oh, how sweet of you to remember. I’ll most definitely tell him.”

“Thanks.” Angelo ended the call and tossed the cordless phone atop his desk, frowning at it. He knew he and Darryl were at odds but he never thought his brother would go and have another baby and not say or relay so much as a word to him about it. With something as big and special as that,

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Angelo can't believe Darryl couldn't put his over-emphasized anger aside and let him in on it. But it had been two months since the baby was born and Angelo wouldn't have known anything about it if he hadn't called that night.

Angelo thought back to the last real conversation he had with his brother. It was shortly after Angelo had told him about his new position as pastor of North Star. At the time, Darryl hadn't said much at all, opting to get off the phone suddenly. Apparently that was just to get his jabs together, because about a day later he called Angelo back and let him have it.

"So you gon' try to play like you a preacher now, a pastor at that, when not even a week ago you were out at the strip club?"

Slightly taken aback, Angelo retorted, "That was then and this is now. You act like people can't change or something."

"Sure they can. I just know you haven't."

"You always think you know. You don't know."

"No, *you* don't know the wrath that's gonna come down on you for playing with God like this. I know full well that God no more called you to preach than he called me to lay eggs."

"Darryl, I told you about this because I wanted to share my good news with you. Not be ridiculed and scolded like I'm some four-year-old."

"I'm just telling you what's right. You don't even realize you're still in bondage; Satan has his hold on you so tight I'm surprised you can breathe. Only the truth will set you free, brother. And God's Word is the truth."

"You don't think I know that? I grew up in the church just like you did."

Jessica L. Terry

"You grew up going to the church *house*. But I have the church *in me*. *That's* how we're different, Angelo."

Angelo sucked his teeth. "You think a church as big as North Star would have hired me to be pastor if they didn't think I was the right man for the job?"

"Look at what you said right there," Darryl said quickly. "*Hired* you. Right man for the *job*. Pastoring a congregation is not like managing a crew at Wal-Mart. Only a chosen few can do this work. And can't nobody *hire* you to be a pastor; you go where God leads you. You can't even commit to a woman; how do you expect me to believe that you can commit to God?"

That kind of stung a little bit, because Angelo knew he was referring to Shanice. Angelo considered this a low blow, because Darryl knew (or should have known) how much Angelo loved Shanice, regardless of the fact that he wasn't ready or willing to settle down with her. The fact that Darryl would throw that in his face was just cruel.

"So you wanna go there, huh?" Angelo asked in a low voice.

"As I said, the truth will set you free."

"Well the *truth* of the matter is, I don't have to answer to you. The *truth* of the matter is, nobody knows my relationship with God but *God and me*. And the *truth* of the matter is, Darryl, that you're being awfully judgmental for somebody who is supposed to be a man of God. *He* is my judge, not you."

"You're absolutely right. I don't have a heaven or hell to put you in. But I do know this; if you go on with this charade of being a pastor just for what you think are easy hours and a fat bank account, you are going to be in for a very rude awakening. It could be years down the line or it could be

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tomorrow, but you can mark my words on that. Remember, God no longer winks at the ignorance of man.”

Angelo was past tired of being preached to. “Whatever you say, Darryl. Look, I have some things I have to go do.”

Darryl knew his little brother was brushing him off. “I love you, brother. But I don’t want any parts of this. As long as you’re playing with God, don’t call my phone or darken my doorstep again.”

Angelo had thought he was bluffing and didn’t take him seriously for a minute. When they were growing up they had said all kinds of things to each other in anger that they really didn’t mean, and a couple of hours later they were cool again. But the next day Darryl wouldn’t answer Angelo’s call, and it continued on for a couple of weeks before Angelo decided to just cut out all the nonsense and go by there so they could talk, man to man. But Darryl wouldn’t come to the door or let his wife or children answer it, either, and Angelo knew for a fact they were in there. Both Darryl and Shondra’s cars were in the driveway, and Angelo could hear voices inside. He stood at the door for a good fifteen minutes, knocking and calling the house simultaneously, but Darryl ignored him. And he had been ignoring him ever since.

Growing up, Darryl had always taken after their father, Dean, more than Angelo. Darryl was clearly the more serious and focused brother while Angelo was all about having as good a time as he could have. He went to church Sunday after Sunday, because it was the rule to go. He listened and retained his father’s sermons, because he knew Dean would ask him about them later. He acted like the good respectable church boy, like Darryl, because he knew Dean wouldn’t tolerate him behaving any other way. Angelo might not have

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shared his father zeal and fervor for the Word, but he feared him probably more than he feared God. Dean did not play, and he demanded respect.

“God’s Word runs this house,” he would say in his booming voice. Standing at almost six-five, he towered over both his sons and outweighed them both by at least twenty or thirty pounds. Overpowering was expected and executed, many times. “And as long as you in this house, as long as you livin’ off my money that put those clothes on yo’ back and food in yo’ stomachs, you gon’ do what it says. *Period.*”

Angelo knew better than to challenge his father. He had had enough backhands and butt whoopings to know who not to piss off. Dean’s message was clear:

“You ain’t gotta *like* what I say, but until God takes me off this earth, you gon’ *do* what I say.”

And Angelo did, however grudgingly. But as soon as he was out of his father’s house and off to college, his church attendance went from two or three times a week to none. He was relishing being on his own and partying and exhausting himself with as many women as he could handle at once; he didn’t have time for church. His Sundays were spent recuperating from his Saturdays. He still prayed, mostly out of habit. He remembered many of his father’s words, but he chose to push them to the back of his mind with other things he didn’t really think he would need to get by, like Trigonometry and Molecular Biology.

Many, many times, Darryl tried to reach out to Angelo and get him back on track; let him know their father was worried about the path he was headed down and wanted to talk to him. But Angelo avoided his father. He didn’t want to be lectured and possibly even told he had to come home, but he



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mostly didn't want to see the disappointment in his father's eyes. Disappointment because he wasn't more like Darryl. Darryl had always been Dean's golden boy, and Angelo figured he could never measure up. So he didn't try.

Angelo had been up partying, drinking, and fornicating for almost two days straight, and when the frantic calls came from Darryl trying to get Angelo to hurry home because Dean had been diagnosed with cancer and it was already in stage four, the doctors giving him *maybe* two weeks to live, Angelo was passed out on some girl's twin bed in a drunken stupor. When he finally woke and sobered up some and noticed the many messages from his brother, he put off returning the calls or even listening to the voicemails for almost a day because he didn't want to hear his brother nagging and lecturing him again. When he finally did and heard the panicked and prayerful messages about his father's failing health, he immediately stumbled into some shoes and started looking for his wallet and his car keys. Angelo had never been so scared in his life; he might have not wanted to deal with his father at the time, but he still deeply loved his father. Something happening to him was just *not* supposed to happen.

When Angelo got back in touch with Darryl, his keys in hand as he headed out the front door to his car, he heard his brother's tearful voice say:

"You're too late."

Dean had passed away that morning. His body had just given out. He had died peacefully in his sleep, with Darryl by his side, praying tearful whispered prayers and holding his hand. Dean had gone on to be with the Lord, while his son Angelo, who was a mere four hours away, was being too stubborn to answer Darryl's call.

*Jessica L. Terry*

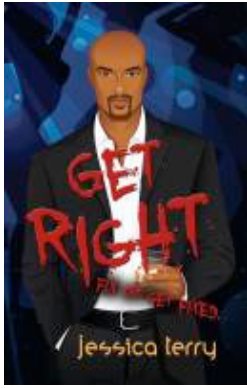
Angelo carried the guilt for that in his heart to this day. And he knew that Darryl probably still held something of a grudge for that, even though he insisted he didn't. He always said Angelo was the one who would have to live with and answer for what he did, not him. And he didn't want dissension with his brother; he just wanted them to band together and be there for each other as they mourned their father's death. And Angelo had always appreciated how Darryl had never thrown the fact that Angelo could have been there before Dean died but wasn't in his face. But it wasn't lost on either brother that Angelo never apologized; not to Dean, not to Darryl, not to God. It was an unspoken fact among them that was never directly addressed, but it was always in the back of both of their minds. And their relationship had never been the same since.

Upset, Angelo had the urge to vent. He wanted to get some things off his chest, especially since with every time that he was rebuffed when he tried to reach out to his brother, he felt more and more resentment build up. Without even thinking about it, he started to call Shanice, but decided against it halfway through dialing her number. Even though she knew Angelo's history with his brother and how much it upset him when Darryl refused to deal with him, and Angelo knew she would encourage him like he felt he so needed right then, he suddenly decided he wasn't in the mood to hear the soul-sucking conversation that would most likely come with it. He didn't want to rehash, he didn't want to analyze, he didn't want to go back down memory lane for the ten millionth

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time...he just wanted to feel better. And he didn't want to go around the world and back again to feel it.

He picked up his phone once more and dialed another number. "Candra," he said, his voice hard. "I'm in a bad mood. Come up here and take my mind off of it. Ten minutes."



*Angelo Winans did anything but practice what he preached as he masqueraded as the pastor of a large church. But when his loved ones start to separate themselves from him, he has to come to terms with just what it is he's doing, as well as face some lingering demons. An older preacher enters his life and shows him the way with some tough love, but can this player change his game?*

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