

Chapter 1

It was the day of uncovering, the day that Truth would confront Lie.

Outside, the sun shone brightly exposing everything in sight, while inside it was dark and dreary, bearing no sign of the radiance that reigned beyond the door. A huge gray cloud engulfed the Morgan family home; it was the kind of cloud that fills the sky when a storm is near.

Vickie sat in the recliner in front of the television smoking Virginia Slims cigarettes back to back. The cloud hovered about her as she stared blankly watching the smoke rise from her cigarette and settle in its place. The cloud above her was so thick she expected rain to come pouring down from it at any moment. The television was on, but it was watching her more than she was watching it. Her mind was on something else—her last conversation with her sister Vanessa.

Thoughts of Vanessa weighed heavily on Vickie's mind, and she always knew when Vanessa was mad, because unlike herself, Vanessa always made it crystal clear. The night before, Vanessa had made it clearer than ever, so now Vickie sat wondering just how long it would be before Vanessa stormed through the door. Vanessa never said she was coming, but something inside of Vickie knew her sister would be there soon. The last thing Vickie wanted was a sermon, and she was sure her sister had already prepared her notes. Vickie didn't mind her sister being saved; they were both raised in the church. It was the "sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost" part that bothered her. She never knew what to expect from Vanessa.

Vickie felt ashamed. As a matter of fact, she was even embarrassed to look at herself. She knew she looked as horrible as she felt, if not worse. Talk about a bad hair day, Vickie had a bad hair month. Her light brown hair was strewn all over her head and it hadn't been combed in days. Her smooth olive skin had turned dark and ashy—like burned coals. The faded jeans and T-shirt she wore were dingy from days of uninterrupted wear, and her clothes gave off a foul smell that revealed how she spent her time.

If Vanessa were to see Vickie in this condition, she would hit the ceiling or maybe even Vickie. It was a terrible situation, and Vickie knew it. Not wanting to add any more fuel to the fire, Vickie got up from beneath the cloud of smoke and went to clean herself up. Of course, the cloud followed her.

As she ran hot water in the tub for a bath, Vickie poured in some of her Victoria's Secret bubble bath, something she hadn't used in a very long time. She lowered herself on one knee, placed her hand in the water, and flicked it back and forth to settle the bubbles. The warm water felt inviting as it swooshed against her hand. Not having had a bath in a while, Vickie had forgotten just how peaceful it could be. Her plans were to sit in the tub and soak until she got rid of the loud stench seeping from her pores.

Vickie also wanted to use the bath as time to relax and totally emerge from her body and mind. She knew some down home blues would take her mentally where she wanted to go. There was once a time in her life when gospel music would have been her choice, but lately, she wanted to take her problems to the world rather than to God.

Vickie walked over to her portable radio and turned it on. The song, "Bag Lady" blared out of the speakers. Nervously, Vickie switched to WCDG, the station that played the blues all day long. She, too, was carrying plenty of baggage, and was not interested in hearing anybody

telling her about her own issues. She already knew just how heavy those bags she was hauling through life were.

The slow mellow sound of the blues began to calm Vickie's nerves as she slowly lowered herself into the tub. The heat from the water quickly opened her pores. Instantly, her body felt relief. Vickie scooped up the soap and began to vigorously scrub herself as the dirt and dead skin detached itself from her body and floated freely in the now grimy water that formed a ring around the tub. Feeling somewhat refreshed, she slowly leaned back in the tub and exhaled a long sigh of relief!

The sad fact is that Vickie didn't realize that the inside of her body needed a cleaning ten times more thoroughly than the outside. She only had just barely touched the surface of her seemingly insurmountable problems. There was so very much more lying below the surface—deeply within her soul! It had been buried beneath her desperate desire to be perfect, but now the time had come for her imperfections to be resurrected. Instead of exploring the source of her own problems, Vickie focused her attention on the radio and the troubles the blues singers bellowed and crooned about in their sad songs.

The radio station was really “jamming.” The disc jockeys were playing all the songs that made her a blues fan: “Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone” by Bobby “Blue” Bland; “Someone Else Is Steppin' In” by Denise LaSalle; and “Don't Hurt No More” by Buddy Ace. Vickie wanted them to bring it on because she enjoyed the serenade of non-stop music. After twenty minutes of playing the greatest blues classics, the DJ played a song Vickie had never heard. This was unusual because she was an avid blues fan. The singer crooned, “You can run, but you can't hide.” Vickie had lived in Mississippi, the birthplace of the blues, all of her life. She was convinced that the blues didn't lie. She believed the blues was the kind of music that

tells the truth (good or bad, right or wrong). It makes you see what you don't want to see and hear what you really don't want to hear. Searching for the message in the music, she listened ever so attentively to the song, and by the time the record finished, Vickie had come to realize she had been trying to run away from her problems; however, it hadn't worked. She was finally ready to admit to herself that she was, indeed, an addict—a crack addict.

Truth smiled.

On the phone the night before, Vanessa had asked Vickie if she was using drugs. Vickie wondered how her sister could even ask her something like that, and more importantly, why on earth had she admitted such a thing. After all, she didn't really think she had a drug problem. And even though Vickie was somewhat ready to accept the reality of her addiction, she was definitely not ready for a face-to-face confrontation with her sister.

Just because I use drugs doesn't mean I am an addict, does it? Vickie asked herself. When her conscience answered "no," she continued talking to herself. As a matter of fact, I don't have to have drugs. That's it! That's what I'll tell Vanessa. I'll just have to think of a way to take back my confession and make my new story believable.

Within minutes of deciding to face her problem, Vickie decided to deny it.

Lie smirked.

To help prove her point of not needing drugs, Vickie tried to remember the last day that she hadn't put drugs into her system. According to her recollection, it had been so long ago that merely searching for the date gave her a headache. Nevertheless, she was determined to remember the date so she could throw it in Vanessa's face. The more she thought, the more pain she endured. It felt as if someone was pounding her head with a hammer each time a thought crossed her mind. She had only experienced this type of pain once in her life, when she was

seven years old and had fallen from a high sliding board onto the rocks below. At the moment, she wished her parents were present to comfort her like they had been then. Unfortunately, they were both dead. Finally, Vickie realized she had been getting high everyday since her daughter, Vonshay, graduated from Ferguson High and left for a summer program at Tougaloo College, the school she planned to attend in the fall.

Vickie was proud of her daughter. Vonshay had graduated from high school with a 3.8 grade point average, and an academic scholarship to college. She was well-mannered, obedient, and had never caused her parents any problems. So many parents had wished, hoped, and prayed for a child like Vonshay, and Vickie had one. Wanting to celebrate her daughter's success and her own good fortune, Vickie could think of no better way of celebrating than getting high. So, that's what she had done... non-stop, as if there would be no tomorrow.

Oh well, that was just a few weeks ago, she thought as she tried to remember the current day's date. Once again, a sharp pain went through her head. She decided that remembering was not worth the pain she was enduring. She stopped thinking about it and vowed to find out later. Right then, she just wanted to enjoy her bath. She dismissed everything else from her mind.

When Vickie emerged from the bathtub about thirty minutes later, she tuned back into her surroundings. Putting on her robe, she heard the radio announcer speaking. He began, "A year ago today, July..." Vickie did not hear anything else he said. She dropped to her knees and began to scream. This couldn't be happening to her. "How could over a month pass without me knowing it?" she yelled aloud. "What about Vonshay's birthday? Did I give her something? Did she like it? How old is she?"

Hearing the last question roll off her lips, Vickie sprawled across the floor and began to moan as huge teardrops fell from her eyes. The pain in her head subdued; the pain in her heart

exaggerated. She rocked and she moaned. She shivered and she cried. Eventually, she drifted off into a deep sleep, knowing she really did have a drug problem and wishing she would never have to wake up to face her sister, her daughter, or even herself.

Vickie slept for hours, not because she wanted to, but because her body forced her to. She hadn't slept in days. It was a much-needed rest. Lately, she had spent every hour of every day getting high or trying to find a way to get high. When she woke up, she felt a sense of peace. A burden seemed to have been lifted from her, but things are not always what they seem to be. She lifted herself up from the floor and began looking for something to wear.

Everything she tried on hung from her hips, which were at one time shapely. Almost all of her clothes were too big because of the tremendous amount of weight she had lost on her crack diet. She didn't want the missing pounds to be too obvious, so she looked for something that would camouflage her shape. Finally, she noticed a brown sleeveless sundress. It was the closest thing to a fit she could find. Vanessa had sent the dress to her the summer before. When she first tried on the dress, she had loved the way it fit her well-shaped body, but today was different. Neither the dress nor any other piece of clothing she tried on looked presentable. After yanking almost everything that didn't look good on her out of the closet, Vickie began to tackle the drawers. She was jerking them so hard and slamming them around so frantically that Vonshay appeared at the door.

"What's wrong, Mama? What are you looking for?" Vonshay asked, noticing the piles of clothes throughout the room. Her deep-set eyes showed concern. No matter how hard Vonshay tried, she could never keep her feelings a secret. Her eyes always told.

"Something nice to put on. We may be having company," Vickie responded, trying to hide her astonishment. She had forgotten that Vonshay was home, but she wouldn't dare reveal

that to her daughter. She could see the pain in her child's beautiful brown eyes, eyes that once danced with joy.

"Who?" Vonshay asked, though she already knew the answer.

"Don't worry," Vickie assured her. "You'll be glad to see 'em, and they can't wait to see you. Personally, I don't want anybody to see me looking like this. Everything I own is too damn big."

"Mama, that's not a problem. That's how people wear their clothes now. Nobody wants stuff stickin' to 'em all the time, especially as hot as it is. Put your little khaki Capri pants set on. It'll be cute. But to be honest, Mama, what you're wearing ain't half as important as what you're going to do with your head. It's a mess!"

"I know, honey. Will you wash it for me?" Vickie asked her.

"Washing ain't gon' get it. You need the works. I've got some perm in my room. Slip something on and come down the hall to my *beauty salon*. I don't usually work on Monday's, but I'll make an exception because this is an emergency if I ever saw one!" Vonshay laughed.

Vonshay smiled as she walked out of the room and went to get her hair supplies together. She was glad her Mama was letting her do her hair because it had been looking bad. Even though Vickie had thick manageable hair, it still could not survive neglect, which was about the only type of treatment it had gotten lately.

Vickie grabbed a pair of jeans and a big T-shirt and slipped them on. The jeans were so baggy she felt like a teenager in a rap video. Oh well, she thought, no one will see me.

Everything was already in place when Vickie arrived at the *shop*, which Vonshay had set up in the kitchen. The perm, a comb, shampoo, conditioner, a blow dryer, and curlers were laid out on the counter. Vonshay was standing behind a chair with her plastic gloves on, beckoning

Vickie to take a seat. “I see you made it. You’re a little late, but I guess I can work you in,” she beamed, showing off her beautiful smile. She looked exactly like Vickie had when she was eighteen, tall and shapely with curves in all the right places. Vickie hoped that eighteen years from now her daughter’s life would be in a much better state than hers.

Vonshay sat Vickie in the chair and began applying the perm to her mother’s hair. Feeling a cool sensation from the chemicals, Vickie relaxed, closed her eyes, and let her mind reminisce. The first place it stopped was the clinic where she found out she was pregnant with Vonshay...

Vickie had gone to the doctor because she hadn’t been feeling well. She threw up almost everything that she ate, and she felt weak. Her friends told her she should go and get a shot because a virus was going around. The doctor told her he would need to run a few tests to determine her problem. She had no idea one of the tests would be a pregnancy test. The thought of pregnancy had never crossed her mind. Vickie had only had sex once, and she was sure that couldn’t be enough to make a baby. So when the doctor told her she was six weeks pregnant, Vickie was in a daze.

The fresh autumn air met Vickie at the door when she walked out of the clinic. It was October and the beautifully colored leaves fell gracefully from the trees. Vickie kicked the same leaves from her path over and over again as she paced back and forth in front of the clinic. After she passed the door the seventh time, she didn’t turn around. Her feet would not allow her. She followed their lead, not knowing her destination.

Since Vickie did not know where she was going, she attempted to figure out how she had gotten into such a mess. She had her whole life ahead of her and so many dreams to follow.

One of the dreams was to have a baby, but it was at the bottom of her list, beneath finishing college, getting married, and having a career. Now she would have to put it at the top. Abortion was not an option. If she hadn't learned anything else from her years of Sunday School, she knew for a fact that God is the source of all life. There was no way she would try to take something that she didn't have the power to give.

The thought of being a mother overwhelmed Vickie. The weight of her thoughts was so heavy it forced her to rest. Her body settled on a bench in the park. There she hung her head and cried and cried and cried. Her tears fell to the dry earth, and it drank them as soon as they touched its lips. There were more than enough tears to quench the earth's thirst. Vickie's eyes were so full of water that she missed the message that the dying trees offered her. The trees were losing a part of themselves, but they did not fret because they understood that if they waited, a new season would come and bring with it an opportunity to embrace new life.

When Vickie discovered she was pregnant, she was a seventeen year old freshman at Tougaloo College, a private historically black college about two hours from Ferguson in Jackson, Mississippi. She had chosen Tougaloo because it was a very respectable institution, and the fact that her high school sweetheart was already enrolled there was merely a coincidence. At least that's what she had told her parents and tried to convince herself.

Vickie knew deep down that André had been her main reason for choosing Tougaloo. She was so in love that she would have followed him anywhere. He was everything that she thought she wanted in a man and the only man that she would consider giving herself to. She couldn't wait to get to school and show him for the first time just how much he really meant to her. Now that she had shown him, she wondered if it had been worth the price she had to pay—motherhood.

Having gained some strength from her rest, Vickie raised her weakened body from the park bench and went back to campus where she crawled into her bed and cried. For three days, she would not leave her room or accept any calls from André. After every other attempt he made to reach her failed, André sneaked into the girls' dorm and into her room. "Baby, what's wrong?" he asked, seeing Vickie sitting on the bed staring into space as if she didn't know where or even who she was.

The sight of André brought more tears to Vickie's eyes. She tried to tell him what was wrong, but only muffled sounds escaped her lips. André wiped her tears away, but others replaced them immediately. After several failed attempts to understand what Vickie was trying to say to him, André finally realized that she had said, "I'm pregnant." Saying the words out loud for the first time made Vickie's situation more real to her. Before André could respond to her announcement, she began to holler and cry louder.

André tried to calm Vickie by reminding her of the consequences he would face if he was caught in the girls' dorm. Unable to control herself, she continued to wail. It wasn't until André told her not to worry that she quieted down. André sat and rocked her with his hand gently massaging her stomach until sleep overcame her. He leaned her back on her pillow and covered her. Before he left, he gave her a tender kiss on her cheek. As he walked back to his room, the words "daddy" and "husband" played over and over in his mind. The smile on his face was broader than that of a child on Christmas morning.

After about twenty minutes, a tingle went through Vickie's scalp. It reminded her of her mother putting a hot comb to a section of over-greased hair in order to straighten it. She opened her eyes and saw Vonshay standing in front of her asking, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," she replied. "This stuff is burning."

“I told you it was time, but you acted like you didn’t hear me, so I just left you alone. What world were you in?” Vonshay inquired as she washed the chemicals from her mama’s hair.

“A world just before you came into the world. I was thinking about you and your daddy and how happy he was when he found out I was pregnant with you.” Vickie’s tone changed. “Too bad his happiness didn’t last forever like he said, or he wouldn’t have left us,” she said maliciously.

“Mama, let’s not go through this again,” Vonshay said irritably. “Daddy left *you*, not me.”

“I can’t tell, Vonshay. It looks like you’re right here with me, and he’s not with either one of us,” Vickie said.

“If I recall correctly Mama, you were the one who told him to leave,” Vonshay reminded her. “Now you get mad ‘cause he left,” she said loudly, wringing her mama’s hair, wrapping a towel around it.

“When was the last time you talked to your daddy?” Vickie asked ignoring Vonshay’s last remark.

“Last night.”

“Oh” was all Vickie could say. She never won when André’s name came up because his daughter stood up for her daddy no matter how many promises he broke. She wondered if her daughter’s love for her was as strong as it was for him. She didn’t believe it was, but she loved her little girl just the same. There’s something special about the bond between daddies and their daughters. Daughters love their daddies for who they are, and daddies love their daughters simply because they exist. This love never outgrows itself; it always leaves room for change. It is the simplest kind of love; yet, the hardest kind to obtain.

Vickie didn't know how to explain to Vonshay that her father was not a good husband. Vonshay only knew him as a father, and he was damn good at that. His daughter believed that he handled everything as he did her. The picture André had painted of himself for his daughter was a masterpiece, but it was a fake. He was really a mean person, and in a subtle kind of way, he had trained Vonshay to be the same way. Fortunately, the child had also picked up some of her mama's kindheartedness. With the combination of these two traits, she was well prepared to deal with the world. The only reason Vickie stayed with André all of the fifteen years that she did was because the both of them wanted Vonshay to grow up with a father.

"What kind of new style are you going to give me?" Vickie questioned, breaking the silence.

"Don't worry. Anything'll be better than what you had," Vonshay said. She was laughing so loudly at her mental picture of her mama's hair before the perm that she could barely get the words out.

Vickie was relieved that the tension had subsided and she joined in. "Mama loves you baby," she said in between spurts of laughter.

"I love you, too, Mama. A bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck," Vonshay responded.

A smile broader than the one on her face spread across Vickie's heart. She had taught Vonshay that chant when she was just a toddler. The fact that she still remembered it led Vickie to think that maybe her child did love her as much as she loved her father. Just maybe. She still couldn't forget that there was something between Vonshay and André with which she couldn't compete. Every time she tried, she failed. Vickie had lost so many battles trying to compete with André for their daughter's love that she knew she couldn't win the war. Explaining her

drug addiction to her daughter would be a major defeat. She felt that the enemy was bound to win.

Vickie sat quietly, wondering what to say next. This seemed to have been a good time for Vickie to explain her problem to her daughter, but she didn't know how. It had been so long since the two of them had spent quality time together and shared a laugh that she did not want to ruin the moment. Their laughter continued as Vonshay bragged about the difference she would make in the appearance of her mother's hair. Though Vickie continued to laugh, she was no longer amused, but simply afraid. She was afraid of speaking the truth about her life.