

## CHAPTER ONE



FAITH RICHWOOD awoke on a Sunday morning and gave a mighty stretch before eagerly stepping out of bed and gracefully executing a pirouette. Her spin was controlled, and the balance on her right foot was stellar. When she stopped, she set her left leg down and inhaled, ready to begin the day. It was the third Sunday of the month, which meant Faith would be performing a praise dance during the Meditation at church. She would be dancing to Yolanda Adams’s song, “Open My Heart.” Having practiced the routine for two weeks, she was more than ready to get on stage.

She dressed and headed downstairs where her parents, Albert and Heidi, were just sitting down to breakfast.

Heidi beamed at her daughter. “There’s my little pianist.”

Albert winked at Faith. “Here I thought she was a dancer.”

“She’s both! And when she’s accepted to Julliard, she can study both arts until she decides which she wants to focus on,” Heidi said tartly.

Faith shared a sly grin with her father. While Faith did plan to go to Julliard and study music and dance, both of which she loved, she didn’t plan to make a career from either of these disciplines. Even though she was only fourteen years old, she had a practical sense about her.

“I’m going to go into business with Dad,” Faith proudly announced. “I want to run his affordable housing division.”

Giving Faith a look of adoration, her father winked at her and chuckled while her mom rolled her eyes.

Albert worked in the construction industry, building big, beautiful houses. Ever since she could remember, Faith had loved accompanying him to work. He’d carefully explain everything to her. He had taught her to read blueprints, calculate concrete, and estimate framing material, insulation, drywall, brick, flooring, and paint. More than once, he’d told Faith she had a real eye for design. He had even paid her to do landscape design on some of his new builds. It hadn’t been much. He’d entrusted her with a small patch at the side of each house, but she’d taken great joy in picking plants that would complement the style of house and be easily sustainable given the type of soil and the shade conditions. Her father proudly called her work “Faith’s Flowers,” even though many of the plants and trees she chose weren’t flower-producing. He was a poet at heart and loved alliteration.

“You nervous about tomorrow?” Albert asked Faith.

Faith grinned. The next day would mark her first day of high school. She was nervous and excited all at the same time. Fortunately, her two best friends, Cliff and Symphony, were going to be in several of her classes. They’d spent hours on the phone comparing schedules after receiving them in the mail a week earlier.

Cliff and Faith had been friends since they were toddlers. Their mothers had been sorority sisters during their college years, and the two families were close as could be, often vacationing together. Once, Faith and Cliff had managed to get lost together in Walt Disney World. They’d had a fantastic time spinning on the tea cup ride over and over, trying to make one another barf while their parents frantically looked for them.

Faith had met Symphony in kindergarten. Symphony’s dad

was in the military, and she'd transferred to their school the week before Halloween. Since she lived a couple of blocks over, Faith had invited her to go trick-or-treating with her and Cliff. Ever since that day, Symphony had been like the sister Faith never had.

Faith straightened her shoulders. "I *am* excited. A little nervousness always helps keep you on your toes and makes you do your best."

One of her dance teachers always said that as a pep talk, and it had stuck.

"Good girl." Albert reached out and tousled her hair.

"Dad," she complained, even though she secretly loved it. "Now I've got to go brush my hair again."

"You can brush it after pancakes," Heidi said, depositing a heaping plate in front of her.



It was 3:45 on the dawn of a very important morning. Benny Gene Williams was awakened by angry voices cussing, screaming, and name-calling. His mother was livid for some reason and swirled unsubstantiated accusations at his dad, who, in a drunken stupor, reciprocated the insults. To be awakened like this was not unusual; it was a way of life in the Williams household. But on this day, Benny wasn't had no tolerance for his parents' dysfunction. It was an important day for him, and he'd vowed not to let anything ruin it.

Today would be the first day of the rest of Benny's life. Or so he thought, anyway. He had been waiting for this day since graduating junior high. Having been awakened by his parents fighting, he hoped it wasn't an omen signaling the rest of the day would go wrong. Benny was so excited about this new beginning that having his sleep cut short didn't bother him. He just lay in his twin bed, thinking about what he needed to do to make this day a success.

He started to pray and thank God for what he considered a blessing that a poor fourteen-year-old boy from the wrong side of the tracks was chosen to attend one of the most prestigious high schools in Harris County. To settle his nerves while getting dressed for school, Benny sang songs of faith from his gospel roots as he always did. Today, he was impartial to the melody. It didn't matter which song he chose because he was certain today was going to be spectacular. He felt compelled to start it out happy. Full of faith, he was determined to make it a good day with all his might. "Kumbaya" rang out through his melodious, baritone voice as he left the house and walked briskly toward the bus stop. Still fairly dark, the morning light was barely peeping through the night sky. It was a marvelous feeling that he likened to the dawn transitioning into a new day. Benny could not have been any happier since for him it *was* a new day.

"Faith can move mountains," Benny whispered to himself as he boarded the bus to start the journey toward his new school.

He sang quietly to himself the entire way. It took a long time to get there, but he finally arrived in front of St. Francis of Assisi Catholic High School.

"Today is the first day of my new life," he stated under his breath, taking nervous steps off the bus.

Benny would use this opportunity to forge a better life for himself than the one he was happy to leave behind. He would not follow in his parents' footsteps. He would rise above. In many ways, he already had.

He would forever be grateful to his old high school guidance counselor at the public school he attended in south Houston. The man had helped him apply for and win a scholarship to attend St. Francis. It would be a long haul to school, requiring him to catch three buses to arrive on time, and he was already sweating in the Texas heat. Benny could only afford one uniform, so he'd need to

put in extra hours at the nursery where he worked, tending to the plants, to save for another. None of that mattered now though. All that *did* matter was his determination to make something of himself and his joy that this was the first step in the greater plan.

His homeroom teacher was standing at the front of the classroom, nodding and smiling at Benny when he entered. Feeling proud, he felt himself smiling back. He had prayed so hard to be here, and now that God had granted his prayer, he'd do everything in his power to earn his place.

“Class, we have a new student. This is Benny Gene Williams,” the teacher said.

Benny winced inwardly. He hated his name. Benny wasn't even short for Benjamin. Neither was Gene short for Eugene. His name had been more of an afterthought than anything else—words randomly assigned to him by his mother because she didn't care about having a baby. In truth, she'd been angry at being a teenage mom and felt she had been trapped into a life she didn't want, which robbed her of a promising future. His name was so weak-sounding, so ordinary. He preferred Joshua for a first name. It meant, “the Lord is my salvation.” He was fond of how Joshua exhibited strength during the battle of Jericho. At the appropriate time, Benny would change his name to Joshua because the name was reflective of how he wanted to be perceived.

Benny kept smiling on the outside, hoping it would compensate for the nervousness he felt on the inside. He needed to shed the past in order to succeed in the present. He had faith that God would help him do so. Somehow, over the course of his life, he'd learned how to camouflage his true feelings by planting a smile on his face.

The whole class said “hello” in unison. He knew it was expected of them, but it gave him a warm glow anyway. These were his new peers.

“Why don’t you take that empty seat?” the teacher said, pointing to a chair next to the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen. She had thick, long, raven-black hair. When she turned her head to look at him, her hair fell into her face. As she pulled it back into place, he lost himself in that very moment. Her dark eyes sparkled in rhythm with her smile. He was smitten! Somehow, he just knew she would become the love of his life.

He hurried to sit down next to her.

“Hi,” Benny said.

She smiled at him and held out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Benny,” he said, shaking her hand.

“I heard,” she said with a little giggle.

“What’s your name?” Benny asked.

“Faith.”



Faith couldn’t take her eyes off Benny. There was something almost magnetic about him. He was so cute, yet there was a sadness to him that she desperately wanted to make go away.

When the teacher passed out a list of class rules and had every student sign it, Faith noticed that Benny didn’t have a pen. She quickly reached into her pencil box and pulled out her favorite pen and handed it to him. Her fingers tingled where they brushed his.

“Thanks,” Benny mumbled, flushing slightly.

“You can keep it.”

Faith couldn’t believe she’d said that. It had been her favorite pen for months. It was purple and wrote so smoothly; it was like writing with air. What had possessed her to tell him he could keep it?

She realized she was staring and turned away quickly. She caught Cliff giving her an odd look as his brow furrowed.

“What?” Faith mouthed.

Cliff looked like he was about to say something, then shook his head and turned his attention back to his own paper.

As the day went on, Benny couldn't believe his luck. The day kept getting better and better. Not only did Faith invite him to eat lunch with her and her friends; she also invited him over to her house after school to work on homework together.



Faith's home looked like a mansion to Benny. He had never been inside a house so grand. It was beautiful, dainty, and meticulously decorated. Her parents were warm and cordial as they invited him into the foyer. His eyes darted out the window, then he paused to take in the awe of the flowers and manicured lawn. His eyes then scanned to the pond at the bottom of the hill. Benny couldn't imagine living amongst such beauty and serenity. When they all walked into the living room, he tried not to act as though this lifestyle was new to him, but he couldn't help himself. He was captivated by the twenty-two-foot-high picturesque ceilings framed by custom molding. The ceiling in this room featured a painting of the Sistine Chapel. Benny knew this detail because he'd made a hobby out of studying different styles of Italian architecture. Before he knew it, he was complimenting Mrs. Richwood on the artistry.

"So you know your architecture," Faith's dad responded, clearly impressed with Benny's maturity.

"Yes, sir. I want to study architecture in college."

"Really? What kind?"

"I am not sure, sir," Benny responded with confidence. He had an old soul and preferred talking to adults over playing with kids his own age.

"I like Italian architecture, and I like landscaping," Albert offered.

"I work at The Garden Center tending to the flowers and helping the owner with planting."

“Isn’t that something. Faith likes to help me on the homesites I build. She does a little landscape architecture like you.”

Benny thought he couldn’t be more smitten with Faith until he realized she, too, loved garden design. He turned to her, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. “Really?” He hated that his voice came out as a squeak.

Faith nodded.

They sat there and stared at each other for an awkward moment. Albert cleared his throat. “I love the scenery of an alluring lawn myself.”

Benny could not let that comment go without a response.

“I know what you mean,” Benny continued with a smile, happy to engage in this conversation with a man of Albert’s character and caliber.

“Your pond is awesome. I can tell a lot of thought went into its placement,” Benny continued.

“Stick around and I’ll take you fishing on that pond,” Albert said, putting a hand on Benny’s shoulder.

Benny tried not to flinch when the older man touched him. He reminded himself that not everyone struck people.

“As a matter of fact, we’re having catfish for dinner tonight that Albert caught in that pond yesterday,” Heidi said. “Would you like to stay for dinner?”

“Yes!” Benny exclaimed.

In truth, he wished he could stay here forever.

“Better call your mother and make sure it’s okay. Mothers worry, you know,” Albert said with a wink.

Winking was Albert’s signature. It was one way he exhibited approval.

“At least leave a message,” Albert added. “The phone is in the kitchen.”

Benny reluctantly walked into the kitchen, dreading the call.



It wasn't only that he didn't want to talk to his mother. He didn't want Faith and her nice parents to realize how different his family was from hers.

He dialed the number and waited, hoping the answering machine would pick up.

"Hello?" a woman answered shrilly.

"Hi, Mom."

"Who is this?" Her words were slurred.

"It's Benny," he said, wishing she would lower her voice.

"Are you calling me from your room? You don't have a phone in there," his mother said, not thinking clearly through a haze of alcohol.

"No, I'm at a friend's house. I'm staying for dinner."

"Stay forever," she said flippantly.

"I'll be home by nine," he told her, lowering his voice. "There's lasagna in the freezer. You just need to put it in the microwave."

"Don't tell me what to do. Who do you think you are? Your no-good father?"

"No, Mom. I'll see you later."

Benny hung up quickly before his mom could say anything else. He turned around to see Albert watching him with a look of sympathy.

"I'm sorry," Benny muttered with a dropped head as he realized Faith's dad had overheard the conversation.

"Never apologize for what you have no control over. You don't have to let where you come from define who you are," Albert said compassionately. "You are only defined by your heart, your mind, and Jesus Christ."

"I believe that, too, sir."

"Then we'll get along just fine," Albert said, smiling warmly. "All you need in this world is optimism, love, faith, and GRIT. Son, do you know what it means to have GRIT?"

“No, sir,” Benny replied.

Albert gave him a serious look with his eyebrows raised. “To have GRIT, son, means to have guts, to be resilient, to take initiative, and—above all—it means to be tenacious.”

Benny stared at Albert with a blank look of confusion and misunderstanding . . . and intrigue. He had never had a conversation like this before with an adult. Benny had a feeling that Mr. Richmond and he were going to get along just fine.

“Don’t worry about it, son. You’ll understand as you grow in age and wisdom.”

As if on cue, Faith walked into the room and gave Benny a dazzling smile. How could it be that he had just met this girl and already he adored her? How could any boy not adore Faith? She was stunning with her long hair, slim and curvaceous body, and tender smile. Her teeth were as white as snow. To him, Faith was drop-dead gorgeous. Already his eyes adored her.

*I am going to marry Faith!* he thought. At that moment, he coined an affectionate moniker for her: MEAY. It became his secret, but one day, at the right time, he would tell her that MEAY meant “My Eyes Adore You!”



The evening eventually came to an end, much to Benny’s chagrin. Albert offered to give him a ride home. As much as he didn’t want Faith’s father to see where he lived, he said yes to the opportunity, realizing it would give him time to speak further with him. Instinctively, he felt that he could learn so much from Albert, and he wanted to know as much as he could about the other man’s job.

The car ride seemed to fly by as Benny asked question after question. At last, they turned onto Benny’s street. His stomach twisted into knots when he saw several police cars with lights flashing parked in front of his house.

“Do you know what’s going on?” Albert asked with a frown.

“No, sir, I don’t,” Benny admitted. He wished he could lie and say it wasn’t his house, but Albert would see through it and wouldn’t approve of him lying. Benny took a deep breath, steeling himself.

As they stopped short of the house, two police officers were hauling Benny’s father outside. His mother came after him, screaming and tripping over her own feet. She fell flat on her face and didn’t move. Benny wanted to find a hole and crawl inside.

“Are those your parents, son?” Albert’s voice was full of concern.

“Yes, sir.” Benny could barely get the words out due to his shame.

Albert parked the car and turned to look at him thoughtfully. “We might want to sit here a moment and not get in the way.”

Benny nodded numbly, wishing he’d never had to come home. There was a sudden knock on his window, and he jumped, startled. A police officer was standing there.

“Go ahead and roll down the window. He won’t hurt you,” Albert said softly.

Benny did as he was told.

“Evening, officer,” Albert said, keeping his voice friendly and calm. “I was just driving my daughter’s classmate home from a study session. It looks like we have arrived at an inopportune time.”

The officer’s eyes softened as he looked at Benny. “Are those your parents, boy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m sorry you had to see this,” the officer said, his voice laced with compassion.

“What’s going on?” Benny asked.

“Your father is being arrested for dealing drugs. Your mom . . .” The officer trailed off, then looked down, obviously pained at delivering this grim news. “Well, your mom’s in rough shape. She’s going to need you to help her through this.”

“I understand,” Benny said, not allowing himself to cry in front of the police officer or Faith’s father.

“Okay, good.” The police officer shifted his gaze to Albert. “Would you mind waiting here with him for a few minutes until we can clear out?”

“Not at all, Officer.”

“Thanks. You can park over there,” the officer instructed, pointing the way.

Albert moved the car and then turned it off. “It’s going to be okay,” he said to Benny.

“I’m not sure how,” Benny admitted.

“You are not your parents, and you do not have to follow in their footsteps. You have the makings of greatness in you. Hold on to that. Study hard and rely on God.”

“Thank you.”

“While we wait, I’d like us to pray,” Albert offered.

Together, they bowed their heads as Benny fought back tears.

## CHAPTER 2



THE WINTER FORMAL was three weeks away, and Faith was not nearly as excited as she'd anticipated. Symphony's father had been transferred, and they'd moved the week after Christmas. The two of them had planned to go dress shopping, and it was upsetting not to have her best friend around to discuss dances and dresses and boys. They talked every other night on the phone, but both of them knew it wasn't the same.

"I think this dress is the one," Heidi announced as Faith modeled a yellow taffeta gown.

"Mom, you've said that about the last four dresses." Faith sighed as she looked in the mirror at the dress shop. "I think it makes me look like a tulip."

"No, it's sunny and bright. Just like you."

"Thanks, Mom," Faith said, giving her mom a small grin.

Heidi rubbed Faith's shoulders. "I know you miss Symphony, but you'll make new friends."

"I know. I'm going to try on the red dress."

"It's the only one in the store you haven't tried on so far," her mother joked.

Faith smiled. "Well, then that one must be *the one* because this tulip dress certainly isn't."

“Speaking of *the one*, has either of your young gentlemen friends asked you to the dance yet?”

Faith frowned. “No, Benny hasn’t asked me yet. What other guy are you talking about?”

“Cliff, of course.”

“Mom! Cliff and I are just friends.”

Heidi gave her a small smile. “Does Cliff know that?”

Faith rolled her eyes as she headed to the dressing room with the red gown. “Of course he does.”

She took off the yellow dress and excitedly stepped into the red one, smoothing it down. The satin felt good against her skin, and she loved the way it hugged her body without revealing too much. She nodded in satisfaction, picturing how she could do her hair. Knowing she was keeping her mom waiting, she exited the dressing room for the big reveal.

Heidi put a hand over her heart.

Faith smiled. “I think this is . . .”

“. . . the one,” Faith and Heidi said in unison.



The next morning Faith took extra time in the bathroom getting ready, making sure her hair and makeup were just right. It was a free dress day. Faith loved these days because they gave her an opportunity to show off her wardrobe and personal style. She chose her royal-blue dress, the one she knew Benny liked because he stared at her more than usual when she wore it. She even borrowed a tiny bit of her mother’s perfume, dabbing it behind her ears. She had a feeling Benny was going to ask her to the dance today, although she wasn’t sure why he had taken so long.

When Faith arrived in homeroom, she was one of only a handful of students. Cliff walked in a minute later and sat down next to her, pupils dilated.

“You look amazing.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling at her friend.

“What’s the occasion?”

“I’m hoping that a certain someone asks me to the dance today,” Faith said pertly.

Cliff started to smile, then it slowly changed to a frown. “Are you talking about Benny?”

“Yes, what’s wrong?”

“I was thinking . . . nothing. Nothing’s wrong,” Cliff said quickly, glancing away.

Faith narrowed her eyes. “Do you know why Benny’s taking so long to ask me to the dance?”

Cliff didn’t turn to look at her. “He’s probably still working up the nerve. You know, with a girl like you, there’s only one chance to get things right. If you miss it . . .” He trailed off, looking defeated. “Well, I’m sure Benny would regret it forever.”

Faith smiled and put her hand on Cliff’s arm. “That’s so sweet of you to say!”

He shrugged nonchalantly.

Faith took a deep breath. “If Benny says anything to you about asking me, could you please encourage him?”

Cliff hunched his shoulders slightly. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is,” Faith said earnestly.

Cliff nodded slowly. “Okay.”

“Thank you! You are the best.”

Just then, Benny walked into the room. Faith saw him and waved, then blushed slightly. He grinned at her as he headed her way, then slid into the seat next to her.

“You look so beautiful. Of course, you always look beautiful,” Benny admitted.

“Thank you,” she said, fluttering her eyelashes slightly.

The warning bell rang, and students started flooding into the

classroom. The teacher began writing on the board and, with a sigh, Faith pulled out her notebook and prepared to take notes.



At lunchtime, Benny hovered outside the cafeteria, waiting for Faith. It was now or never. He'd been spending a lot of time at her house over the last four months, and he was pretty sure she liked him, but he'd never made any formal declaration because he'd been too scared Faith would say no. If she rejected him, then things would be awkward and he wouldn't be able to hang out with her or have long talks with her father anymore.

He finally saw her walking toward him, wearing the blue dress that seemed to sway with every move she made. It was like watching the ocean waves, and he found it intoxicating. His heart began to beat faster, and his palms were drenched in sweat. She gave him a million-watt smile as she approached.

*You have to say something. Do it now.*

"Hi, Benny."

"Hi, Faith. Look, there's something I've been wanting to ask you."

She leaned in closer, and he caught a whiff of her perfume. Somehow, her intoxicating scent made the task at hand more difficult. He clenched his fists.

"What is it?" she asked, a little breathless.

"May I escort you to the winter formal?"

It sounded very grown up, mature, just like he'd planned it. Benny was so proud of himself until Faith frowned slightly, little lines creasing her forehead. He began to panic. She was going to say no, and then it would be the end of everything.

"Escort me? Are you . . . asking me to be your date?" There was a question in her tone.

His panic increased. Maybe he hadn't made himself clear. Maybe



she thought he was asking her to go as a friend. Did she want that? His head was spinning.

*God, give me the words.*

“Faith, will you be my date for the winter formal . . . and for the rest of my life?” Benny blurted out.

Her smile returned even bigger and brighter than before. “Yes, I’ll be your date to the winter formal, and as for the rest . . . we’ll see.”

“That’s good enough for me.”

He wanted to lean in and kiss her, but he could see Cliff walking up to them. Now was not the time. Benny would save the kiss for the dance.



The dance proved to be as wonderful as Benny envisioned. He looked handsome, and Faith felt like a princess. The only problem was that Benny had a cold and kept coughing the whole night. She felt bad for him, but he insisted on dancing every dance with her anyway. She had hoped he would kiss her but could tell he was afraid to get her sick. When her father drove him home, she walked Benny to his door, but he only gave her a lingering hug before going inside. It was slightly disappointing, but overall, it had been a glorious first date, and she reveled in the little moments, like the feel of his hand on her waist as they danced, the way he looked at her, the sound of his voice when he whispered, “Meay, I’m crazy about you.” She wasn’t sure what the word meant, but she knew she loved the sound of it—*Meay!*

Two weeks later Benny was completely well, and tonight they were on their second date—a carnival. They enjoyed rides and games in between walking around, holding hands, talking non-stop, and sharing deep-fried Oreos while sipping sodas.

They walked by a game booth that had giant stuffed bears nearly taller than Faith hanging from the roof. She stopped to ogle them.

“Those are so adorable!”

Benny grinned at her. “Then you shall have one, Meay.”

The game was the kind where you had to throw a ring around the neck of a bottle, and Faith shook her head, signaling defeat. “Those are impossible to win.”

“Someone has to win them,” Benny said with cheerful optimism.

She smiled and then opened her mouth in disbelief as he bought ten rings. He threw the first nine, and they bounced crazily around the bottles but didn’t land where they needed to. He held the final ring in his hand and turned to her.

“How about you blow on it for good luck?” Benny suggested.

Faith stepped closer, pursed her lips, and blew gently on the ring. Benny gave her a strange look before closing his eyes and throwing the ring as if he was trying to skip a rock. It skimmed the top of half a dozen bottles before suddenly dropping around the neck of the seventh.

“You won!” Faith squealed in joy and surprise.

Benny opened his eyes and looked at her. “No, *we* won.”

She flushed as she pointed to one of the giant bears, and the man running the booth got it down and handed it to her, giving her a wink. “He’s a keeper, that one.”

Faith dropped her eyes shyly as she hugged the bear to her chest. “I’m going to call him Benny,” she announced.

“But that’s my name,” Benny said.

“Yes, this way there’ll be a Benny around to hug and talk to whenever I want.”

“I like that, Meay!”

*There was that word again, Meay.*

“Just what does that word mean?”

“What word?”

“Meay!”

He leaned in as if to kiss her, but instead whispered into her ear. “It means *My Eyes Adore You!*”

“I love the sound of it. Meay!” She kissed him gently on his cheek.

Benny grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the Ferris wheel. The three of them crowded into their seats, the bear in the middle. The view from so high up was amazing, but Faith found she could barely take her eyes off Benny. He was also staring intently at her.

With a jolt, the Ferris wheel came to a stop when their car was at the top. Benny leaned forward, having to push the stuffed bear back a little. Faith leaned forward in response, closing her eyes. When Benny kissed her, Faith felt the earth move. It didn't matter that it was probably just the Ferris wheel starting back up.

## CHAPTER 3



THREE YEARS LATER, Faith stared at Benny and wondered how she could possibly love him even more than she already did. The two of them, along with Cliff, were working Friday after school in the community center, feeding the homeless. It was even hotter than normal for spring, and she wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her arm as she scooped potatoes, corn, and chicken fingers onto plates.

Benny was in the kitchen cooking while Cliff was manning a table of donated clothing and helping people select items they might need. The most popular item seemed to be socks because he kept running out of them and would have to ask one of the other volunteers to bring out more bags filled with socks.

He smiled and waved at Faith, who waved back with her serving spoon. She and Cliff were still best friends after all these years. What was wonderful was that Cliff and Benny were even closer.

They had a couple of minutes left until the end of their shift. It was grueling work but very satisfying. The three of them had started volunteering there as part of a senior project, but Faith had never dreamed how much she would love helping people.

Of course, it was also hard to see so many people in rough shape. It especially broke Faith's heart when kids came through the line.

Worst of all was the fact that three of the kids in her own class were apparently homeless, and she'd never realized that until she started volunteering at the center. Faith could tell they were all embarrassed that she knew their secret, so she never breathed a word of about their personal lives to anyone else or singled them out at school by treating them differently.

When the dinner rush was finally over, she joined Benny in the kitchen, helping him clean up. Cliff was still stuck outside for another half hour until people started to leave.

Faith had her sleeves rolled up, heavy dish gloves on, and was scrubbing some of the big pots.

"I love helping people, Benny." He was going by Joshua these days, but she still couldn't bring herself to say his new name.

"It *is* very satisfying," Benny said as he hauled a couple of pots over to the sink.

"I've been thinking that after college, maybe there's more I could do," Faith said.

He wiped the sweat off his forehead and stared at her curiously. "Like what?"

"Well, you know I want to work with my father in his construction business."

"Yeah?"

"Most of the houses he makes are huge and meant for upper-middle-class families. I mean, he does a few lower income housing projects, but nothing for people or families who are truly destitute."

Benny nodded, following her train of thought. "So is there something about that you want to change?"

"I want all the housing I build to be affordable housing and transitional housing."

He stared at her intently. "There's not as much money in doing business that way."

"I don't care. I just want to help people."

A grin slowly spread across his face. “You know, we are an amazing team.”

Faith smiled back. “How do you figure?”

“We have similar goals and values. I see a future where you’re building these houses and communities, and I’m doing the landscaping and creating green spaces for people to enjoy and explore. Nature is so healing, and it’s something people in the city, particularly those in dire straits, don’t get to enjoy enough very often, if at all.”

Faith smiled. She thought of how many times Benny had gone fishing with her father. Every time, both came back with a spring in their step, overjoyed and exuberant. She knew Benny wanted that for all people, which was one of the things she loved most about him. She leaned forward and gave him a lingering kiss.

“Partners?” Faith asked.

“Partners always, in everything,” Benny whispered in response.

“Wow, it was crazy busy today,” Cliff said as he walked into the kitchen.

Faith turned and gave him a nod. “Yes, it was.”

“So, anyone up for a movie tonight?” Cliff asked.

Benny shook his head. “My band has rehearsal tonight. We landed the prom gig tomorrow night, and we need to be ready.”

“You guys already sound great,” Faith told him.

“But we can always improve,” Benny countered.

Cliff nodded. “So you’re out.” He turned to Faith with a raised eyebrow. “Movie?”

She shook her head. “I wish I could, but Mom’s doing some last-minute alterations on my dress tonight.”

Cliff sighed. “Looks like I’m flying solo tonight.”

“Whatever happened to the girl I set you up with last month? Kim, the one we double-dated with?” Faith asked.

Cliff looked at his shoes. “She was nice and all, but just not right for me.”

“Cliff, you need to give these girls a chance,” Faith lectured.

“I know,” he mumbled.

“Leave my bro alone,” Benny said gently. “If she isn’t the right girl, she isn’t the right girl.”

“Okay, fine.”

Faith put the last pot on the drying rack. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow night.”



It was the best night of Benny’s life. Prom had been amazing. His band was rocking. He and Faith had been named King and Queen. Now they were playing “If,” and he was getting to watch the love of his life dance to his music. There was only one way it could get more perfect.

They had one more song before the night was over. He watched Cliff ask Faith to dance, and he smiled as his girl and his best friend took the floor. He knew that Cliff had feelings for Faith, but he admired the man for never having said a word to either of them or acting on his feelings once they’d started dating. It took a certain strength and courage that Benny wasn’t sure he would have had if their roles had been reversed.

The song came to an end. The rest of Benny’s band had agreed to pack up the stuff without him so he could take Faith home. They left the gym with their heads held high like the king and queen that they were. He drove slowly back to her house, savoring every moment. Once they got there, he parked and suggested she take a walk with him down by the pond.

“You are my queen. You know that, right?” Benny said, holding her hand.

“And you’re my king.”

“I want to make it official,” Benny said, his heart beating fast. “And I don’t want to wait any longer.”

“What are you saying?” Faith asked.

“We graduate in a month. I think after graduation we should get married.”

“So do I,” she said, so quickly that it took Benny’s breath away. As always, they were on the same page.

“We should talk to your parents though,” Benny added. He had so much respect for them, and he felt it was important to include her parents in their future plans.

Faith glanced toward the house. “You know they’re waiting up for me.”

As one, they turned and headed to the house. It all seemed so simple, so right.



Faith’s heart was singing as they entered. She’d loved Benny since the day they’d met. There would never be anyone who could take his place in her heart. Her parents knew that.

It took her and Benny ten minutes to lay out their case for not waiting to get married. It took her parents only ten seconds to shoot it down.

When Faith tearfully bid Benny goodnight, she whispered into his ear, “This is not over.”

Three months later they eloped. Cliff went with them, being that he was the best man. He was also the only one who knew they were already married when they started college in the fall.



## CHAPTER 4



FAITH STARED DOWN at the pregnancy test in her hand and sobbed uncontrollably. She was overjoyed that she and Benny were having a baby, but the timing couldn't have been worse. She was in her last quarter of her third year of college, and her father had died two days before of a sudden, massive heart attack. He had never even known she was married, and now he wouldn't be there to meet his first grandchild.

Faith didn't hear the door open, so she was startled when she heard Benny ask, "Meay, what's wrong?"

She looked up at him and couldn't find the words. Instead, she handed him the pregnancy test. He stared at it for a moment, then his face lit up with joy. He looked at her and a moment later was frowning again.

"Are you upset that we're having a baby?"

She shook her head. "I'm upset that my dad . . . my dad . . ."

She dissolved into sobs as she collapsed onto the bathroom floor. He dropped down and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly. After a few minutes, she wiped her eyes.

"We can't tell Mom yet. Not until after the funeral."

"Whatever you want. Whatever you need," Benny said through tears. "You're the love of my life, and you're having my baby!"



Two days later, Faith sobbed throughout her father's funeral. Benny and Cliff were two of the pallbearers, and neither of them could make it through without crying either. Her father had meant so much to all three of them. It was almost impossible to believe he was gone.

Her mother looked so lost and fragile all day. Faith didn't know how to comfort her. Every time she tried, she imagined what it would be like to lose her own husband, then ended up crying wildly until her mother tried to console her.



Benny was overwhelmed at experiencing so much joy and so much grief simultaneously. It felt like his chest was going to burst. He had recently graduated from college in under three years by working hard at summer classes and doubling up during the last three semesters. He had landed a job in landscaping design with a firm that handled corporate clients. It was a great job, and he was planning on starting a small company on the side to handle residential homes so he'd be ready when Faith graduated. Benny was eager to support her in building affordable housing. He had figured that once he had a few paychecks under his belt, it might be okay to go ahead and tell his in-laws that he and Faith were married. He disliked keeping the secret all this time. Now, with a baby on the way, they couldn't keep it from her mom any longer, whether they were ready to reveal their union or not.

The baby. It made him deliriously happy every time he thought of bringing life into the world. It also filled him with some fear and trepidation. He made a vow to God that he would be different than his father, and he would be a good role model. He prayed every day that God would help him live up to his word.

The death of Albert was a devastating blow because of the baby.

He'd always assumed that when the time came, he'd be able to go to Albert for all the fatherly advice and wisdom he could ever need. Now he had no one in his life who could guide him on this wonderful but intimidating path of parenthood.

"You okay?" Cliff whispered as they walked the coffin out of the church.

"No, you?"

"Not even remotely."



Faith stood at the graveside, watching as they readied to lower her father's coffin into the ground. When it became too much, she forced herself to look elsewhere at the trees, the sky, and the people who were gathered there. So many had loved and admired her father, and the large turnout was a testament to him.

She saw one man standing a short distance away and thought she recognized him as someone she'd seen on one of her dad's construction projects a while back. A chill went down her spine as she watched him stare intently at her mother in a way that Faith didn't appreciate.

*There's something not right about that man,* she thought as she struggled to remember his name. *Vaughn. Vic. Vince. That's it! Vince.* She frowned, recalling a conversation she'd overheard regarding her father firing him. It seemed strange that he would show up here at the funeral. Then again, Vince wasn't exactly paying his respects to her father, not with the way he was looking at her mother.

Benny touched her shoulder, and it pulled her attention back to the funeral. It was time to step forward and throw the flower she was holding onto the coffin lid. It nearly killed her, but she did it.



“You’re pregnant, aren’t you?” Heidi said, eyes narrowed.

Faith and her mom were having lunch about a month after the funeral, and Faith’s morning sickness had proven to be more of an anytime-it-wants sickness. She’d just run to the bathroom for the second time.

“Benny and I eloped right after high school. Sorry I’ve kept it a secret. And yes, I’m pregnant,” Faith blurted out.

Heidi stared at her wide-eyed for several moments and then started chuckling.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. It just explains why the two of you gave up so easily when we told you no. That’s all.”

“Then you’re not mad?”

Her mom shook her head, her eyes getting misty. “I’m getting a grandchild. How could I ever be mad?”

Faith jumped up and hugged her mother as they both broke into tears. After a minute, she forced herself back to her seat, aware that they were causing a bit of a scene.

“Well, I’m going to have to throw you a belated wedding reception,” Heidi said with a grin. “I think we could all use a good party right about now.”

The wedding reception three weeks later was followed by a baby shower a couple of months after that. Faith felt like she was drowning in gifts. Everything would have been perfect except for two things. First, she was diagnosed as a high-risk pregnancy and put on bed rest. She dropped out of college, realizing she needed to focus on the baby’s health for now. Second, Vince, the man she’d seen at the funeral, had started hanging around her mother. No matter what warnings Faith gave about the man, it didn’t seem to matter. Her mother was smitten.

## CHAPTER 5



WITHOUT FAITH, we have nothing. Faith believed that statement with all her heart and not just because it was something her husband, Joshua, whom she *still* called Benny, would say to her. After all, faith had brought them together in high school, faith had seen them through some tough times in college, and faith had helped them build a beautiful life and family together after marriage. Now she was thirty-four years old. With each passing moment, she found herself falling deeper and deeper in love with Benny. He was exactly that kind of guy, and he was all hers.

“Faith Meay, keep your eyes closed,” she heard Benny say from just inside the doorway.

“They are closed.”

It was early morning, and she was sitting up in bed, having just awakened to find that her husband had already risen. A moment later, she felt him place something that felt suspiciously like a tray on her legs.

“Okay, you can open your eyes,” he said.

She did and saw it was indeed a breakfast tray bearing fresh-squeezed orange juice, bacon, and a gigantic red velvet pancake in the shape of a heart.

“Aww, thank you, honey!” Faith said.

“Happy anniversary, Faith Meay. This year, I thought I’d beat you to it.”

She smiled at him. The year before she had surprised him with breakfast in bed, and this year he’d turned the tables.

“Happy anniversary. Care to join me?”

“Unfortunately, I’ve got an early business meeting to get to. Remember, though, I’ve got big plans set for this evening. Be ready.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to give me the tiniest hint about what we’re doing?”

“Not even,” he said with a laugh. “This is going to be an anniversary to remember.”

“Every day with you is one to remember,” Faith said sweetly.

Over the years, Benny had given Faith many memorable occasions. The life he’d built with her reflected his unfailing love. Benny had loved Faith with all his being since the first day they’d met in high school. He adored her. And she loved him just as much in return. She was looking forward to making another memory tonight.

Benny appeared touched by Faith acknowledging that life with him was special. “Maybe I should stay!” he teased flirtatiously.

“But you have a meeting . . .”

“You’re right. I guess I’ll just dine and dash,” he said with a mischievous smile as he stole a piece of her bacon and then ran for the door.

“Hey!” Faith called after him.

She could hear Benny laughing as he headed down the stairs. She felt a twinge of sadness as she heard the front door close behind him. Sixteen years ago today they had eloped. For a courthouse wedding, the ceremony was very elegant and tastefully performed. The best that two hundred fifty dollars could buy. Their friend

Cliff stood in as both the best man and attendant for the bride. Every anniversary since, Benny would go out of his way to make it more special, more romantic than the previous year. Faith appreciated his efforts.

Today, she and the kids were working in the garden. There was a lot to do before his mysterious anniversary surprise.

As she grabbed a piece of bacon for herself, Faith marveled at how fast time went. It seemed like just yesterday they'd met at school when he'd been the new kid, and she'd been instantly smitten at only fourteen years old. She was still just as smitten twenty years later.

She reminisced about their first non-school date, smiling in her heart as she pictured the gigantic teddy bear Benny had won for her at the annual carnival. It was also the same night he'd coined her mysterious nickname: Faith Meay. He would often look at her from across the room and mouth, *Meay!* He loved to use it in the presence of company to create a secretive, intimate moment. "Faith Meay," he'd say, "are you ready to go?" Those who didn't know her thought that Meay was her middle name.

She finished her breakfast and then prepared breakfast for the kids. There was a lot to do, but she kept drifting back to thoughts of Benny, wondering what he had in store for the evening.



It was the end of summer, which was always one of Faith's favorite times of the year. The fact that her anniversary fell on August 28 was only partly responsible for that. She loved recalling the bounty and beauty the summer season brought and then anticipating the promises autumn held. As much as she loved each season, she had a special place in her heart for fall. She and Benny had eloped at the end of summer, just as the beginning of harvest season was upon them. Just as notable was the inspiring beauty that came

with the turning of the leaves. So many people were reminded of death when they noticed the colored leaves falling from the trees, but Faith saw a promise of the coming resurrection. All things were made new, but only after a time of shedding and pruning.

It was also about time for the weather to turn cooler. She mopped her brow. It was ninety degrees outside, which wasn't as bad as it could be. The hot, humid Texas summers were enchanting but could also be a challenge, especially when you were trying to keep anything alive.

Faith smiled as she tended her garden. The tomatoes were ripe and would be delicious in a salad for dinner the next night. Everything was coming along nicely and right on schedule.

She'd been thinking a lot about change recently. Her youngest was about to start preschool. It was a huge step, both exciting and a little frightening. She would now have a handful of hours during the week that was completely her own. She hadn't had that for a long time.

Faith always imagined she would live to be one hundred as several members of previous generations of her family had. She was officially one-third of the way through her life. The first season had been about growing, just like a seed in her garden. Now it was time to focus more on shaping her life and herself. She wanted to be more purposeful in how she lived. As her children were starting to grow and find themselves, it was time she did more of that as well. She had been thinking a lot about her dad and how she wanted to honor his memory by continuing his work to provide affordable housing in urban communities. Over time, she'd expanded that dream to center around single mothers who were survivors of domestic abuse or abject poverty. Faith knew from listening to her dad that children would be better equipped to meet the future if they were being raised in safe and decent housing. Faith's dad had died too soon to guide her, step-by-step, through the process



of accomplishing this vision. Now that all her kids would be in school, she thought about undertaking work that would make her feel good about herself and honor his memory.

She heard footsteps and turned to see her youngest child, Amia Siobhan, running toward her. The four-year-old was carrying a small basket with four oranges in it. Amia was a joy to behold. She was bright and cheerful with her mother's good looks and beautiful hair. In fact, she was so much like her mom that Benny often called her Little Faith.

"Mama, there are more oranges than I can eat," Amia said.

"More than we all can eat," Buck said, walking behind her and lugging a basket that was overflowing. Buck was the oldest of the three children at twelve years old. His given name was Shane Ethan Strong, but because he almost died at birth and then survived the odds, his dad called him Buck. Faith called him her "Gift from God."

Joshua Francis Junior appeared with an armful of oranges and a silly grin on his face. Nine-year-old Joshua bore his daddy's name, but everyone called him Junior. It didn't bother Buck that he didn't have his daddy's first name. He understood why. His own name had a special meaning that made him proud. To be called *Buck* was like a badge of honor.

Faith felt her greatest blessing in life was having these three gems calling her *Mom*. They were highly intelligent, grounded, happy, uncorrupted by a sense of entitlement, and thoughtful. She and Benny were well on their way to accomplishing the goal they set for themselves as parents to raise kids who were appreciative of the gifts God gave to them and eager to share their blessings with those who were in need.

"You're right! There are more than we can eat. What do you think we should do with the extras?" Faith asked innocently as she looked at each of her children in turn.

“I think we should take them to the kitchen,” Buck said. He was referencing the community kitchen where they volunteered once a month. Faith had grown up wanting for nothing. She had always reasoned that was why she wanted to reach out and help those who had so little.

*Maybe I can do more volunteer work and help those who are less fortunate,* Faith thought. Something in that idea appealed to her greatly. It also seemed like a worthy use of her upcoming free time. The more she thought about her new plans, the more excited she became. First, she would inquire about working with nonprofits that provided housing and shelter for the homeless. Then she would put the wheels in motion to develop a business plan that focused on building the houses she’d dreamed of for single parents and for women who were victims of domestic violence. No matter what Faith did, she would incorporate having a community garden because she felt people, especially children, deserved to eat nutritious and wholesome food.

She glanced down at her children, who were looking up at her eagerly, waiting for her answer.

“Taking them to the kitchen is a great idea. I’m sure they’d love to have these oranges,” Faith said, proud of her three children.

“And we could print out Bible verses and tape one to each orange,” Junior suggested.

“I love that idea,” Faith said. “My son, the pastor.”

Due to his sensitive nature and concern for others, she had always thought of her middle child that way. He beamed at her in response to her words.

“To educate the mind without educating the heart is the epitome of ignorance,” Junior said, quoting words his father repeated often.

Before Faith could respond, she heard her husband’s voice behind her.

“Glad that someone listens to what I say,” Benny said teasingly.

The three children nearly dropped their oranges in their scramble to greet him. Faith hastily rose, dusting off the knees of her slacks before moving closer to give him a kiss.

“You’re home early,” Faith said in surprise.

“Am I, Faith Meay?” Benny asked mischievously. “Or are you late getting ready?”

“What on earth do you have planned?” she asked, her excitement rising.

“I guess you’ll just have to wait and see. In the meantime, who wants ice cream?”

The three kids began to clamor at once.

“All right, ice cream sundaes in the kitchen.”

The kids ran ahead of them as Faith began walking toward the house, holding hands with her husband.

“You are full of surprises today,” she said.

“You have no idea.”

Inside the house, the kids were already digging into giant sundaes that Benny must have made before coming outside to get them. In the middle of the kitchen counter was a massive spray of red roses in a delicate porcelain vase adorned with small, red glitter hearts and their names: Faith & Joshua.

It made sense that he put *Joshua* instead of *Benny* because that was how he thought of himself since he’d changed his name. It was also the name on their marriage license. She was one of only two people who still insisted on calling him *Benny*.

The aroma from the roses filled the air with a sweet perfume, and Faith closed her eyes to breathe it in. She was convinced this was what heaven would smell like.

“Happy anniversary, Faith Meay,” Benny said.

“Happy anniversary, my husband of sixteen years,” she said, slowly opening her eyes.

“I’ll be honest. The vase cost more than the flowers,” he admitted.

“Then I’ll treasure it always.”

“I’ll treasure you always,” Benny said.

“I should go get your present,” Faith offered.

“Bring it with us. I can open it later tonight.”

“You really want to carry around a new grill all night?”

His eyes widened in surprise. “Did you get me a new grill?”

She took several seconds to answer, letting the suspense build.

“No, but I could have.”

He chuckled and kissed her cheek. “Is it smaller than a bread-box, and does it weigh less than a bowling ball?”

“Yes, and yes.”

“Then bring it with us.”

“Hello in the house!” a deep voice boomed out.

Faith turned toward the screen door to see Cliff.

“Uncle Cliff!” Amia shouted as she abandoned her ice cream to run into his arms.

Cliff opened the door and came inside, all smiles as he hugged Amia. “I see someone is celebrating something. Let me guess. It’s National Red Flowers Day?”

Faith couldn’t help but smile. Cliff knew well enough what day it was. He had arrived to babysit while they went out, although he was three hours ahead of the expected time.

“So, Cliff, why are you here so early?” Faith asked, nudging his arm.

“Nope, sworn to secrecy. Sacred oath and all that,” he said, miming locking up his lips and throwing away the key.

“You’re both impossible,” Faith said.

Amia turned around, letting go of Cliff. “Mommy, go put on your pretty dress.”

“The purple one?”

“No, your *pretty* dress,” Amia requested.

“I thought that was the pretty one.”

“I think she means your *party* dress,” Benny said gently.

“Oh, you mean the black dress?” Faith asked, even more intrigued. That dress was reserved for very formal occasions, few as they were.

“That’s the one.”

Benny loved Faith’s black party dress. When she wore it, the crepe fabric stretched over her hips, accentuating every curve in her slender, statuesque body. Faith knew her husband loved it, and she wore it just to tease him. It was simple, elegant, fashionable, and provocative. The back of the floor-length, sleeveless dress concealed a nylon zipper that started at her neckline and terminated at the small of her back. The front of the A-lined, scooped-necked silhouette was symmetrically designed to flatter her hips and show off her legs. A ruffled split on each side, from the floor to above her knees, cascaded to the floor. The dress had a hint of flair so that when she danced, the dress moved in sync with her graceful rhythms.

Tonight, she would sport two strands of sleek oyster-colored pearl necklaces. Benny presented her with them to commemorate the occasion of Buck coming home from the hospital. They were embellished with diamonds interspersed every three or four beads. The pearls were long enough to wrap twice around her neck, but instead, Faith tied a knot in them so she could twirl them at will. Four-inch black, sequined designer pumps and a matching sequined clutch completed her ensemble.

Yes! Faith wanted tonight to be a special and memorable occasion. Her black dress was just the incentive she needed for both.

She ran upstairs to shower and shine, breathless with anticipation. When she was finished, she returned downstairs and gave a little turn as Amia clapped her hands in approval. Faith picked her up and Amia fingered the diamonds amidst the pearls.

“The pretty dress,” Amia said, ogling the shiny stones.

“So it is,” Faith said, kissing Amia’s head before setting her back down.

“My turn,” Benny said, heading for the stairs.



“Ready for your first surprise?” Benny asked.

“Yes!” Faith exclaimed.

“Keep your eyes closed tightly.”

She did as he instructed.

“Now open them.”

Faith saw Benny when she opened her eyes and couldn’t help but admire how well his black suit fit him. He had led her outside, but she was so entranced with how handsome he looked that she wasn’t paying attention to her surroundings.

“Your chariot awaits,” Benny said as he positioned her in the direction of the limo that was slowly approaching.

“What is this, Ben?” she asked in amazement.

“This is our car. We will be chauffeured for the entire night.”

“Oh, it’s going to be an amazing evening.” Faith barely managed to get words out through her excitement. “OMG! I can’t wait for this night to unfold!”



Faith had tried, unsuccessfully, on the drive into Galveston Bay to guess their destination. At last, the car stopped, and the driver opened the door. Benny was standing there to lead her, making her promise to keep her eyes closed.

They walked several yards. She was in heels, but his arm was steady beneath her hand, and she had complete faith in him to steer her where she should walk.

“Okay, this part is a bit tricky, so open your eyes,” Benny said.

She did as instructed and saw an exquisite cruising yacht in front of them. He helped her step onto the deck.

“I booked a private sunset jazz cruise down Galveston Bay,” he said.

“Oh, my goodness,” Faith gasped, realizing this exclusive cruise must have been extremely expensive.

“Well, actually, it’s not one hundred percent private,” Benny said with a smirk, pointing to a jazz string quartet backing up a pianist already on board. Champagne was on ice, chilling in the cooler. Hors d’oeuvres of fresh fruit, olives, and cheese squares accompanied the champagne.

The yacht pushed off a minute later and once they were underway, the musicians started playing a medley of familiar songs from across multiple genres. All the songs were handpicked by Benny, perfect for the most romantic of evenings.

“They’re playing our song,” Benny said with a cheesy smile as he spun her into his arms and began to dance.

They continued dancing as they cruised down the bay, just the two of them. Hand in hand. They brought out all their best moves. Swing! Slow drag where Faith buried her head on Benny’s shoulder! The slide! Tango! What an amazing time they shared. Faith could not believe the night could get any better.

When the yacht docked, Benny took Faith by the hand and walked her to the car. The chauffeur opened the door and made sure she was secure in her seat.



“That was so much fun,” Faith told Benny when they were back in the car.

“The fun’s not over, Faith Meay,” Benny promised with a sly grin.

“I sincerely do not know how on earth you’re going to top the yacht!” Faith said.

“Just wait,” he said, winking at her. “Just wait!”

About forty minutes later, the chauffeur placed the car in park and began helping Faith out. She looked at the restaurant sign and gasped.

“Are you kidding? Brenner’s on the Bayou! I’ve always wanted to eat here!” Faith exclaimed.

“I know,” Benny said with a grin as he offered her his arm.

She took it and strolled next to him, feeling like the luckiest woman in the world. The restaurant was famous for its food, its aesthetics, its setting, and a beautiful waterfall that emptied into a pond stocked with expensive, exotic fish.

The best thing of all was Benny bought out the entire restaurant for the night. It was just the two of them again with a band from the past. Benny had brought the band back together for the night, the band he’d played with during college. Just seeing the guys again brought tears to Faith’s eyes. As the maître d’ escorted them to their table in the center of the room, Faith whispered to Benny how happy she was and thanked him for this one-night escape from reality.

After they ordered, they spent a few minutes gazing at each other and making small talk. It was moments like these that she loved and cherished. She could talk to her husband about anything, no matter how important or insignificant. The waiter cleared away their salad plates and a moment later brought their main courses. Benny had ordered the rack of lamb, and she had decided to try the duck confit. She took a bite of her duck and was delighted to discover that the skin was crispy while the meat was juicy. It made for a wonderful combination. The restaurant was living up to its reputation. The blend of food and ambiance was the undergird for an enrapturing moment she would never forget.

For two hours after dinner, the band played oldies from their past. They danced to the rhythm of songs that kindled romance. Benny sat Faith down and then joined the band. He sang Isaac Hayes and



Dionne Warwick's rendition of "My Eyes Adore You" among other songs. Benny's voice was stage quality. Had he wanted to do so, he could have successfully pursued a career in entertainment.

When the band was finished, Faith interrupted their packing and asked if they would play one song so she could honor her husband. The song she requested was one of Benny's favorite songs and the one they danced to as king and queen of the high school prom. Faith sat Benny down and gave the band a queue to start. They started to play "If." She moved to the rhythm of the music with poise and grace. There was a certain *savoir faire* about Faith that made Benny proud. She knew that the way she moved her hips and twirled on her tiptoes aroused Benny. When the music stopped and she walked toward Benny, he mouthed *Meay*. "Faith Meay!" he called out, pulling her into his arms and kissing her gently on the neck. The night had come to an end, leaving an indelible memory for both of them to cherish for the rest of their lives.

Before leaving, she took another look around the restaurant and shook her head, amazed that they were there—alone. She'd heard about the place for years, and without a doubt, it was worth every penny that Benny had spent to make this anniversary more than a night out on the town. It was a gift.

They exited the club with Faith clutching Benny's arm and strolled to the car with fingers interlocked, stopping for a moment to seal the night with a kiss. All the way home she lay her head on Benny's shoulder, not wanting the night to end.

When the car pulled up to the house, Cliff came out and headed toward his car, signaling good night with his hand. "The kids are sleeping. The rest of tonight is all yours," he called out. "Hope you had a great time!"

Still under the influence of the night, Benny and Faith didn't acknowledge Cliff. Benny lifted Faith into his arms and carried her

upstairs to their room. Her head lay on his shoulder as she realized this was only the third time he had carried her. The first was after their wedding; then when she went into labor with Buck; and now tonight. None of the other times felt this good though.

As Benny stood her up onto the floor, he ran his fingers through Faith's hair and pulled her close to him, holding her tightly. He kissed her forehead, her neck, and then tenderly on the lips. He unzipped her dress and let it fall freely onto the floor.



Too hyped up to sleep, the night turned into pillow talk.

"I've been thinking a lot about you lately," Benny told Faith.

"I should hope so," she teased.

"I know that you used to dream about going into the construction business to build homes. I feel I might have robbed you of that. We were married right out of high school, and then we started having kids. You have been the world's most amazing mom and the most understanding wife. I'm worried that you now need something for just yourself. I don't want you to ever feel that life passed you by without giving you a chance to live your dream."

Faith was surprised Benny was bringing up this topic. She remembered they had talked about it back in high school and kept talking about it in college until she dropped out after getting pregnant. She had since managed to finish her bachelor's degree, one class at a time, but hadn't done anything about fulfilling her career dreams.

"I'm completely content with my life just the way it is," Faith declared.

"While I'm very glad to hear that, I want you to take a few days and think about it. Buck starting junior high got me thinking that one day the kids will be grown, and I never want you to feel like you've missed out on anything."