

# *Secrets and Lies*

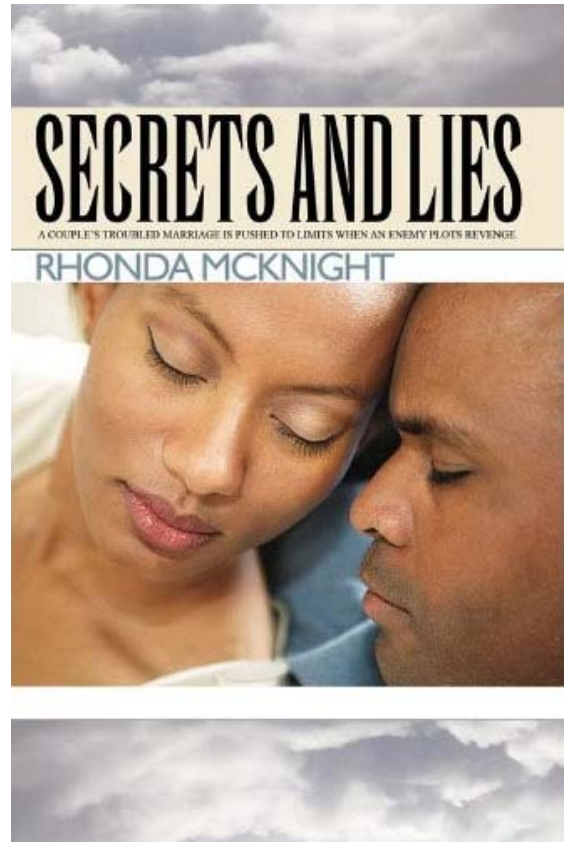
by

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## **Excerpt from Chapter 1**

*He's cheating.* Faith Morgan pushed the end button on the phone. Three hang ups in two hours. She tried to shake off the sense of foreboding she felt every time it happened, but she couldn't. Her heart pounded as she walked back to the island, where she'd been chopping the ingredients for her husband's favorite meal. She looked at the piles of sausage and shrimp; the onions, and other vegetables that were next in line to be sliced and diced. She wanted to swipe everything into the trash can. Jonah didn't deserve this hard work. Not if some woman was calling their home.

Faith's shoulders dropped, she leaned her weight back against the counter and let her sneakered feet slide forward along the slick tile until they met the grout and stopped. She had ten years invested in this marriage. It had to last. She couldn't march down the aisle a third time. It was so Zsa Zsa Gabor-ish. And the truth was, she loved him. She loved the way he looked, she loved the way his scent filled her nostrils when he kissed her goodbye in the morning, she loved that husky quality his voice had just before he fell asleep at night, and she loved the way he touched her – when things were good between them.



## *Secrets and Lies*

A burst of giggles erupted from the family room and she looked up to see Elise, her four year old who remained positioned in front of the television. Elise adored her father. And at the age of ten, Eric, was approaching that time in his life when he'd need a man to help him sort through the man stuff. This wasn't just about her, and whether or not she loved Jonah. She was fighting for the children, too.

The ringing of the phone nearly sent her heart into spasms. *Not again*, she thought. Faith pushed herself off the counter and took the few steps necessary to reach the receiver. She looked at the Caller ID, let out the breath she'd been holding and picked up the phone.

"Hey, girl," she said.

"I have a taste for Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey. I've been craving it for three days."

Faith's mouth fell into an easy smile. "So, have it. Get some New York Chocolate Chunk for me."

"No, no, no," Yvette Taylor shrieked. "You're supposed to talk me out of it. Some friend you are. I need to lose five pounds to the dress for the women's banquet."

"What you need to do is buy a new dress and stop trying to fit into things you wore in college," Faith teased.

"Very funny, Miss Forever a Perfect Six. This *is* a new dress. It's just the same size as the dresses I wore in college." Yvette was barely able to keep the laughter out of voice. "You're not the only one who can maintain her girlish figure. A sistah can fight to keep the pounds down."

A small smile parted Faith's lips as she moved back to the island and began scooping the food she'd chopped into a large bowl. "You've dialed the wrong number if you're looking for someone to tell you to watch your calories. I'm making gumbo."

"Gumbo in May? You only start chopping and cutting up stuff when you're stressed.

## *Secrets and Lies*

What's up?"

Faith emptied the bowl into a large pot of soup that was simmering on the stove. Then she looked to make sure Elise was still distracted by the television.

"More phone calls," she whispered.

Yvette was silent for a moment. "Are they still not saying anything?"

"Just silence and hang-ups."

"Did you call the phone company?"

"No." Faith bit her bottom lip.

"Why not?" Yvette asked. "You're torturing yourself."

Faith let her eyes fall on the four-carat diamond that weighed down her ring finger and swallowed. "I don't know. I just..." She took a deep breath. "Losing, I think," she whispered.

"Losing everything I have."

"Faith, you're trippin'. It's probably just kids or some telemarketing company. Women don't call wives anymore. Those heifers out there just wanna have fun, not wash some man's drawers. I'm telling you, it's not what you're thinking."

Faith wanted to believe that, but she had a bad feeling – a hair-rising-on-the-back-of-her-neck kinda of feeling – that it was no prank or computer glitch in a telemarketer's system. Jonah worked late all the time, or so he said. He could easily have another woman, what with the hours he kept. A wave of nausea swept over her. Just the thought of her husband with another woman made her sick.

"Faith..." Yvette's voice broke through. "Don't sit around there acting like a victim. That's not even your style. Call the phone company and have them put a trace on the calls."

Yvette was right. "I'll call. I promise. First thing in the morning."

## *Secrets and Lies*

“You have the interview in the morning. Call now.”

Faith’s eyes rolled upward. She’d forgotten about that. “I should cancel.”

Yvette didn’t say anything.

“I haven’t worked in five years. I’m just going to embarrass myself.”

“Girl, please. You have the bomb resume. You shouldn’t be afraid to step out with it.”

But Faith was afraid. She was afraid of everything. Afraid to go on the interview, afraid of how her husband would react if she found a job, and afraid someone else was stealing her man. *Jesus*. She had to get it together.

“Look, I’m about to get on the interstate and I don’t have my ear piece.”

Faith nodded at the phone as if Yvette could see her. “Thanks for listening.”

“What are friends for? You listen to me complain about my money problems.”

“And food cravings,” Faith added with a smile.

“That’s right.”

“Well, girlfriend, pass on the Chunky Monkey. Nothing tastes better than that dress will look on you.”

“I know that’s right.” Yvette let out a cackle. “Later.”

Faith put the phone on the counter, picked up a large spoon and stirred her masterpiece. That’s what Jonah had called it the last time she prepared her mother’s gumbo recipe. He loved her cooking. He loved her. At least she thought he did. But they had been fighting about everything lately – and now the phone calls. Faith felt tears welling. She clenched her teeth. Yvette was right. She had to be a woman about this. Let the phone company trace the calls. If he was cheating, she’d have to deal with it.

“Mommy, is the gumba soup almost done?” Elise had crept up and was now pulling the

## *Secrets and Lies*

tail of her blouse.

Faith kept her back to her until she got her face together. Forcing a smile, she turned. Elise reminded Faith of sunshine standing there with her long auburn curls falling in ringlets around her small heart-shaped face.

“Mommy, why are you sad?”

Faith tried to mask her feelings by forcing another smile. She lowered her body so she was almost eye level to her daughter. “Mommy's not sad, honey.”

“You are too. Your smile is not in your eyes,” Elise said. “Are you mad at Daddy?”

Faith crossed her fingers behind her back. “No, baby. I'm not mad at Daddy.”

“Good. Cause I don't like it when you and Daddy are mad.”

Elise's words stung. So much for hiding their problems from the children. Obviously she hadn't done that as well as she thought. The child knew a phony smile when she saw one and there had been plenty of those in the past few months.

“Why don't you let me finish cooking so we can eat and go to church.”

“But I wanna help you,” Elise whined.

Faith needed Elise out of the room. She felt guilty about it, but her emotions were too raw to deal with her children right now. Besides, it was still possible that she could call the phone company today, and she didn't want Elise to overhear.

“Why don't you go upstairs and find your smock? I bet they'll let you paint tonight.”

Elise was silent for a moment, obviously considering her mother's offer.

Faith leaned over and playfully swirled her index finger around in her daughter's bellybutton. Girlish giggles filled the kitchen as she scooped Elise up in one arm and continued to tickle her with her free hand.

## *Secrets and Lies*

"Okay, okay, Mommy." Elise was hysterical with laughter. "I'll go, I'll go..."

Once Elise's feet were planted on the floor. She scampered away, clearly satisfied to have gotten some of her mother's attention.

Faith watched her leave the kitchen. *My smile's not in my eyes.* Jonah's draining the life out of me. She clucked her teeth, let out a long breath and walked back to the sink. She began wiping counters when the shrill ring of the telephone froze her in her tracks.

The Caller ID read *unavailable*.

Faith pressed the talk button and brought it to her ear. "Hello."

Silence.

"Why don't you say something?"

Silence, again.

"You don't have anything better –," Faith began, but the words "*You're stupid,*" cut her off just before she heard the dull drone of the dial tone.

A stun gun wouldn't have shocked her more. Her harasser had spoken, but they'd done it so quickly that she couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. But she did hear one thing – they'd called her stupid. That didn't sound like a kid. That sounded like someone who thought she was being a fool.