

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman embracing. The woman is on the left, looking down with a soft smile. The man is on the right, leaning his head against hers. The background is a soft-focus forest scene with a path leading into the distance.

Do Over

MARI CARR





Do Over
By Mari Carr

Sometimes once is not enough...

After twenty-five years of marriage, Faith Wainwright wonders what she'll do next. Her kids have moved out and sometimes she feels so distant from her husband, Troy.

Right before their anniversary, Troy gives Faith an unexpected gift: a journey through their hometown to reenact all their "firsts." Their first date. Their first kiss. And especially the first time they made love—only *better*.

Each stop on their tour becomes an opportunity for Faith and Troy to rediscover how explosive their passion can be. Now Faith knows exactly what she's going to do—*Troy*, over and over again...

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Dedication

This story is dedicated to M and L, one of the most romantic couples I've ever met.

Chapter One

Faith Wainwright felt her mind wandering as she sat in her childhood home, listening to Mother talk about nothing in particular. Her gaze traveled around the living room of the home she'd grown up in. She hadn't lived in this house in over twenty-five years and yet, the memories made here were vividly etched in her mind. She smiled when she spotted the tick marks on the doorjamb between the living room and the kitchen. A lifetime of initials and dates marking the growth spurts of her and her two sisters were still there.

Since her husband Troy's work transfer nearly twelve years ago, she didn't get to visit her mother as often as she liked. Even though it was only a three-hour drive, real life seemed to limit her opportunities to come back home and lately she'd been feeling homesick. Something she'd never suffered from since she and Troy had packed up the kids and thirteen years' worth of shit and headed south.

Of course, she hadn't had the time to miss her sleepy little hometown during those years. Every moment of them had been filled with work and Little League, proms and high-school graduations. Now both of her kids—and a fair amount of her money—were in college and the home away from home she and Troy had built was empty, quiet. Suddenly she had *too* much time for homesickness.

She'd been in a funk ever since they'd packed their youngest up and dropped her off at college. The hierarchy of her world was out of whack—her kids had always come first—and now she wasn't quite sure what to do with herself. When Troy suggested this weekend excursion back home, she'd jumped at the chance, hoping the trip would clear her mind, give her some idea of where to go now. And if not, at the very least, she hoped it would distract her from her doldrums for a while.

"Well, that's enough about me," her mother said, interrupting her thoughts, and Faith felt guilty for not listening. "I can see your mind is elsewhere. What's going on with you?"

"I miss the kids. I'm so lonely." Faith blurted the words out before she could even think to shield them and the emotion surrounding them.

"Oh, Faith. I wondered when the empty-nest syndrome would hit you. You took Jackson's departure for college in stride, never missing a beat."

Faith shrugged. "Jenna was still home and God knows she didn't give me time to miss Jackson, as every spare moment was spent driving her to track meets and volleyball games."

"You raised your kids, Faith, and you did a damn good job of it. There's nothing wrong with missing them, but it's time you figured out how to take a little time for yourself. And it's not as if you're totally alone. You've got that big, strapping husband at home there."

Faith laughed at her mother's description of Troy. She'd certainly been lucky in the husband pool. While most forty-three-year-old men were balding and sporting spare tires around the middle, her husband still had a full

head of salt-and-pepper hair and a body most men a decade younger would envy. His job as a construction worker made it easy for him to keep his muscular physique, but Troy helped it along by exercising and eating right. A three-season athlete in high school, he'd passed the competitive spirit along to their children. Playing sports with the kids had kept Troy young and vibrant all these years, and Faith thought he was more handsome now than he'd been when they first started dating.

"Troy doesn't seem to be struggling with this like I am," Faith confessed. "He's always busy—in and out of work. He's in the midst of a big project at one of the construction sites and he plays golf on Sundays, fishes in the pond behind our house a couple nights a week to relieve some of the stress of his job. He's just fine. You know Troy—nothing fazes him." Her husband was a rock—solid, reliable and so damn steady, she felt like shaking the hell out of him sometimes just to see if anything inside rattled.

Deborah nodded and said nothing—a sure sign her mother didn't agree with her assessment.

"Okay," Faith said, "let's have it. What's wrong with what I just said?"

"Sometimes it's so easy to get wrapped up in our own hurt that we miss little signs along the way that show someone else is suffering too."

"Troy?" Her loud single-word question was laced with disbelief. When Faith accompanied it with a single snort, her mother simply shook her head.

"Yes, Troy. That husband of yours sees and feels a hell of a lot more than you give him credit for, Faith."

"I'm not saying he's an insensitive clod, Mom. I'm just saying he's not as bothered by Jackson and Jenna leaving as I am."

"And what would you have him do? Cry inconsolably on the floor for weeks on end? Has Troy ever done that?"

Faith almost laughed at the thought of Troy in tears. She could only recall two times when she'd seen him choke up a bit and that was when their children were born. "Troy doesn't cry. He's a man's man. Caveman to the core."

"So strong men don't have feelings?"

Faith shook her head. "That's not what I'm saying at all. Troy just handles things differently than me and sometimes," she paused, trying to put her words together in a way that would make sense, "sometimes I feel alone even when we're in the same room. Whenever I try to talk to him, I feel like my words are getting mixed up with the hockey announcer's voice and he doesn't understand anything I'm saying as a result."

"I think he hears and understands more than you—" Deborah's voice was cut off by the doorbell ringing.

"Are you expecting company?" Faith asked.

Deborah shook her head. "No. Would you do me a favor and get that, dear? My sciatica's been acting up all morning."

Faith stood up, but didn't move away from her mother. "I didn't know you were hurting. Why didn't you say anything?"

"It's nothing, sweetheart. Just a part of getting older." Her mother gestured to the front door. "Go on. Don't worry about me."

Faith walked to the front foyer and opened the door, surprised to find Troy waiting on the doorstep. He'd dropped her off at her mother's house as soon as they rolled into town around noon, promising to return later this evening. He'd made plans to hit the golf course with his dad and a couple of buddies from high school. She glanced at her watch. Two o'clock. "That was the quickest eighteen holes in the history of the game. What happened?"

"Didn't actually make it to the course. I had a few other errands to run." He bent down to pick up a duffel bag by his feet. "Go upstairs and put this on. Throw your bathroom bag back in this duffel and meet me in the living room. Fifteen minutes," he added with a wink. "Not a second longer or I'm coming up to get you."

"What on earth are you—"

"Oh, and no questions." He handed her the bag, walking past her toward the living room. She watched him place a friendly kiss on her mother's cheek. "Hiya, Deb. How are you doing?"

"Troy," Faith said from the doorway, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Her husband never strayed from a schedule and he'd had this golf date set for weeks.

"Faith," her mother said with a grin that let her know whatever was going on, Deborah was privy to it. "Go upstairs and change. You don't have a lot of time."

"Time for what?" Faith asked.

Troy turned to look at her. "What part of *no questions* are you struggling with?"

Faith narrowed her eyes, and then gave in, turning to climb the stairs. However, she made sure to mutter the

word “smartass” loud enough for her husband to hear. His chuckle in response drifted to her on the stairs and her temper flashed briefly once more before curiosity took over. What the hell was he up to?

She walked into her former bedroom—now a guest room—and threw the duffel bag on the bed. Opening it, she was surprised to find Troy’s old letter jacket from high school, a pair of jeans, tennis shoes and a T-shirt that said Carlylse Panthers, their alma mater’s mascot. Her mind raced. Glancing at her watch, she recalled Troy’s comment about fifteen minutes.

Changing quickly, she went to the bathroom to grab her toiletry bag. Catching a glimpse of herself in the T-shirt and jacket, she was inundated with memories of getting ready for dates with Troy in this very room. Working on instinct, she picked up her hairbrush and quickly pulled her hair back in a high ponytail. Though her hair was shorter now, she could still manage to recreate the same look she’d sported her senior year. She grinned as she shook her head, the ponytail swinging from side to side. Picking up her toiletries, she made it back downstairs with five minutes to spare.

Troy smiled as she returned to the living room. “You always did look hot in my letter jacket.”

She giggled, twirling playfully and feeling very much like a teenager once more. “Where did you find it?”

“It’s been hanging way in the back of a hall closet at my folks’ place all these years. My mom found it a couple of months ago when she was spring cleaning. Called to see if I still wanted it.”

“Can I ask questions yet?” Faith’s earlier annoyance had dispersed completely and she was anxious to find out what her husband was up to.

He shook his head. “Not yet.” Turning, Troy said goodbye to her mother before gesturing to the door. “Your chariot awaits, my lady.”

As he opened the front door, he grasped her hand and led her to his truck.

She looked back toward the house as her mother waved to them from the porch. “You kids have fun.”

Troy surprised her by crossing to the passenger side and opening the car door for her, something he hadn’t done since they were dating. “Oh my,” she teased, “such a gentleman.”

He placed a quick kiss on her cheek. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

As she put on her seatbelt, she spotted a wrapped present in the middle of the bucket seat. Troy hopped in the truck and started it without acknowledging the gift. Pulling out on to the road, Faith bit her tongue for nearly two minutes before her curiosity kicked in.

“What’s in the box?”

Troy laughed. “Surprised you were able to hold that question in so long. Must have been painful for you.”

“Very funny. Is it for me?”

“Yep,” he said.

Faith rolled her eyes. “Can I open it?”

“Nope.”

“Dammit, Troy. What the heck is going on with you today? I thought we were coming home to visit our parents and hang out with some friends. Next thing I

know you've kidnapped me from my mom's house and are tormenting me with pressies I can't open."

He laughed. "I'd hardly call that a kidnapping. You walked to the truck under your own steam. And you can open the present in a few minutes. Just want to be in the right place when you do it."

She looked out the window at the familiar streets and tried to determine where his so-called "right place" was. Their hometown wasn't that big and it seemed to be one of those magical places time never touched. Main Street looked very much as it had when she grew up here, only perhaps a bit better. In the last year or two, the city council had begun a beautification program and all the older historical buildings were getting touch-ups of paint and much-needed repairs.

As they passed the courthouse and turned left, Troy's destination became clear. "Carlyle High?"

He nodded, pulling into the parking lot in front of the school. The last bell for the day had rung and they sat in silence for several moments, watching as all the teens rushed for buses and cars, intent on beginning their weekend rituals.

When the parking lot was almost completely clear, he turned to her. "Happy anniversary, Faith."

Her brows lowered. "Our wedding anniversary isn't until next Tuesday."

He shrugged. "It's close enough. I wanted to celebrate it with you here."

"At the high school?"

He chuckled. "No, here. In Carlyle. Home."

She smiled at his words. "This place hasn't been home in nearly thirteen years."

“It’ll always be home. Too much of our lives happened here for it to be anything else.”

She nodded, knowing he was right. Then, he picked up the present and she blushed. “I feel terrible. I didn’t get you anything yet.”

Truth be told, she hadn’t planned on buying him much more than a card. After twenty-five years of marriage, a simple card exchange and dinner out had sort of become their standard routine. There wasn’t too much that either of them really wanted and with two kids in college, spending money on anything frivolous seemed like too much of a waste.

“You give me plenty, Faith,” he said, tapping her nose playfully, and she had to take a quick breath to fight back the tears at his unexpected, sweet comment. She loved her husband and she knew for a fact that he loved her, but neither of them spoke in flowery phrases. Every night of their lives together, they’d kissed good-night and said the words, “love you,” but after awhile, the meaning behind the words was lost in the rote pattern.

Looking down, she carefully opened the beautifully wrapped package. Pulling off the lid and digging into the tissue paper, she was surprised to find a photo album. She started to open the cover, but Troy’s hand covered hers.

“You can only look at the first page,” he said.

She looked up, the question in her eyes, but he didn’t give her time to voice it.

“This is only the first stop in our celebration. One page for each place. I’ll tell you when you can turn the page.”

She looked at him for several moments, trying to assimilate this man and this incredibly romantic gesture

with the easygoing guy who'd been leaving wet towels on her bathroom floor year after year.

Opening the photo album to the first page, she saw a picture of her and Troy the night of their senior prom. They hadn't come to the dance together, but they'd certainly left the gym hand in hand. His original date had come down with the flu, canceling the morning of. She'd come with Travis Scottsdale, her first semi-serious boyfriend and asshole of the century. Ten minutes after arriving at the dance, he told her he wanted to break up with her, leaving her sitting alone while he proceeded to make out in the corner with Amber Cooper.

"Oh my gosh. Look at us. We're so young."

"And sweaty," Troy joked. "We danced our asses off that night."

"It didn't help that the AC in the gym didn't work." Faith grinned at the memory.

"Must've been at least a hundred degrees in there."

Faith looked back at the photograph. "Where did you get this picture? I've never seen it."

"It was in the pocket of that letter jacket. I can't remember exactly where I got it. I think Judy Hayes gave it to me a couple weeks after the dance. I'm pretty sure I was supposed to pass it along to you."

"And obviously you forgot." Forgetting little things was a special talent of Troy's. She always had to remind him it was garbage day or to stop on the way home from work to pick up the dry cleaning.

Troy shrugged. "I was a teenage boy falling in love for the first time. Believe me, I was not about to give up that picture. I looked at it all the time."

This time, she couldn't hold back the tears his kind words provoked.

"Troy," she whispered.

He bent forward. "Kiss me," he murmured. Their lips touched. They'd kissed a million and twelve times in their lives, but this kiss, gentle and sweet and innocent, reminded her of their first. It was in this parking lot after the dance and she could still remember the excitement she felt when Troy Wainwright offered her a ride home. They'd gotten into his car and before he started the engine, he'd turned to her and said the exact same words.

Kiss me.

The request and the action had taken her breath away that night and she was feeling the same lightheadedness now as she had then. As soon as the memory entered her mind, she pulled away with a gasp and looked around. If she wasn't mistaken, this was very nearly the same parking spot.

"Our first kiss."

He grinned, pleased she'd remembered. "Yep. Right here. In front of the school." He turned on the radio and slid in a CD. Pushing Play, he pointed back down to the photo album as the sounds of Fleetwood Mac drifted through the speakers.

For the first time, her gaze traveled from the picture on the left page to a letter protected under the plastic film on the right page. It was written to her in Troy's handwriting.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Read it."

Faith,

You and I have known each other nearly our entire lives, traveling the same path through elementary, middle and high school. While we were acquaintances through those early years, I feel like I never really knew you, never saw you until the night of our senior prom.

Betsy Jordan coming down with the flu was probably the best thing that ever happened to me, even though I didn't realize it at the time. I remember how pissed off I was after her mother called and said she couldn't go to the dance with me. I almost stayed home that night, but my mom insisted I put the rented tux to use. You know my mom—waste not, want not.

I came late and by the time I got there, that dickhead, Travis had left you sitting all alone. I knew you all had been dating, so I was surprised when I saw him with Amber. I can still remember the look on your face as you watched him dancing with that other girl. You were so pale and yet, so strong. I could see how hard you were fighting not to cry, to hold on to your dignity. It was like a light went on inside me. I'd passed you in the hallways for years and never really looked at you, but that night, you were the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen and I wondered why in the hell I'd never noticed it before.

I was nervous as shit when I walked over to you and asked to sit down. You smiled at me and I felt like somebody had punched me in the gut. Talk about an instant attraction. We talked and laughed and after awhile, we started dancing. The last song of the night was "Landslide" and I took you in my arms and we slow danced while Stevie Nicks sang. After the dance, you said I could drive you home and we had our first kiss in the parking lot. I fell in love with you that night even though I

was too stupid at the time to know it. When I dropped you off at your house, I asked if I could call you again and you said yes. I smiled the whole way home, thinking about you.

Even after all this time, I only have to think about you and I smile.

*Love,
Troy*

Chapter Two

As Faith looked up from the page, she couldn't hold back the tears streaming down her face. He took the photo album from her hands and placed it on the dashboard. Unhooking her seatbelt, he pulled her into his arms.

"Shhh. This is supposed to be a celebration. No crying allowed," he teased as he cupped the back of her neck, holding her head to his chest.

"It's happy crying." The words were muffled by his shirt, but they still produced a quiet laugh from him.

"Oh well, happy crying. That's okay then."

She pulled away a few inches so that she could see his face as she spoke. Stroking his beloved, familiar cheek, she leaned closer, kissing him again. "I love you," she whispered against his lips just before the kiss deepened. Troy's arms tightened around her and she was overwhelmed by the passion behind his hold. It had been years since he'd kissed her with such fervor, such need. Her body responded to him, her nipples puckering beneath the cotton T-shirt, the juncture of her thighs going moist.

Pulling away to gasp a breath, she grinned. "You are getting so lucky."

He laughed, rubbing his nose against hers in a gesture as familiar as his kisses. "I'm counting on it. But it will

have to be later. Right now, we need to get going. Few more stops before I cash in on that *getting lucky* promise.”

He moved her back into her seat, pulling the seatbelt across her chest. His forearm grazed her taut nipples and she sucked in a breath, her eyes narrowing when she saw him grin. He was seducing her and doing a damn fine job of it. If anyone had told her yesterday, she’d be reacting to her own husband like a sex-starved woman, she’d have laughed and claimed it impossible.

After so long together, their roles had evolved gradually over time until they settled into their now-comfortable pattern. The lust of their honeymoon phase had shifted away from red-hot lovers after the first couple of years. For a few years, it seemed like they were roommates rather than a couple and at times, they’d felt more like coworkers whose job it was to raise two kids. Lately though, they’d simply become best friends.

While they still had sex regularly, the act itself wasn’t the explosion of bodies coming together in a flash of lightning and earth-shattering thunder that it had been in their younger years. Nowadays, it was a slow, smooth glide that slaked their needs and brought them closer in a contented, easy way.

However, at this moment, there was nothing she wanted more than to unhook her seatbelt and ride her husband’s lap in the middle of the high-school parking lot, and she didn’t give a damn who saw her.

Troy started the car and pulled back on to the street. His smug expression proved he knew what she was thinking. “Tsk, ts, ts. Shame on you, Faith. You know, it’s all coming back to me now. You always were impatient when it came to sex.”

She crossed her arms and shot him a dirty look. "And you were always a tease."

His smile grew wider and she was taken aback by the beauty of it. Sometimes it amazed her that this gorgeous hunky man was in love with her. That he belonged to her. "I'm not a tease. A tease never delivers. And you, Mrs. Wainwright, are going to get seriously fucked tonight—long and hard and deep. What I'm doing is building up the anticipation."

Her mouth went dry with each word he uttered and she squeezed her legs together in an attempt to fend off the sudden spark of arousal. "Shit," she whispered and he laughed loudly.

"You might want to pull that jacket over those pretty nipples of yours. I have a feeling the diner is still a hotspot for the local teens after school and I'd hate to have to fend off a bunch of horny boys." As he spoke, he pulled into the small parking lot behind the Main Street Diner.

"What are we doing here?"

Troy opened his car door and climbed out, leaning in the open window to look at her. "Having dinner."

She glanced at her watch and saw it was only four-thirty.

"I know. It's a bit early, but we have too much to do tonight so we're going to have to eat now. Besides we skipped lunch, remember?"

She wanted to tell him the only thing she was hungry for was him, but he didn't give her a chance to respond as he crossed around the truck to open her door. Taking her hand, he led her into the diner, pulling her directly to a booth in the corner.

As she took in the familiar restaurant, she noticed that the place was indeed packed with teenagers. A few of them glanced at her and Troy and she figured they were curious about her wearing an ancient letterman's jacket.

"This place never changes," Troy said as he picked up the menu, skimming it quickly. "Yep, even the food is the same. What do you say we have a couple of cheeseburgers with the works and split a big basket of fries?"

"Throw in a couple of chocolate shakes and I say you've got yourself a deal." As she put the menu down, Troy reached across the table to take her hand.

"Same thing we had the night after graduation."

As soon as he spoke, she realized why he'd brought her here. The diner was one of their regular hangouts during high school, so she figured the stop here was just a part of their walk down memory lane. Her mind traveled back to the night of commencement and suddenly the importance of the diner became more apparent.

She nodded. "You gave me this jacket that night."

Troy released her hand and his fingers roamed up the leather sleeve until he reached her face. Cupping her cheek, he lightly caressed her lips with his thumb, looking at them as he spoke. "I told you I didn't know exactly what the future held for me, just that I wanted you in it."

She kissed the pad of his thumb on its next pass. "You gave me this jacket, said you'd replace it with a ring when you had the money."

He lowered his hand, used it to pick hers up from the table. He looked at her engagement ring and the tiny diamond sparkled in the fluorescent light.

"Maybe I should have waited until I had more money before we made the jacket/ring exchange."

“This ring is beautiful.” He’d offered several times over the past few years to buy her another ring, but she’d always refused. She didn’t want a bigger diamond. She wanted the memories attached to this one.

His face became more serious, his brows furrowed. “I’ve always wanted to do right by you, Faith.”

She swallowed heavily. “And you always have.”

“I know I couldn’t give you a lot of things that you probably wanted, but—”

His words died down when the waitress came over. He placed their order, but he didn’t return to the conversation once the woman left.

Faith watched the worries she’d seen in his eyes disappear, quickly replaced by the mischievous twinkle she loved so well. “Seem to recall us making out in this booth a few times back in the day.”

“Behave. There are minors around.”

He chuckled, and then released a relaxed sigh. “Nice to be home again.” He stretched his arm across the back of the booth. “Seems like every time we’ve come back here lately, it’s been to put out a fire or deal with something bad.”

Faith agreed. They’d returned to Carlysle three times in the past year, once for her uncle’s funeral, once to help her mother clean out her basement after a pipe broke and flooded it, and again when Troy’s dad suffered a mild heart attack. During each trip, they’d been too busy to visit friends or old stomping grounds, so this trip back was particularly special. Given Troy’s surprise celebration, Faith suspected this could very well be one of the best trips of her life.

Their dinner conversation turned to the same familiar topics—parents, jobs, the kids. As they ate, they talked just as they'd done every night for the past twenty-five years, and then Troy paid the bill. He stood and rubbed his stomach before taking her hand and helping her up.

She groaned. "I can't believe I ate all that food. I feel like I could pop I'm so full."

Troy kept her hand and surprised her by kissing her knuckles softly. "You're in no danger of that. You've got a smokin' hot body and I swear you get prettier every year."

She laughed at his compliment. "Remind me to call Dr. Rosenberg when we get back. I think you need your eyes examined."

"Is this going to be the same sort of check-up as the hearing one?" Troy teased as they stepped out of the diner and back on to the sidewalk.

Faith laughed. She'd insisted he get his hearing checked a couple of years ago, convinced he was losing his after she spent months repeating herself to him. "Yeah, well, I wouldn't brag about passing that hearing test with flying colors. That just proves you ignore me when I'm talking."

Troy put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "I hear you just fine when you say stuff I want to hear. I mean if you were inviting me to suck on those pretty breasts or telling me to take you on the kitchen counter, I think you'd find out just how good my hearing is."

"So what you're saying is you have selective hearing?"

He nodded. "Yep, only picks up dirty sex talk."

"Ah, dirty *sex* talk. Not just dirty talk. So when I tell you to take out the garbage—"

“Eh, sorry. What? Were you talking?” He laughed at his joke as she playfully elbowed him.

Faith rolled her eyes. “It’s so nice to have that mystery solved after all these years.”

Grasping her hand again, he looked around the quiet neighborhood. “What do you say we walk off a few calories? Take a stroll down Main Street.”

“Sounds great.” Faith took a deep breath of the fresh scents of autumn. It was late September and she smiled as they walked. Fall was her favorite season. She loved the vibrant colors as the leaves on the trees started to change and the crisp, cool evening air. “I have to admit they’ve worked wonders on some of these buildings.”

They ambled slowly, window-shopping and reminiscing about the town and the people who lived there. Faith was almost surprised when Troy tugged her hand and pulled her into the small park located in the center of the town.

“Hey,” she said. “They’ve even redone the playground.”

Troy stopped to look where she was pointing. “Damn. They got rid of the rusty digger and sandpit. I loved that when I was a kid.”

“Your mother said you were destined for construction work and she knew it when you were three years old. She said you’d never leave home without your building blocks and plastic toolset.”

“Yeah, well, your mom said she always knew you were gonna work with kids. Said you started babysitting when you were twelve and everyone in town lined up to have you take care of their little ones. Deborah swears being a preschool teacher was your calling.”

“Predictable as the tides, you and me,” she said.

Troy scratched his chin, then nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Do you ever worry that we can’t pinpoint our kids in the same way?” Faith had often wondered and worried about Jackson’s and Jenna’s futures.

Troy gave her an amused look. “For one thing, it’s easy for our moms to say now that they knew all along what we’d become as adults. All they have to do is look at our chosen careers and then they can go back and pick out all the so-called signs. Secondly, I think I have a good idea about where our two are gonna end up.”

“You do?” Faith was genuinely surprised. Troy usually didn’t play the “I wonder” game with her, so she’d just assumed he didn’t think about the future.

“Jenna’s a natural at two things—sports and teaching. I wouldn’t be surprised if she called us to say she’s going to major in education, maybe study to become a health and phys. ed. teacher.”

Faith thought his guess was a good one. “I think you may be right. I don’t see her with little kids though.”

“Me either, but I could easily see her in a high school.”

She was amazed by how dead-on Troy’s assumption was. “And Jackson?”

“That kid came out of the womb talking. He’ll do something where all he needs is his mouth. Figure he could work in politics or be a sports announcer or even sell fucking used cars. Doesn’t matter what it is. That kid will land on his feet—not because of his brains, but because of his confidence and cockiness.”

Faith laughed. “Amen.”

“They’re good kids. They’ll be successful whatever they choose to do.”

While Faith truly believed the same thing, having Troy reaffirm that notion went a long way to easing her inner worrywart. “I agree.”

They’d been walking as they talked, the conversation distracting Faith from her surroundings. When they ended up at a bench by the lake, Faith realized where she was. Her words when she spoke showed her surprise. “Our bench.”

“What trip down memory lane would be complete without a visit here?”

She immediately noticed the original bench, which had been covered with graffiti, had been replaced. “It’s not the same one.”

Troy wrapped his arm around her waist. “Apparently part of the beautification of the city was to replace all of the old wooden benches with metal ones. The others were covered in carved-out initials, remember?”

She nodded. “Two of those initials were ours.” She looked around and noticed the new metal benches surrounding the lake, and then she looked back at the one in front of her, confused. “This bench is still made of wood.”

“I made a phone call when I heard they were doing work on the park. And then a little donation.” Troy drew her attention to a new plaque that hung on the back of the wooden bench.

As Faith read the words, her eyes welled with tears. Apparently happy crying was becoming a habit for her.

This bench was donated in honor of the love of my life.

It was here Faith said yes and agreed to become my wife.

“Oh my God. That’s beautiful.”

Troy beamed. “And it rhymes.”

“So it does.” They laughed together until Troy reached out and pulled her into his strong embrace. She’d never quite gotten over how good it felt to be enveloped by this large frame. She loved the feeling of being surrounded by him—it always made her feel protected and cherished.

“One of the happiest days of my life was the day you said you’d marry me, Faith.”

She pulled away just a bit to look at him. “Smartest decision I ever made.”

He bent down and kissed her, their lips betraying their need for each other. She wanted him more than she’d wanted him in a long time. Hell, maybe more than she’d ever wanted him. His thigh moved inward, brushing between her legs and she thrust forward, driving herself against his strong leg muscle, trying to find surcease for her aching pussy.

His hand delved beneath her jacket, plucking at her hard nipples in the way he knew she loved, and the action caused her to push against his thigh even harder.

“Sex,” she murmured against his lips when he lightened the kiss, nipping playfully at her lower lip.

“Not yet. We’re still in public.”

“I don’t give a shit.” She didn’t. She would happily lie down on this bench—her bench—and say yes all over again if only he’d make love to her.

“The night’s still young.”

She growled. “Oh my God. I’m going to have to kill you now.”

He laughed at her threat. "Anticipation," he said, repeating his earlier words.

"Insanity. Mine. Coming soon if you don't fuck me."

Troy pulled away, feigning affront. "Here I am trying to be romantic and all you can think about is sex, sex, sex."

Faith grinned coyly as her hand launched a sneak attack on his covered cock. He gasped when her hand brushed against his all-too-prevalent erection. "I don't appear to be the only one thinking about sex, Troy."

Troy grasped her wrist firmly in his hand. She thought he meant to pull it away, so she was surprised when he pushed it against his cock, harder. "Take a good long feel, Faith. I want you to remember exactly what you're going to have pounding between your legs tonight. I'm going to fuck you for hours. Going to have you begging for mercy."

"Mercy?" she asked. "Or more?"

His eyes darkened at her sensual teasing. "I'm going to warn you now, Faith. This isn't going to be a night of the same-old, same-old. None of that comfortable, easy lovemaking we've fallen into. I've been planning tonight for weeks and I've had plenty of time to figure out all the ways I'm going to take you."

Faith felt her knees go weak at his naughty threat.

"Like?" she prompted, loving Troy's sudden talent for dirty talk. She could feel her arousal gathering and she briefly wondered if it was seeping through her jeans.

"Like tying you up and fucking every part of your sexy body."

Faith closed her eyes, groaned. "Every part?"

He bent forward to nip at her earlobe, his words rumbling through her soul like a freight train. "Mouth, pussy, ass, tits. Every part."

"God, yes," she whispered as she attempted to grind her aching clit against his leg harder.

"Shit," Troy said, taking another step away from her. "You're driving me crazy, Faith. I have a plan, but you are seriously fucking with it."

She laughed. Her lovely, organized husband. No doubt, he had their evening's activities plotted out down to the very second. She loved the idea that she could turn him on so much, he lost his way. Loved the power she felt in that moment, the knowledge that she could still fluster him, leave him panting for more.

"Take me back to the truck," she said, dragging her fingers along his chest.

His eyes narrowed with suspicion. "You'll play along? Be a good girl?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

"Faith."

"You aren't the only one with some plans for tonight, Mr. Wainwright. Let's go."

Their return to the truck was much quicker than their leisurely stroll toward the park. Troy had an iron-clad grip on her hand and Faith knew he was hanging on to his sanity by a mere thread. He opened her car door, quickly crossing to take his place behind the driver's seat.

"Do you remember those woods over on Watkins' Lane?" she asked as he started the car.

She distinctly heard him mumble the word "fuck" before he put the truck in drive and pulled out of the parking lot.

“Why?” he finally asked.

“I want to go there. I mean, that place certainly has some sentimental memories attached to it.” Faith tried to give him an innocent grin, but she knew she was falling short. She and Troy had spent many a night “parking” on the very secluded, dirt lane and she’d lost her virginity to Troy in the backseat of his dad’s car there shortly after graduation.

“Dammit, Faith.”

“You seriously mean to tell me that Watkins’ Lane wasn’t a stop on your tour?”

He gave her a sheepish grin and shrugged. “I knew what would happen if we went there and I’m too old and too large to try to have sex in the front seat of a truck. I’ve gotten spoiled by years of being able to have sex in the privacy of our bedroom...in a king-sized bed.”

She reached across the truck seat and ran her hand up his thigh until she could press her palm against his cock. “Take me there, Troy. I want to see it again.”

He briefly glanced in her direction and didn’t respond, but she noticed when he took the appropriate turn and she knew she was getting her request. “There’s nothing to see back there except trees and a dirt road.”

“Well, I wasn’t really planning to look at the scenery. Actually I just want to suck your cock. Since you have this hang-up about public places, I thought maybe you’d feel more comfortable there. I seem to recall you didn’t mind doing all sorts of naughty things there when we were younger.”

“Shit.” He pulled to the side of the road so quickly she almost got whiplash. “You wanna go to Watkins’ Lane, fine. But first, we’re gonna pretend to follow my plan.”

He reached for the photo album, placing it on her lap. Dusk had descended so he had to turn on the interior light. “Turn the page. You can read the letter while I drive.”

She flipped the page as he pulled back out on to the road. The picture was of the two of them before they married. Troy was facing the camera and she was looking up at him—both of them were laughing. Had they ever been that young, that carefree? Troy’s dark eyes were brimming with a self-assuredness that said the world was his to claim. She recognized it as the same look that now resided in her son’s brown eyes and she was amazed by how similar the father and son really were.

Her gaze traveled to her younger face and in it, she saw shades of Jenna. Faith looked like a young woman—happy and in love, with her future looming bright before her. She silently prayed she’d see that exact same expression on her daughter’s face one day when she met the young man who would turn her head and make her believe in forever.

As Troy drove, she read the letter and realized the future captured by that photograph was now her past. And oh, what a past it had been.

My beautiful Faith,

I remember my dad telling me when I was younger I’d know instantly when I met the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. At the time, I thought the old guy was off his rocker. Dating had never been comfortable for me and I was pretty sure married life would be more of the same—endless hassles and complications.

Then I met you. It’s always been easy between us, Faith. Easy to talk, to laugh, to love. I’d dated lots of girls

before I met you and it was always damn hard work. I felt like I had to think before I spoke, that I was always second-guessing every gesture, every move, playing games with no clear-cut rules. I never did any of that with you. You just came into my life and let me be me. When I look back now, I can't remember a time when you weren't there or a time when I didn't want you there.

I remember the day I proposed to you like it was yesterday. I'd carried that damn little ring around in my pocket for nearly a week, trying to find the right time, the right words. And after all that worry, I still fucked it up. We walked around that stupid lake for hours and the whole time I was giving myself an internal pep talk, determined you'd have my ring on your finger before I took you home that night.

Finally, my nerves snapped and when we sat down on that bench, I blurted out, "Hey, let's get hitched." Days of practicing flowery proposals and that's what came out. I didn't remember my dad's words about knowing the right woman until you answered me. You just smiled, laughed a little and said, "Okay. That sounds like fun," and I knew the man was right. You didn't want the fancy words or flowers or even a big ring. You just wanted me and in that moment, I felt like I was ten feet tall.

You have always been the only woman in the world for me. You're my best friend, my lover, my wife and my life.

Troy

Chapter Three

Troy pulled the truck over to the side of the secluded road as Faith finished reading the letter and closed the album. Her heart was filled with so much happiness and love, she wondered how it all fit without bursting at the seams.

Troy remained silent and she appreciated that he gave her time to compose herself and her thoughts. She looked around at their quiet surroundings and felt certain there wasn't another human being for miles around. Fred Watkins, Troy's father's best friend, owned the land where they were parked. He'd inherited it from a great aunt, but he chose to reside in his family's large house in town, rather than move into his late aunt's small cabin. He only used the land during hunting season, usually with Troy's father.

Troy put the car in park and turned off the engine, leaving the power to the radio on. He unbuckled his seatbelt and fiddled with the CD player for a second. Soon the truck was filled with Lionel Ritchie's voice singing "Truly."

"Have you been rifling through my CD collection?" she teased, glad for the opportunity to lighten the emotions of the moment.

"I know you like his music."

“Troy...tonight...everything—” She closed her eyes and tried to find a way to express how much this evening meant to her.

He reached over to take her hand, squeezing it gently. When she opened her eyes and looked at him, she knew he understood. He could read the words in her face as easily as she could see the understanding in his. They were connected by a lifetime of experience and sometimes words just weren’t necessary.

The crinkles around his eyes deepened as he grinned. “So, here we are.”

“Watkins’ Lane. This certainly brings back some memories. One night in particular...” She smiled when she saw he was recalling the same night she was.

“We did quite a bit of fumbling around in my dad’s backseat,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Have to admit I’m not real proud of my effort that first night.”

“I was a virgin and nervous as hell. You knew that.”

“Yeah, I did. And it sort of scared the shit out of me. I didn’t want to hurt you, Faith.”

She scooted across the seat, closer to him. “You didn’t.” She tucked her hand under his T-shirt, running her fingers along his chest.

“Yeah well, even so, you have to admit, it wasn’t my finest hour. It was over in less than a minute.”

She stroked his nipple, loving his quick intake of breath. “Funny. I don’t remember that night as being anything short of magical.”

He snorted. “You’re crazy. You don’t know what magic is.”

She smiled and decided to throw out a challenge. “I don’t, eh? Well, then maybe you should show me.”

“Oh, I’m gonna show you alright. What do you say we go for a do over?”

“Do over?”

He nodded. “Sort of like taking a Mulligan in golf. I want a chance to take your virginity again...this time without all the shaking hands and rushing.”

“Sounds like we’ve finally gotten to the good part of your *planned* activities.”

He placed his hand on top of where hers rested on his chest, the thin layer of his shirt separating them. For a moment, he looked at her and as she watched he seemed to transform before her eyes. Gone was her cocky, fun-loving husband and in his place, she watched the boy she’d fallen in love with reemerge. His face was more serious, more sincere. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

She blinked, trying to figure out what he was asking, until he continued.

“I mean I’ve heard it can hurt the first time.”

She closed her eyes and smiled. He was taking them back in time, giving her a second chance for magic.

“I’m sure,” she whispered, trying to bring forth the younger woman, the Faith she’d been all those years ago, when sex was an unknown and exciting thing.

At her answer, he bent forward and kissed her. It was a gentle melding of lips that spoke of newness and discovery. She moved closer, anxious to relearn all the things she’d forgotten about her husband’s lips.

“God, Faith. I want you so bad. It feels like I’ve waited forever for this night. We’ll go slow, I promise, and if you change your mind, just say so. We don’t have to do this.”

“Please,” she whispered when his hand drifted up to cup her breast.

“Don’t worry, baby. I’ll take care of you. I’ll always take care of you.”

With his gentle touches and sweet words, he transported her back in time and she felt the slightest fluttering in her stomach. Butterflies? Nerves? God, this really was starting to feel like her first time.

“I want to see you,” he whispered as his lips moved along her cheek, not stopping ’til he reached her ear. He sucked the lobe into his mouth. “I want to take your shirt off. Just your shirt...for now. Okay?”

She nodded, her voice failing her as he reached for the hem of her T-shirt, pulling it over her head. His gaze fell to her chest and she felt a hot blush rise to her cheeks as he looked at her. His eyes studied her body as if he’d never seen her before and for the briefest of moments, she actually felt the urge to cover herself up out of modesty.

“God,” he murmured. “You’re so beautiful. Can I take your bra off? I want to touch your breasts, kiss them.”

She moaned as she nodded. She wanted his lips on her, wanted his hands touching her. He reached behind her and she smiled when he fumbled with the clasp of her bra. His words drifted back to her. Do over. Magic.

As he pulled the lace away from her body, her hands did move up to cover herself. The moment was too real and she couldn’t overcome the belief that he was truly seeing her for the first time.

“Don’t hide yourself from me, Faith. Ever.” He gripped her wrists in his large hands, pulling them away from her breasts. His touch was firm, and arousal dampened her panties as she trembled slightly. He noticed her response, but mistook it. “Are you cold? I can turn the heater on.”

She shook her head. "No. No heat. I'm burning up."

He smiled at her admission and she watched him slip briefly out of his role, back into the skin of her confident, sex-incarnate husband. "Those are only sparks. By the time we're finished, I'm going to have you hotter than a raging inferno."

He didn't give her time to respond as he bent his head to her breast, sucking her nipple into his mouth roughly. She threw her head back and he took the motion as an invitation to advance their play. Pulling away briefly, he reached beneath his legs and hit the release on the bucket seat, pushing it as far back as it would go.

Gripping her legs, he pulled them toward him. "Lie down."

She slowly reclined as Troy twisted, positioning himself between her legs and coming over her. He resumed his kisses to her breasts, tweaking her hard nipples until she was squirming beneath him. "I love your tits," he whispered and she grinned at his very masculine admission. "I want to squeeze them around my cock and fuck them."

"Do it," she urged.

He shook his head and she watched as he seemed to catch himself. "Later. This time is for you."

He unbuttoned her pants and slowly dragged down the zipper. The entire time he watched her face and she could see he'd fallen back into his earlier role. The transformation was amazing. Why hadn't they ever tried role-playing in bed? Troy was obviously a natural.

Anxious to resume the play, she reached out and grasped his wrists—her nervous gesture causing him to stop.

“I just want to touch you. Just my fingers, Faith. If you don’t want any more than that, I’ll stop. Honest. Let me show you how good I can make you feel.”

She licked her lips apprehensively. “Just your fingers?”

“For now,” he added. “Then you can tell me if you want more.”

She nodded her assent, lifting her hips as he pulled her jeans down. She expected him to leave them around her ankles, so she was surprised when he didn’t stop until the denim and her tennis shoes were lying in a heap on the floorboard. She was completely naked in his truck in the middle of nowhere and he’d yet to take off a stitch of clothing.

He’d given up his place between her legs when he undressed her and his hip was now next to her closed legs on the seat. His hand drifted along her upper thigh and instinct had her pressing her legs together more tightly. “Just my fingers, Faith,” he repeated. She nodded, but made no move. “Open your legs. Let me in.”

She spread her legs a couple inches.

“More.” He moved his hand to her stomach and left it resting there while his gaze remained on her pussy. “Spread them apart more.”

The tight space in the truck cab limited her legroom until Troy took over for her. Lifting her left leg, he placed it over the back of the truck seat. Then he gripped her right one and pulled it around his hip as he resumed his place behind the driver’s seat and between her legs. If she’d felt exposed before, it was nothing compared to now as she lay spread-eagle and nude.

“Jesus. I have a feeling should my life ever pass before my eyes, this is going to be the image that flashes in my mind. God, Faith. You are so sexy.”

His words eased her discomfort until his hand reached for her. Dragging his fingers slowly down her stomach, he drew a trail from her navel to her clit, stopping when he reached the distended flesh begging for his touch. “You’re wet.”

She nodded. Of course, she was wet. She was drenched, drowning in a sea of arousal.

“You weren’t wet the first night.”

His words caught her unaware. “I wasn’t?”

He shook his head. “You were too nervous and I was too stupid to know how to put you at ease. I know I must have hurt you.”

“Doesn’t look like that will be a problem tonight.”

His face was serious and she suddenly realized just how much he’d worried about their first time. The worst part was she could have set his mind at ease years ago. She didn’t remember a bit of pain. She didn’t remember anything except the amazing feeling of having him inside her. But she knew her husband and she knew words wouldn’t have the same effect as actions.

“What would you have done differently?” she asked.

He turned on the seat and slowly leaned forward until his mouth was hovering just above her pussy. His hot breath as he spoke tickled her sensitive flesh. “I would have done this.”

His lips descended and he paid homage to every needy part of her. His lips sucked on her clit, his teeth nipped at her mons, his tongue traveled from her bottom to her opening, thrusting inside as she thrashed and moaned

against the seat. For several minutes, he gave her all the things he'd regretted forgetting the first time. When he added his fingers to the mix, slipping two inside her, she closed her eyes, shuddering as her orgasm came.

"Troy." His name fell from her lips on a gasp as he climbed over her. She wrapped her legs around his jeans-clad erection, her body thrusting against him, seeking more. He kissed her and she tasted her juices on his lips, the sexiness of that sensation driving her needs even higher. "Please make love to me. Please."

She heard the rasp of his zipper, felt the head of his cock as it prodded her sensitive flesh. "Hold on to me," he whispered.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and recalled him saying the same words to her all those years ago.

Hold on to me.

She'd held him that night and she'd never let go.

His cock pushed in slowly, gently and she knew he wasn't finished making amends for the past. When he was seated to the hilt, he stopped. Raising his head, he captured her gaze. "Okay?"

She smiled, a tear escaping despite her best efforts to hold it back. "It's perfect, Troy."

He kissed her cheek, rubbing his nose along the damp skin where the tear had fallen and the serious young man disappeared. She knew this time he was gone for good. Her self-assured, sexy husband returned and grinned. "What do you say we try to beat our previous time?"

She giggled. Sex with Troy was always fun. She clenched her pussy muscles tightly, loving the groan her

sexual teasing brought from his lips. "Think you're up to it, old man?"

He pulled out until just the head of his cock remained inside, then he pushed back in—hard, deep, fast. She gasped. "Was that a challenge?"

She tightened her legs around his waist, changed her position slightly to capture him even deeper. He gritted his teeth when she ran her fingernails along his back, through his T-shirt. "Game on."

Rather than laugh, Troy took her dare to heart, coming into her body with finesse and skill. He drove her to two more climaxes before she felt his body tighten. He called out her name loudly as he spilled his come into her body, kissing her as if his life depended on it.

"Love you," he muttered as they both gasped for breath.

A niggling worry tugged at her heart. "Troy, I've never thought of our first time together as anything less than amazing. We really didn't need the do over."

He studied her face for a second and then a wide grin broke free. "Hell, Faith. Every time with you is like the first time."

"Magic?"

"Magic."

For several moments, they remained locked together. The windows of the truck had fogged up so completely, Faith felt like they were drifting alone on a cloud. After several minutes, Troy pushed himself up, reclaiming his seat behind the steering wheel.

One glance proved that while he'd managed to strip every piece of clothing off her body, he'd done no more

than unzip his jeans. He reached down to pull her up, and then went to work finding all her clothing as she dressed.

Once she'd put herself back to rights, Troy pushed the lever and moved the truck seat forward once again. "You know, I seem to recall someone trying to talk me out of buying the truck with the extra large cab, saying something about it being too big and a waste of money."

Faith laughed. "Troy. I was wrong. Very, very wrong."

He cranked up the defroster with a shit-eating grin. "Music to my ears."

As Faith glanced at the car's clock, she was shocked to discover it was only nine-thirty. It seemed like she and Troy had lived a lifetime in the past few hours. She laughed to herself when she realized they actually had. They rode without speaking for several minutes, letting the radio fill the silence.

As they drove back into town, Faith looked at Troy. "What's next?"

"Well, the little detour down Watkins' Lane sort of threw a wringer into my plans, but it's nothing we can't work with." He pulled up in front of Grace United Methodist Church.

"Was tonight a little bit too much for you? Feeling the need to pray for forgiveness of your sins?" she joked.

"Sex with you is never a sin. More like a gift straight from God. You don't really need me to tell you why we're here, do you?"

She shook her head. "We got married here. I'd never forget that."

"Yeah, well. There was a church social going on until about nine o'clock. Pastor Gregory said we were welcome

to come to it and maybe walk around the sanctuary, relive the wedding day part.”

Faith tried to work up a bit of guilt about messing with his plans, but she couldn't seem to produce the feeling. “Oops. Sorry.”

He laughed. “No, you're not.”

“Looks like the social's over.”

Troy glanced at the dark church. “Yep. Locked up for the night. Guess that means we'll just have to skip this part and move to the next item on the list.”

“Which is?”

He pulled the truck back on to the road, gesturing to the photo album still lying on the dashboard. “Why don't you turn the page and find out?”

Faith opened the photo album and laughed at the picture on the next page. It was a photograph she'd taken of Troy the night of their wedding. He'd taken off his shirt, but pulled the suspenders on his tuxedo pants back up to be silly. He was flexing his muscles for the camera. Reflected in the mirror behind him was the image of her, still in her wedding dress, taking the picture and laughing.

She glanced up as he pulled into the parking lot of the only hotel in Carlysle.

He looked over at her and smiled. “Honeymoon. Read the letter and then you have a promise to keep.”

“Promise?”

“Something about me getting lucky.”

She laughed. “I thought you already did.”

“That was just the appetizer.” Troy tugged on her ponytail playfully. “Now I'm going in for the main course *and* dessert.”

Faith smiled, and then looked down to read her next letter.

Faith,

When I look back at this picture, I'm amazed to recall how young we were when we got married. Back then, it didn't seem strange to get married at twenty and yet, I can't believe our folks didn't go through the roof when we suggested it. Instead, your mother made you that pretty white dress and my mom baked a cake for the reception, while our family and friends gathered around us to wish us well. Jackson turned twenty-one last month and I know without a shadow of a doubt if the boy said he wanted to get married, I'd tell him he's too young.

We were young, Faith, but when I think about it, I realize my feelings for you now haven't changed through the years. Our love ran hotter than a furnace when we first got married and I can remember rushing through the days at work, just so I could run home to you.

I became a man in your arms, physically and emotionally. When I left my parents' home, I was an idealistic boy with more plans than brains, more grand schemes than money. We grew up together—you and I—struggling to pay the rent, to keep food on the table, to adjust to living away from home.

That first year was tough. I was working two shitty jobs—both for minimum wage, while you spent your days stuck in our tiny apartment, taking care of other people's kids. We ate a lot of macaroni and cheese! Then my mother got cancer and passed away. The night she died, you stayed up with me all night, talking to me, holding me. You were the glue that held me together, kept me

moving forward. My parents raised me with their values, but you're the one who taught me what those values meant. You showed me how to walk the walk and how to live inside my own skin. You never stopped believing in me, in our future, in our dreams.

I flexed my muscles for you the night of our honeymoon, tried to impress you with my brawn, but the truth is you're my strength. Without you, I'd be nothing.

Troy

Chapter Four

Faith stood in the doorway and looked around the hotel room. She couldn't believe Troy had managed to get the exact same room they'd stayed in twenty-five years ago. "Looks like they've done some renovations recently."

"Thank God," Troy said as he tossed the duffel bag with her toiletries on a table by the door. "The place was a dive the last time we stayed here. If they hadn't gutted the inside and made it so nice, this wouldn't have been included on my tour regardless of the fact we spent our honeymoon here. I was fully prepared to drive the thirty-five miles to stay at the Days Inn in Lowell."

Faith shook her head. "That wouldn't have been the same."

Troy pulled a bottle of champagne out of an ice bucket and pointed to it. "Thirsty?"

"I can't believe you came over here this afternoon and set all this up." In addition to the bottle of wine, he'd scattered rose petals on the bed and dropped off their luggage.

"I'm just sorry one night in this hotel room was the sum equivalent of our whole honeymoon. Wish I'd taken you somewhere more special than downtown Carlyle."

She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Our honeymoon was perfect, Troy. Why on

earth would we have wasted all that money to fly someplace like the Caribbean or Hawaii when we'd have done the same thing there that we did here?" She ran her hand along the front of his jeans and smiled when she felt his cock twitch under her touch. "I mean you've seen one bed, you've seen them all."

Troy grinned wickedly. "You've got a point there. Take off that jacket," he said, his voice laced with a sexy demand she found hard to resist. She recalled his warning back in the park. He'd been so many different men tonight, she was feeling slightly overwhelmed.

"Haven't you ever heard of saying please?"

His eyes narrowed, darkened. "I told you earlier what was going to happen tonight. Take off the T-shirt and bra while you're at it."

She slid the heavy jacket off, tossing it over a chair. Pulling her T-shirt from her jeans, she slid it over her head slowly, enjoying the needy look in her husband's eyes.

"Now who's being a tease?" His voice was husky, deep and the rough timbre of it pushed all her hot buttons at once. Her breasts as she freed them from her lacy bra felt full and too sensitive to touch. Her panties were damp and her breathing was labored.

"God, Troy. I need you so badly."

He shook his head as he rubbed the front placket of his jeans. She could see his erection straining against the material. "I believe you said something about sucking my cock." Reaching down, he unzipped his jeans. Kicking off his shoes, he tugged off his pants and boxers. Then, as he sat on the edge of the bed, he pulled off his T-shirt, as well. It was the first time she'd seen him naked all day and she had to admit there was a lot to be said for his

anticipation game. Her fingers itched to touch every inch of his firm, tanned skin.

He beckoned her to him with a crooked finger. "I want your mouth on me."

She trembled at his admission and wondered once again when sex had stopped being sexy for them. They'd set the sheets on fire in their younger days and his racy words and smoldering looks were bringing it all back to her. How could they have let this slip away?

She walked across the room, grasping his wrist as he ran his hand along his thick flesh. She stilled his motions, shaking her head slowly. "Let me do that for you."

"Get on your knees."

She dropped down before him and he closed his eyes briefly when she pushed his thighs farther apart and settled between his legs.

"Wait a minute." He reached behind him on the bed and grabbed a pillow. Reaching for her elbow, he bid her to stand up while he tossed the pillow on the floor. "Kneel on this." He cupped her cheek with his large palm, a quick gesture of adoration.

His gaze darkened when she grasped his cock, tightening her fist without preamble, giving him the rough touch she knew he loved.

The sight of his rock-hard erection set her mouth to watering. She licked her lips as she listened to the sound of his breathing deepen, speed up. He brushed her cheek with the back of his knuckles before reaching back to take her ponytail in his grasp.

With steady pressure, he guided her head to his lap and she allowed him the control. He wasn't taking her anywhere she didn't want to be. Usually a patient,

thoughtful lover, she was enjoying his sudden dominance and she would never have guessed how much she desired giving him this power over her. She'd seen shades of his unbending determination to steer their course all day. Now, in the bedroom, she handed herself over to his command, an enthusiastic slave to his will.

Taking him into her mouth, she savored the sound of his groan when she tongued the sensitive skin just below his head. His fingers tightened in her hair and she sensed he was restraining himself, holding back out of concern. Something inside her snapped and she pushed away.

"Take me like you mean it, Troy."

"What?"

"Take me the way you want to. We've been together long enough for you to know I won't break. I'm not made of glass. You made me some promises in the park. I want them. All of them."

He swallowed heavily and she could see him fighting some sort of internal struggle. No doubt the old-fashioned man he was raised to be, the one who believed women were meant to be protected and cherished, was battling the alpha male who wanted to take, to control, to own.

"I don't think you understand what I'm—"

She cut his words off with her mouth on his cock. She devoured his hard flesh, took him to the back of her throat while tightly squeezing his balls in her hand.

His fingers flew to her hair and she thought for a moment he'd pull her away, stop her, but instead he pushed her head lower, forced her to take him deeper. She hummed her assent, felt the moisture gather in her pussy and knew which man had won when he tugged on her ponytail, forced her head back until her gaze met his.

“I’m going to fuck your mouth, Faith. This isn’t gonna be a simple blowjob. You understand there’s a difference, right?”

She narrowed her eyes, angry that he felt the need to explain himself. It felt like he was asking permission, seeking her approval. She bared her teeth, let him feel them against his flesh. He growled—an honest to God growl—and then gave her exactly what she’d asked for. He gripped her face between his large palms, pulling her mouth down on his cock, pushing deeper with each entry, the entire time he alternated between praising her beautiful mouth and demanding that she suck harder, take more, swallow his head.

“Shit. I’m coming, Faith. God, baby. I’m coming.” The first splash painted the back of her throat as Troy continued to push her mouth on to his cock. She swallowed several times until his hands slackened and she heard his harsh breathing begin to slow. Looking up, she watched as he fell onto his back on the bed. She released him, loving the utter exhaustion and complete satiation on his face. Resting her head on his thigh, she felt no need to move right away.

Though her own arousal was still thumping, her body crying for satisfaction, she was happy to stay where she was, secure in the fact that she’d just rocked her husband’s world.

“Come here.” His voice was husky, deep.

She crawled up on the bed beside him, and he pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly in his embrace as he placed soft kisses on the top of her head. “Jesus, Faith. I never expected—I didn’t know—”

She raised her head and grinned. "Not too shabby for an old housewife, eh?"

"You aren't old."

She rolled her eyes, not surprised that was the only thing he heard.

"I wasn't too rough? I didn't hurt you?" His words brought to mind his memories of their first time and she wondered if he'd harbored his anxiety about harming her all these years. She'd never known, never suspected.

"You were hot," she said. "Despite my fear of sounding like a complete pushover, I have to admit having you take control in bed turns me on a heck of a lot more than I would have suspected."

He studied her face for a moment, his eyes serious, his mouth tight. "This could change things a bit."

She looked at him curiously. "What do you mean?"

"Knowing that you like it, knowing you want it. Jesus, Faith. I want it too. More than you could ever know."

"How come you never said anything? Never asked?"

He shrugged. "We've been married a damn long time. I sort of thought I knew what you liked in bed. I didn't want to scare you off."

"Troy. I think after all these years, it's pretty safe to say there's nothing you could do to chase me away."

He rolled over, pulling her under his large frame. "Is that right?" His question was laced with just a touch of sensual menace and as quickly as that, her body jumped into overdrive, not forgetting that while he'd come, she had not.

"You know," he said, "maybe you're right. A little fear's not necessarily a bad thing."

She reached up to place her hands on his shoulders, but he stopped her, gripping her wrists firmly and pushing them into the mattress beside her head. "Leave your hands there. Don't move them unless I give you permission to."

She narrowed her eyes for a moment, wondering what he'd do if she disobeyed. He must have read her thoughts on her face. "I have no doubt you're going to test my limits, Faith. All of them. But not yet. Let me show you exactly what we've been missing."

She nodded, leaving her hands in place. He rose from the bed, standing above her. She was still in her jeans, a problem he made short work of. After he stripped off her clothes, she watched as he crossed the room to a small bag in the corner she hadn't noticed before.

"What's in there?"

He shook his head. "No questions."

"Again?"

He chuckled. "You really suck at this game."

She grinned, but her smile faded when she watched Troy pull a pair of handcuffs from the bag. "Oh," she breathed.

He walked back to her, indicating with his finger that he wanted her to twist around and lay on the bed the proper way. She moved into the middle of the mattress and he bent over her, pulling her hands above her head once more. She lay still as he wove the chain on the cuffs around a slat on the headboard, then she heard the snick as he snapped the bracelet part around each of her wrists. Instinct drove her to tug on the metal. The cuffs were lined with some sort of soft leather, so her skin was protected.

“They’re secure,” he said, pointing out the obvious fact she’d just discerned for herself. She was definitely trapped. “You won’t get free until I decide to let you go.”

“And when will that be?”

He reached down and roughly pinched one of her turgid nipples.

“Ouch,” she cried.

“No questions. Remember?”

She nodded, trying to figure out why her pussy was begging her to ask him something else. The slight pain of his pinch seemed to have a direct connection to her clit. She squeezed her legs together, wishing she could use her hands to ease the need.

Troy slapped the side of her hip. “Hold still. Open your legs.”

“But—”

He slapped her other hip. “No talking.”

She opened her mouth to retort, but before she could utter a sound, he leaned down and took her lips in a crushing kiss. For a second, she feared he was bruising her lips, then he put his tongue into action and she decided she didn’t give a shit if he did. She returned his kiss, their tongues battling for dominance and he didn’t pull away until she was gasping for air.

“You’re going to be a bit tougher to train than I thought.”

A very large part of her took exception to the word *train* until he reached down to cup her breasts. He brought his lips into play, sucking on her nipples until she was crying out, pleading for him to fuck her. Her clit was pulsing painfully from the neglect, the need.

“God, Troy. Please,” she yelled again, but he ignored her, intent on tormenting her at his own pace.

Finally, after a lifetime, his lips began to travel south. Kneeling between her outstretched legs, she shivered when he blew a steady stream of air on her clit. “You need to cool off.”

She threw her head against the pillow and struggled not to call her dear, beloved husband every nasty name she’d ever heard.

When he looked up and gave her a smug grin, she clenched her teeth against the steady stream of obscenities floating through her mind. He was testing her, teasing her. She knew that as well as she knew the moment he took these cuffs off her hands, all bets were off.

He ran one finger through the short hair on her pussy. “Maybe it would help if you counted to ten.”

“Maybe it would help if you kissed it better.”

He laughed at her suggestion. “Maybe it would.” He bent forward and took her clit between his teeth with a sharp nip that took her by surprise before he used his tongue to soothe away the pain.

Her eyes closed of their own volition and she felt, more than saw, the brilliant flash of white light that accompanied her immediate climax. One touch and he’d driven her over the edge.

Troy seemed unfazed by her orgasm, instead continuing his assault on her senses. Each bite he delivered was followed by a soft kiss, each pinch was soothed by a delicate rub. He used her body against her, bringing her to the brink two more times. Each time he refused to acknowledge her trembling cries, her thrashing,

and instead he continued to play until she thought she'd go insane with the intensity of the pleasure.

When she thought she was completely drained, his cock brushed against her opening and her traitorous body came roaring back to life. He lifted her legs over his shoulders, his hands supporting her ass as he drove in with one hard, deep thrust.

Once seated, he held for just a moment, waiting for her at last. When her eyes met his, she saw how much this night meant to him and she felt as if she were seeing him clearly for the first time.

"I'm going to fuck you now," he said simply.

She nodded.

"I can't be gentle."

Her voice, hoarse from yelling, betrayed her and all she could do was nod once more.

Her gesture freed him as he pounded into her body with a strength she didn't know he possessed. She was vaguely aware of the fact she was screaming as he pushed her over into one long, painfully beautiful orgasm. The clenching contractions of her inner muscles seemed to push him into a different realm. He gripped her thighs, holding them against her chest as he opened her up for an even deeper fuck.

For a moment, she thought she saw stars and feared she'd pass out as she came one last time. He followed her into the moment, filling her with jet after jet of hot come, until he collapsed on top of her.

It wasn't until she felt her arms being lowered that she realized she had fallen asleep. Troy had cleaned her and covered her in a blanket, yet neither act had roused her until he unlocked the cuffs and pulled her into his arms.

“Okay?” he asked.

She nodded. Her body was numb from his hard use, but she knew she’d let him do it all over again in a heartbeat if he asked her to.

“So okay,” she whispered.

He kissed her brow. “You’re amazing. Just when I think it’s not possible for me to love you more, you find a way to burrow even deeper into my heart.”

She smiled tiredly at his admission, but her mind felt as mushy as her muscles. “Ditto,” she replied and she fell asleep once more as Troy’s chest rumbled with his soft laughter.

Faith woke up the next day, surprised by the brightness of the sun outside. Usually she was up with the birds in the still dim hours of early morning, but it would appear her husband had officially worn her out. Glancing over, she found him snoring softly, looking exactly like the man she’d woken up next to every morning for years. But this morning, something felt different, better. Ordinarily she’d get up and make a pot of coffee, reading the newspaper and playing FreeCell on her computer until he woke up and joined her.

This morning, despite the stiffness in her muscles, she was tempted to wake him up and demand he continue the amazing sex he’d initiated her into last night. His eyes opened slowly and found her staring at him.

“Good morning, Mrs. Wainwright.”

“Good morning,” she said, clearing the sleep from her throat. “Sleep well?”

“Like the dead. That was quite a workout you gave me. Figure I’m lucky I didn’t have a heart attack.”

She laughed. “Feel up to another round?”

He looked at her in disbelief, then worry. “Are you kidding me? Aren’t you sore? Faith, I was more than a little hard on you last night.”

She wiggled a bit, trying to determine if she was in pain. Problem was the second Troy said hard, her thoughts went straight to the gutter. “I don’t think I would have enjoyed a little hard. Seems to me you were very hard...and very good.”

Troy closed his eyes and she thought for a moment he was praying. “All the wasted years,” he muttered. “Dammit, Faith. I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but we don’t have time.”

Faith narrowed her eyes. “Why don’t we have time?”

“Tour’s not over yet.”

He glanced at the clock beside the bed and hopped out of bed before she could try to seduce him out of his damn plans. “Troy.”

“Come on, sweetheart. Rise and shine. We’re already behind schedule. I’m gonna grab a quick shower and get dressed. While you’re getting ready, I’ll run out and pick us up a couple of cups of coffee and some donuts.”

“You had me at shower,” she said, rising from the bed, letting the sheet drop away.

Troy shook his head. “Didn’t I specify? I’m showering alone. With the door locked. Behave yourself, Faith, or you’re going to find yourself lying facedown over my lap while I show you what happens to naughty girls.”

Her pussy fluttered at the thought and she grinned.

“Shit,” Troy said, turning for the bathroom.

He slammed the door and she distinctly heard the lock snap into place.

Despite Faith's best efforts to seduce him, Troy remained true to his original schedule. Luckily the beautiful, sunny day snapped her out of her bad temper as they rode through town with the windows on the truck rolled down. Troy was singing along with Toby Keith on the radio, and she had to admit she felt happier and more relaxed than she had in months. It was amazing what a night of incredible sex could do for a person.

She played the night over in her mind, not paying attention to their direction until Troy pulled the truck to the side of the road and parked.

"You were a million miles away," he said, tapping her nose playfully.

She shook her head. "Not that far." She looked outside and realized they were parked outside their first apartment. "Hillman Apartments."

Troy grinned. "Yep. Only doing a drive by here. It's time for you to open the album again. Read the next letter while we head to the next stop."

Putting the car in drive, he pulled away from the curb as she turned to the next page. Happy tears sprung to her eyes when she found a picture of Jackson and Jenna sitting outside on the grass in their Easter finest. Jackson, the very protective four-year-old brother, was sitting with his arm around his one-year-old sister. Both of them were smiling widely and Jenna had a pink plastic Easter egg in her hand. Faith ran her finger across the picture, touching

their faces and recalling how soft and wonderful it had been to caress their baby skin. Discreetly, she brushed away a tear, turning her attention to Troy's letter.

My dearest Faith,

I can still remember the night you told me you were pregnant with Jackson. We were living in that cardboard box of an apartment on Hillman. It was well after midnight and I came home from working the late shift, surprised to find you awake and waiting for me. You just looked at me and said, "I'm pregnant."

I don't think I realized exactly how much those words were going to change my life. I mean I was excited and happy. I wanted to make a family with you, Faith—never doubt that. But for the first time in my life, I also experienced true fear. Until that moment, I'd lived like most young men do, believing they are invincible, untouchable, immortal. Let's face it—the center of my universe was ultimately me. You were, of course, an integral part of my life, but the axis of my existence rotated solely on my wants, needs and desires.

Those two words changed all of that. Suddenly, I realized I would be responsible for another human being—completely responsible—and everything I'd come to think about the world shifted, changed and I was forced to become less selfish and more selfless. Quite a transition for a twenty-two-year-old to make. And once again, I had no answers, so I looked to you to guide me.

Even from that first night, you seemed so at ease, so comfortable with the changes happening in your body and in our lives. For nine months, I simply listened and followed as you prepared us to raise our child. I loved

watching your belly grow round, loved talking to the baby inside and feeling him kick. Every day was a miracle. I learned the basics of how to be a parent from my folks, but as I watched you with Jackson and Jenna, I discovered how to love unconditionally, without limits. You are a natural mother. No child in the world could ever have had a better mom than my two kids did and I owe you more for that than I could ever hope to repay.

I've received hundreds of gifts in my lifetime—from ties on Christmas to a clunky used car on my seventeenth birthday. None of them compare to the ultimate gift you gave me—fatherhood. I cannot imagine what my life would have been like without Jackson and Jenna.

*I love you,
Troy*

Chapter Five

As she finished reading the letter, Faith let her eyes drift back to the picture of her son and daughter. She simply couldn't look at Troy yet, couldn't speak without dissolving into tears. Her mother had been right. All these years, she'd thought her husband was easygoing, unobservant. Turned out he'd understood their lives better than she had.

They drove in silence for several minutes. Troy was focused on the road and she suspected he knew how close she was to losing it. Finally, he turned the truck into a driveway and shut off the ignition.

"We're here."

She looked up. They were parked in front of their first home. They'd moved in to this house on Anders Street the day Jackson turned one month old. The apartment had been too small to even consider raising a child in and Troy had insisted his son have a yard to play in.

"Our first real home," she said, her voice thick with the emotions fighting to get out. "I loved this little house." They'd stayed here for eleven years, spent the majority of their children's younger years in the place until Troy's transfer at work sent them away from Carlsle, away from their friends and family.

"Wanna go in?"

She looked at him with surprise. "Can we? I mean do you think the people who live here now would care?"

Troy opened the door, crossing to help her out of the truck. "Guy who bought this place from us moved out a couple years ago. With the economy in the shitter, he couldn't sell so he's been renting it out. Turns out the last renters moved out a few months ago and he hasn't found anyone else to move in. So, I rented it for the day."

"You rented it? For a day?"

Troy shrugged, but she couldn't believe all the time he must have spent planning this perfect weekend for her. Tears sprung to her eyes.

"This is your fault, you know," she said, when he laughed.

"More of those happy tears?"

"I can't believe there are any more tears left in me."

Troy took her hand and led her to the front porch. Bending down, he lifted a flowerpot and retrieved a key. "Right where it's supposed to be."

He unlocked the door, but before she could step over the threshold, Troy bent down to pick her up.

"What are you doing?" She couldn't help the giggle that escaped. Try as she may, she couldn't remember her husband ever picking her up like this.

"I couldn't carry you over the threshold the first time because you had Jackson in your arms."

"So this is another do over?"

He grinned at her use of his term. "Yep. We're really correcting a lot of mistakes here, aren't we? Another day or two and we could have every screw up from the last twenty-five years sorted out."

“That would be nice,” she said, struggling to think of a single mistake that needed to be fixed.

He put her down in the front foyer and Faith turned to look at her beloved first home. “It’s still the same.”

“Not exactly,” Troy said as he led her into the living room. “Mercifully that brown shag carpeting has been replaced with Berber.”

“Oh my God. I’d forgotten about that horrible carpet. Terrible stuff to try to clean.”

“Wish we’d had money when we lived here. I always thought this place would really look good with hardwood floors.”

Faith smiled at his comment. Her husband was the consummate builder. For the past twenty-five years, he’d worked his way through the ranks at the construction company, now serving as master carpenter and supervisor. He’d recently started talking to his boss about buying half the business and expanding it. Troy was the hardest worker she’d ever met and one of the smartest men on the planet. She was so proud of all he’d accomplished with just a high-school diploma and at least two dozen trade and management classes taken at the local community college over the years. He was constantly striving to better himself, to learn more so that he could be a valuable employee and a successful supervisor.

“That would have looked nice. I wonder...” She drifted through the living room to the door that led out on to the back patio. “It’s still there.” She smiled as she spotted the wooden playset Troy had designed and built for their kids.

Troy grinned when he spotted what she was looking at. "What do you know about that? Spent two months designing that thing."

"The kids loved it. I can't begin to count how many hours Jackson spent on that tire swing and the monkey bars."

Troy nodded. "And if you couldn't find Jenna in the house, it was always a good bet she'd be in that sandbox." He draped his arm around her shoulders as they looked around the large backyard and reminisced about all the kids' birthday parties and family picnics they'd held there.

"It was a great house to raise kids in," Faith said as Troy gestured for her to lead the way back into the house.

"The perfect house. What do you say we check out the rest of the rooms? And then..." He paused as she turned to look at him.

"And then?" she prodded.

"And then I have a surprise for you in our old bedroom."

She laughed, running her hand across the front of his pants. "I'll just bet you do. You realize I could begin to get spoiled by all these surprises."

Troy shrugged, pulling her hand away from his cock and kissing it. "I'm a guy, Faith. We don't think of sex as spoiling, but more as sustenance. Besides, I wanted to make this weekend special."

She moved closer, wrapping her arms around his waist and placing a soft kiss on his lips. "It's been the most special weekend of my life."

"Good. But..." he placed a quick kiss on the end of her nose, "it's not over yet."

They toured through the rest of the house at a leisurely pace, each room bringing back a plethora of memories.

When they entered their old bedroom, Faith gasped. Like the rest of the house, the room was bare, but in the middle of the floor, someone had laid out a plush, quilted bedspread and pillows. Next to it was a picnic lunch, complete with chilled wine, fried chicken, potato salad and chocolate-covered strawberries for dessert.

"How on earth?" The food was fresh, the scent of the warm chicken assaulting her senses and making her mouth water.

"Your mother came by earlier and set this all up for us. I picked the key up from the guy yesterday when I supposed to be golfing and gave it to your mother while you were changing into the T-shirt and letterman's jacket. I told her to leave it under the flowerpot on the front porch on her way out."

"My God. You thought of everything."

Troy shrugged. "You've always teased me about over-planning."

"I'll never do that again. Troy, this is wonderful."

They walked over to the blanket and sat down. Faith filled their plates with her mother's scrumptious homemade picnic lunch while Troy poured the wine and pushed Play on the small CD player. Neil Diamond's "Hello Again" filled the room.

"Another one of my CDs?"

Troy nodded. "Snuck them out of your car a couple days ago. Kept worrying you'd realize they were missing."

They listened to the music, relaxing as they ate. It had been a long, busy weekend and yet Faith didn't feel a bit

tired. Instead, she was energized. She felt more alive than she had in months.

“Jenna was conceived in this room,” Faith said as she finished the last of her potato salad and wiped her mouth on a napkin.

“That was quite a night.”

She laughed. “You’d just come home from Billy Tucker’s bachelor party and you were drunk.”

“I was barely tipsy. I’d had three beers the whole night. And those were only consumed in hopes of making the women at the strip club your cousin Rodney dragged us to, look better. Never been to such a dive.”

Faith narrowed her eyes and pretended to be annoyed. “You came home at two in the morning, crawled into bed and woke me up by putting your freezing feet on me.”

“It was the middle of January. I was hoping you’d warm them up.”

It was amazing to her how clearly she could recall that night. Half the time, she struggled to remember what had happened the week before and yet, she could remember the night they’d created Jenna like it happened yesterday instead of nineteen years earlier. “You pulled me into your arms and kissed me.”

Troy nodded. “I said, ‘Let’s make a baby girl.’”

“And we did,” she replied.

“And we did.” The look Troy gave her was so reverent, so filled with gratitude she had to swallow past the lump in her throat. “Of course, you got pregnant during the first damn attempt, fertile Myrtle.”

Faith laughed. “Yep, you thought you were gonna start getting sex all the time.”

“Instead, two weeks later, I was holding your hair while you threw up your breakfast.”

She shrugged. “Morning sickness sucked.”

“I know you miss the kids.”

His words caught her unaware and all she could do was nod.

“I know I’ve been working long hours lately with the Higgins’ project. I wish I could be home more, Faith.”

She closed her eyes, shook her head. “No, your work matters, Troy. I understand that.”

His face darkened and she saw shades of the same anxiety he’d displayed yesterday at the diner when he looked at her engagement ring and again in the truck when he revealed his concerns about their first time. “I leave you alone too often.”

“I’m a big girl, babe. I have lots of friends, lots of hobbies. I don’t expect you to entertain me 24/7.”

“Even so—”

“Even so, nothing. Troy, you’ve devoted your life to climbing the ladder in that company so you could help provide a good life for me and the kids, so you could afford to put them through college. Now you have a chance to become part owner and believe me, there’s nothing I want more than to see you accomplish that goal. I’m so proud of you, of all you’ve done. So no more about this leaving me alone too much. I’m not lonely—honest.”

He narrowed his eyes and she knew he didn’t believe her words, so she tried to clarify them. “I mean there are times when I feel a bit alone, but that’s true of every single person on earth. I know I’ve been a bit blue lately, but my girlfriends who’ve had kids go off to college say

my feelings are normal and that they'll pass. It's empty-nest syndrome. It's as simple as that."

"Problem is I don't *ever* want you to feel alone, even for a minute."

She smiled at his sweet words and leaned forward. "Then I guess you're just going to have to make sure I have lots of red-hot memories to keep me warm for those times when you can't be around." She kissed him, knowing her words had struck a chord when Troy quickly took charge of her lips, pushing her back on the quilt and coming over her.

They kissed for several moments, content to simply explore and enjoy each other's mouths, lips. When Troy pulled away, he rested his forehead against hers.

"You know, I think I can deliver on those spicy memories."

She grinned. "I know you can."

Troy looked around the room and then back at her. "Seems to me there's no time like the present. Stay there. Don't move."

He rose, standing as she reclined at his feet. As she watched, he shed his pants and boxers, but left his T-shirt on. She licked her lips when the image of his erect cock emerged from the denim and she started to rise up on to her elbows.

He shook his head. "I said don't move." His voice had taken on the commanding tone of the previous night and she went wet at the sound.

"I want to take my clothes off," she said, when he knelt beside her. "I want to suck your cock."

“No, not this time.” He reached down and unhooked the button on her pants, pulling down the zipper. “Lift your hips.”

She obeyed and he helped her shimmy her jeans and panties off as she remained lying on the blanket.

“Roll over,” he directed. “Get up on your hands and knees.”

She followed his directive, curious about his intentions.

“I like the idea of fucking you from behind while we’re both half dressed.”

Faith closed her eyes and groaned softly as his hand brushed the sensitive skin of her ass. He shifted until he knelt behind her, but he made no move to take her. Instead, he caressed every inch of her bottom and upper thighs with his hands until she was panting with need. She arched her back, hoping the position would tempt him, beckon him to proceed.

His fingers delved between her legs and he shoved three inside her wet pussy without warning. She cried out at the shock, the glorious intensity as he roughly fucked her with the thick digits.

“Yes,” she hissed as he pounded harder, deeper.

“Come for me, Faith. Let me feel that pussy of yours clench against my fingers.” His words prompted the reaction and she came hard, trembling as he continued his assault, refusing to lessen his speed, the power of his fingers as they pummeled her needy flesh.

He slowed only as her climax began to wane. His fingers left her and she felt immediate relief. He would take her now. Despite her orgasm, her body wanted the main event, wanted his cock filling her.

When he didn't move, she looked over her shoulder, surprised to find him studying her ass intently.

"Troy?"

He looked up at her, his face lined with seriousness. She thought he looked as if he wanted to say something, but instead his gaze dropped once more. This time when his fingers stroked her, it wasn't her pussy or clit, but the tight pucker of her ass he started to rub.

"God," she murmured on a breathless sigh.

"It's been a long time since I touched you here."

She nodded. It had been years since they tried any of the things they'd toyed with when they'd been young and adventurous in bed. "I know."

"I want to try it again."

Her mind flashed back to the early days of their marriage. They'd experimented with pretty much everything in bed, but somewhere along the line, the kinky games gave way to sneaking in morning quickies before the kids woke up.

His finger, still damp from her juices, wiggled on her anus and she pushed back in invitation. "Is this another do over?"

He shook his head. "Hard to do something over that you've never done before."

"You've put your finger in my ass before."

Troy leaned over her back, his lips grazing her ear. "I'm not going to stop with just a finger this time. I want to fuck your ass, Faith."

She shivered at his admission, and then struggled to respond. "Troy—"

"Not now. Later. I want to buy you a butt plug and we'd need lubrication, lots of it, which I don't have here. I

just want you to think about it. Decide if you think that's something you'd like to explore too. For now—" As his words drifted away, he pushed a single digit inside her tight hole. He moved forward slowly, retreating several times to gather more moisture from her pussy to ease his way. After several moments, he had it fully lodged and Faith squeezed her eyes shut, savoring the dark, compelling sensation.

He thrust shallowly until she began moving back to meet his finger. Troy seemed to take her participation as her acquiescence and he started thrusting harder, deeper. She gasped for breath, amazed by how good he was making her feel with just a single finger in a place she would have considered off-limits. She cried out when two more of Troy's fingers entered the dance, moving inside her pussy. She was being doubly fucked and the feeling was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. Reaching around her hip with his other hand, Troy began rubbing her clit and she disintegrated. Her body flew apart and she felt as if she'd turned into a multitude of shooting stars, each nerve-ending flashing into brilliant white light and heat and scattering around the room.

It wasn't until she felt Troy's cock prodding at the entrance to her pussy that she realized once again, her husband had thrown her into a sort of orgasm oblivion. He'd fucked her unaware and she sincerely hoped he'd drive her there again. It was an awesome place.

Troy shoved his erection deeply in one hard thrust and she trembled under the impact. Somewhere along the line her arms had given out as she now rested on her elbows, her cheek lying against the soft quilt, her ass the only part

of her still up and ready for action. Troy lost no time in claiming it.

“God, you’re sexy, Faith. You have no idea how fucking hot you look right now. All tousled and flushed. I wish—” His grip tightened on her hips and she knew he was struggling to hold back his own climax, trying to drag out their play.

“Fuck me,” she said, lifting her head to look over her shoulder at her handsome husband. Their eyes met and she was overwhelmed by the passion etched in the lines on his face. “Take me,” she whispered. “Take me hard.”

His jaw tightened for only a second and then his eyes drifted closed as his body took over, took her at her word. He used his large hands to pull her hips toward his as he thrust forward. It was intense, glorious, amazing. She felt herself coming again and this time, Troy came with her, calling out her name.

Turning to his side, Troy lay down, careful to stay inside her, spooning her as they both tried to catch their breath.

“My knees are killing me,” he said after a few minutes.

She laughed. “Every muscle in my body is screaming.”

Troy collapsed onto his back and she turned to face him, her arm wrapped loosely around his waist. “You think we’re getting too old for this?”

Troy looked at her, shock written on his face. “Hell no. We’re just out of practice. But now that the kids are away at college and we have the house all to ourselves again, I intend to make sure that oversight is corrected. We just have to build up our stamina. It’s like training for a marathon. You can’t go out and run twenty-six miles the very first day. You have to work up to it.”

“Are you planning to work up to having sex twenty-six times a day? Because if so I can tell you right now, some of those miles will be done solo.”

Troy broke into loud laughter at her jest. “I’ll keep that in mind. Maybe we could just try for a half marathon.”

“I’m thinking more along the lines of a 3K. You’re going to be forty-four on your next birthday. Wouldn’t want you to have a heart attack or something. How would I explain it to the kids?”

The twinkle in Troy’s eyes told her he was enjoying their conversation too much. “Jackson would probably be damned impressed with his old man if I kicked the bucket while fucking the hell out of his mom. I mean my reputation with my son could be made.”

Faith sat up, shaking her head. “More likely you’d put him in therapy for the rest of his life. Find another way to impress him. Besides I’m determined to drag you in to a ripe old age with me here in the land of the living. There will be no fucking anyone to death.”

“Spoilsport.” Troy reached up, tickling her ribs as he spoke and she swatted his hands away.

“So what’s next?”

Troy glanced at his watch. “Well, we need to clean up all this stuff and then I thought we’d head back to the hotel and grab showers before the next stop in the anniversary tour.”

Faith was feeling twinges in muscles she didn’t know she had and the thought of a long, hot shower sounded like paradise. “Sounds perfect.”

They got dressed, before putting the picnic leftovers in the basket Faith’s mom had left behind for them. Faith folded up the blanket and they loaded everything into the

truck. Troy locked up the house and they stood in the front yard, looking at the place they'd called home for a decade.

"Are you sorry we left Carlysle?" Troy asked.

Faith looked up at her husband, surprised by this question. "You had a good job with the construction company. The transfer was a promotion and raise we couldn't turn down."

"That's not what I asked. I could have found another job, Faith."

"We took the right path. It may have been hard at the time, but looking back, I know deep in my heart, we were right to leave."

Troy's face cleared and suddenly she realized her husband had carried around the weight of the move for a long time.

"Why didn't you ever talk to me about these things, Troy?"

His brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, it seems like you've been carrying around a hell of a lot of baggage these past twenty-five years."

"Baggage?"

"The engagement ring, taking my virginity, the move. Troy, our life together has been nothing short of perfect. I've always thought that and I thought you felt the same way."

Troy reached out to pull her close. He rubbed his nose against hers, his typical gesture of affection, and he grinned at her. "If you wanna know the truth, I never worried too much about any of that stuff until I started planning this anniversary weekend. You know me, Faith. I'm a man of few words. I don't always find it easy to say

what I'm thinking, let alone what I'm feeling. The letters were the easiest way for me to gather my thoughts, tell you some things I thought you should know. Thing is I started writing those letters and I started remembering things I'd forgotten. After awhile, I realized I was the luckiest bastard on the planet and I was sort of amazed you stuck with me this long."

She laughed at his admission. "Thank God. I was starting to worry you'd been living with all these guilt issues for years."

Troy pulled back and gave her an amused look. "Oh, hell no. You're still hitched to the same caveman you've always been stuck with."

"You're no caveman and you don't appear to have been oblivious to anything these past twenty-five years. Heck, I'm starting to think you're more observant than me."

Troy laughed, but after listening to her husband's concerns, she felt as if she needed to make a few amends, as well. "Troy, I think I sort of lost my way these past few months. Let myself wallow in my depression over Jenna leaving without taking your feelings into account. I'm sorry about that."

"No apology necessary."

She smiled. "You know. Home has never been a physical place for me. It's never been a specific dot on the map. Home is anywhere you are." She looked back at the first home she'd secretly been heartbroken to leave and she realized the truth behind those words. It hadn't been as hard to leave Carlisle as she'd thought because she was with Troy and the kids.

He sighed contentedly as he took her hand and led her to the car. "Ready to move on?"

She nodded. She already had.

As they pulled out of the driveway, Troy gestured to the photo album. "Time for the next page."

Faith,

The hardest thing I'd ever had to do was tell you that the construction company was expanding and we would have to move to Parksville. Asking you to uproot from your hometown, to leave your parents and to start from scratch in a city full of strangers felt like way more than I had the right to request. You'd already given me two healthy, beautiful children and you'd worked hard to make our house on Anders Street into a home.

After our wedding, we'd chosen to live in Carlysle because we knew it was a safe place and that we would always be surrounded by our families. We said Carlysle was where we wanted our kids to grow up. I worried for days before I could actually bring myself to say the words aloud to you.

And, in your typical fashion (you would think I would have known better after twelve years of marriage), you smiled and said let's go. You treated it as an adventure and I think it was your enthusiasm that made it so easy for the kids to accept. Hell, it made it easier for me to accept. All of us were nervous, afraid of what the future would bring and yet, you made certain our adjustment to a new city and our new lives was painless, easy.

Once again, with your quiet confidence, you gave me the courage to make a fresh start somewhere else. You helped the kids adjust to their new schools, you made our

*new house warm almost from the first week we moved in,
and you never made me feel like you were anything other
than completely happy with our changed circumstances.*

*You're my home, Faith. You always have been and
God-willing, you always will be.*

*Love,
Troy*

Chapter Six

When they entered the hotel, Faith dropped down on the bed and closed her eyes. “What a weekend.”

Troy claimed the chair by the bed, his legs sprawled out in front of him. “Tired?”

Faith shook her head, and then reconsidered. “I’m not physically tired, no.”

“Emotionally drained.” Troy spoke the words, his assessment a statement, rather than a question.

“I guess that’s one way to describe it. When you suggested that we come to Carlisle this weekend, I jumped at the chance because I thought it would help me snap out of my depression. Give me a chance to figure out what I’m supposed to do with the rest of my life.”

“And have you? Figured it out, I mean?”

She pushed her upper body up, rested her weight on her elbows, so she could look at him as she spoke. “Actually, I think by coming here and spending this weekend with you, I realized there was never anything to figure out. Jackson and Jenna leaving didn’t mark the end of our lives together. It’s freed us. Given us more time to explore all the options that got put on the back burner while we were raising them. You were the answer to the question twenty-five years ago and you’re still the answer.

You're my future. I'm not sure how I could have missed that."

"I like the sound of that. Like being your past, present and future." He rose and stretched. "I think I'm going to hit the shower."

Faith sat up. "Alone?"

He looked at her and grinned. "You got a better offer?"

"I sort of like the idea of scrubbing your back."

Troy grasped her hand and pulled her up. "Yep. That's a better offer. Come on."

They took turns undressing each other, the process made longer by the fact they kept stopping for long, wet, incredibly thorough kisses. Troy turned the hot water on high, the small room quickly filling with steam. Faith groaned out loud as the strong jets hit her sore muscles, and Troy chuckled.

"Been getting quite a workout this weekend."

"I'm discovering muscles I never knew I had." She bent down, reaching for the soap as Troy gave her a wicked grin, and then turned, offering her an up-close view of his tanned, muscular back.

"Damn," he said as she rubbed the lather into his skin. "When's the last time we took a shower together?"

Faith tried to remember, but couldn't think of a single instance since the kids were little. "Years."

"You know, I'm thinking in an effort to support the Go Green movement, we should consider teaming up on our showers more often. Save water."

"Something tells me one hot shower *together* would last longer and waste more water than both of us going solo. Even so..." She pushed him until he turned, wrapping her arms around him to rinse the soap off his

back. Dragging her tongue along his chest, she stopped when she hit the tight brown pucker of his nipple. "I do like the idea of showering together."

"Screw the environment, eh?"

She chuckled. "Yeah, something like that."

Troy held her head in place against his chest for a moment as she covered his slick skin with kisses. Finally, he gently tugged her hair, pulling her head back. "Swap places with me," he said, turning to push her under the jets. "I want to wash your hair."

Faith closed her eyes as the soothing motions of Troy's hands working the shampoo into her hair turned her body to pure jelly. "That feels so good. So relaxing."

He rinsed her hair, and then repeated the process with the conditioner. Trading sides once more, he stood beneath the jets and Faith picked the soap back up. "Time for the front." She ran her soapy hands down along his chest and arms until she reached his cock. Semi-erect when she started, after two quick swipes from root to head, she had it standing at full attention.

Troy covered her hand with his, increasing the pressure and speed of her strokes. "Have to admit I'm glad to know the old boy is still capable of this kind of workout."

She giggled. "Worried about that, were you?"

"Well, I am pushing middle age. Sort of nice to know my cock can go for more than one good kick a day."

He turned slightly so Faith could rinse off the suds before facing her once again, and she tightened her grip around his erection. "I'd say he's kicking pretty good."

Before he could reply, she dropped to her knees and took him into her mouth.

“Jesus,” Troy muttered as she engulfed his flesh, moving forward until the head of his cock brushed the back of her throat. She rubbed his cock, using her hand and her mouth to drive him to the brink, but he surprised her by taking her face in his grip and pulling her away.

“Not this time. Stand up.”

Troy gave her a determined, sexy look she immediately responded to. But before she could ask him his plans, he turned, pushing her under the showerhead, facing the wall. The powerful, hot jets of water sluiced down her back as Troy guided her into the position he wanted—pushing her shoulders lower, pulling her ass toward him.

“What do you say to a quickie?”

She looked over her shoulder and grinned. “Go for it.”

Troy pushed into her oh-so ready and willing pussy, slamming to the hilt in one thrust. With a firm grip on her hips, he pulled her toward him as he shoved forward. She used her hands on the wall to brace herself against his intense, but incredible assault. After less than a dozen strokes, she felt her climax begin. Troy joined her, both of them crying out their release as he filled her with his come.

They remained motionless under the water for a few moments, both of them struggling to regain enough strength to move. Finally, Troy pulled out and used a washcloth to wipe away his seed from between her legs.

“Amazing,” she whispered and he grinned.

“Always.”

Turning off the water, they retreated from the shower, taking turns drying each other and then Faith followed

Troy, both of them wrapped in the soft white towels provided by the hotel.

“Nap time?” she asked, glancing at the very welcoming bed.

He shook his head. “Wish we could, sweetheart. No time.”

She thought she should feel exhausted after their heated interlude, but he’d spoiled her with surprises and she couldn’t wait to see what he had planned next.

Walking to the closet, Troy pulled out two garment bags she hadn’t noticed hanging there the previous night.

“What are those?”

“Our clothes for the evening.”

She smiled when he laid them across the bed. Unzipping the first one, he grabbed the hanger and lifted out a tuxedo.

“Oh my,” she said, dying to see her casual, never-out-of-jeans husband in the fancy suit. “Hello, James Bond.”

He acknowledged her joke with a grin, and then laid the tuxedo aside, opening the second bag. “And for you.” He revealed a beautiful white dress and for a moment, Faith thought her eyes were playing tricks on her.

“My wedding dress, but it, I mean—?”

“I smuggled it out from under our bed about a month ago.”

Faith was touched by her husband’s thoughtfulness, but in this instance, his plan had a serious flaw. “Troy. I hate to say this, but there’s no way that dress is going to fit me anymore. I mean that was two kids and at least four dress sizes ago.” While she liked to think she wasn’t exactly fat, she also wasn’t the size eight her husband had married all those years ago either.

“Your mother altered it.”

His answer caught her unaware. “She did?”

He grinned like the cat that ate the canary and she could tell he was very pleased with this particular surprise. “Yep. I also stole that pretty blue dress you wore to the company Christmas party last December and she used that to help her size it correctly.”

“I’m a little concerned with this new thievery tendency of yours.” Her joke was a weak attempt at stalling as her gaze drifted to the gown again and she chewed on her lower lip.

“It’ll fit just fine, Faith.”

She twisted her lips in a rueful grin. “I’m sure it will. I’m just sort of sorry my mom had to resize it. Guess it brings home the fact I’ve let myself go over the years.”

Troy narrowed his eyes. “You are not allowed to launch into any bullshit about gaining weight. You’re gorgeous. Prettier now than you were when I married you and a hell of a lot sexier. Now drop that towel and put on the dress. I can’t wait to see you in it again.”

She laughed, loving his laying-down-the-law voice. He thought she was gorgeous...and sexy. She certainly wasn’t going to argue with that. Taking the towel off, she reached for the dress, her pulse racing at the thought of trying it on. There was a small part of her that was dying to put it on again after all these years, just to see how it looked.

She’d lovingly had it preserved and then stored it under their bed, waiting for the day Jenna decided to marry. Who knew if her daughter would want to wear it? Given the old-fashioned style, she doubted it, but regardless of that, she looked forward to the day Jenna

would say yes to some young man and she would let her daughter try it on to decide.

Putting the silky material over her head, she turned so that Troy could fasten up the row of buttons along the back. She smiled to herself recalling him unfastening these same buttons the night of their honeymoon. His fingers, so deft now, had trembled slightly the first night they'd spent together as a married couple.

She turned as he finished, blushing at his wholly male, fully appreciative stare. "Faith," he said, his voice husky and filled with emotion. Her stomach flip-flopped when she realized he was speechless...just looking at her. She'd expected to feel fatter, older as she put on the dress, but instead, his gaze made her feel like the most beautiful woman on earth.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He looked up at her face and shook his head. "Why don't you take the bathroom to finish getting ready? I'll throw on this suit out here. If we don't get a little distance between us right now, we're never going to make it to tonight's grand feature surprise. I want you, Faith. So much."

His face proved the validity of his words and she could see he was working hard to restrain himself.

"I won't be a minute," she said, giving him the space to pull himself together. She'd messed up his schedule last night in regards to the church social, and while she didn't regret that, she also didn't want to ruin any more of his lovely plans.

"How are we doing on time?" she asked as she headed to the bathroom.

"We have enough. Do what you need to do."

Taking him at his word, she took her time fixing her hair and applying makeup. She suddenly wanted to be worthy of his appreciative glances.

Walking back into the bedroom, she sucked in an amazed breath when she caught sight of Troy in his tuxedo.

“Wow,” she said on a sigh.

He raised his eyebrows and flexed his muscles. “Still know how to fill out the old monkey suit.”

She laughed. “You look totally hot. Like I want to rip-off-that-suit-and-ride-you-all-night-long hot.”

Troy groaned, his eyes darkening with desire. “Damn, baby. I just managed to pull myself together after seeing you in that dress. Hold that thought because I’m going to take you up on it later.”

The image of him in his tuxedo sent her straight to Stupidville and all she could think about was stripping the sexy suit off him, one piece at a time. “Why later?”

He glanced at his watch. “Because we’re late.”

His words quickly reminded her he had plans. “For what?” She hoped he’d slip up and answer.

He grinned, not fooled by her attempt to ferret out the secret. Placing his hand on her back, he steered her toward the door. “For your next surprise and your next letter.”

Faith,

My memories of our wedding day are sort of spotty after all this time. I find that rather than recalling every moment, the day comes back to me in scenes. When I think of that day, there are three things in particular, that stand out in my mind.

First, I remember how I felt before the ceremony. I was a nervous wreck. My mouth was completely bone dry. I ended up getting to the church, fully dressed in my tuxedo way too early. The damn suit didn't have any pockets in it and I didn't have my wallet. I had to borrow a dollar from my mother so I could walk across the street in my monkey suit to buy a soda. I remember thinking here I am getting married and my mother's rifling through her purse like she did whenever I needed lunch money for school. I felt very much like a little boy playing dress-up and for a minute I wondered what the hell I was doing there.

That feeling of fear and uncertainty disappeared the moment you appeared at the end of the aisle in the pretty white dress your mother made for you. You were standing on your father's arm and you looked so peaceful, so serene. All my nerves left me and I was overcome by a feeling of rightness. I knew I was exactly where I was meant to be.

Finally, I remember our first dance. We'd selected Billy Joel's "You're My Home" as our song and I think the lyrics describe our life together perfectly. I've always been a shitty dancer—I'm sure prom proved that to you—and of all the things I worried about in regards to that day, dancing in front of all our friends and family was the thing I dreaded the most. I felt self-conscious and ridiculous walking out in front of everyone. When the deejay started playing our song, you walked toward me and smiled. You knew I was uncomfortable. You stood on tiptoe and kissed me. Just a quick, soft kiss and you whispered, "Just you and me."

And with those few words, you made the rest of the world disappear. Since that moment, it's always been just you and me. And, Faith, I wouldn't have it any other way.

*Love you,
Troy*

Chapter Seven

Troy pulled into the parking lot of the fire hall where they'd celebrated their wedding reception and turned off the truck.

"Here we are. Next stop."

Faith closed the photo album and bent forward, kissing him softly. "Troy." Her voice broke as she said his name, the emotions of the weekend catching up to her as she looked into the eyes of the love of her life, tears welling on her lashes.

"Shh." He placed a finger against her lips. "One last surprise."

Her light chuckle quickly turned into a happy sob and he tipped her face up with a finger under her chin. "Faith," he whispered, concern written on his face.

"I'm okay. Just a blubbering mess. I must look like hell. So much for my makeup."

He rubbed his nose against hers. "You look beautiful. Bit soggy, but beautiful."

She laughed at his joke.

"Come on," he said. "We may as well get this over with and let the waterworks really commence."

She was confused by his comment, but he didn't give her a chance to question him as he helped her out of the truck and led her into the large banquet hall.

As they walked in, she was assaulted by loud yells of "Surprise!"

She blinked several times, her mind struggling to process everything she was seeing all at once. Unfortunately, her thoughts never made it beyond the fact that her two kids were standing at the front of the crowd dressed in their Sunday finest and smiling broadly.

"Jackson? Jenna?" She took two steps toward them. "Why aren't you two at school?"

Laughter rocked the room at her question and she heard her cousin, Rodney, yell out, "Uh oh. You kids are in trouble now."

"Mom." Jenna rolled her eyes as she spoke. "We're here to surprise you. Happy anniversary." Her daughter rushed forward, embracing her, and Faith suddenly understood Troy's comment about the waterworks.

Tears streamed down her face as Jackson hugged her next. "Happy anniversary, Mom. You and Dad sure do make marriage look easy. I figure the next twenty-five should be a breeze considering you won't have me and Jenna to deal with anymore. Jenna especially, since I was such a model child."

She laughed at her son's comment. As soon as Jackson released her, she found herself receiving hugs and well wishes from her mother, her father-in-law, her aunts, uncles and cousins. As more and more people offered their congratulations, she began to wonder if Troy had invited the entire town.

Throughout it all, Faith laughed and cried and wondered if she'd ever received a more beautiful gift than this weekend. Finally, the crowd dispersed as everyone sat down at the tables surrounding the dance floor and for the

first time, Faith could really see the room. It looked exactly as it had the day of her wedding reception. Her mother was standing beside her, beaming.

“How’s your sciatica?”

Deborah gave her a guilty grin. “Needed to find a way for you to open the front door.”

“You had a big hand in all of this, didn’t you, Mom?”

Deborah shrugged and shook her head. “The whole thing was Troy’s idea, but I won’t say I wasn’t pleased to be included in the execution of a few things.”

“I couldn’t have done any of it without her,” Troy said, stepping up to them, placing a kiss on her mother’s cheek. “She’s a peach.”

Her mom swatted Troy on the arm with a pleased look.

“The picnic at our old house on Anders Street was wonderful and this place,” Faith gestured to the fire hall, “it looks incredible. And my dress. Thank you.”

Turning, her mother grasped her hands. “You look lovely in that dress, dear. Have you had a good time this weekend?”

“The best time of my life.”

“Well, it’s not over yet.” Troy took her arm and led her to the middle of the dance floor, surprising her by dropping down on one knee. The room fell silent and Faith felt her heart race at the image of Troy’s handsome face looking up at her as if she were the only person on the planet.

“Twenty-five years ago, I asked you to be my wife and you said yes. Faith, no man’s ever had a more wonderful life than me and well, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to do it all over. What do you say we get hitched...again?”

Faith laughed through the tears streaming down her face. Nodding, she said, "Okay, that sounds like fun."

The crowd cheered at his proposal and her response. As Troy rose, he gestured toward a hallway off the back of the room that led to the fire hall's kitchen and restrooms. From the door, Faith gasped as the minister who married them came out followed by their original wedding party.

"Oh my God," Faith whispered as her two best friends from high school strolled into the room on the arms of Troy's brother and his cousin, the groomsmen from their first wedding.

She couldn't hold back her girlish squeal as she and her two friends rushed to hug each other, all of them crying and talking at once. She hadn't seen either of her friends in years and she had remarked to Troy on more than one occasion how much she missed them.

"How did you find them?" she asked, turning to Troy who walked over to greet both women with a friendly hug and kiss on the cheek.

"Facebook. Jenna showed me how to sign up and use it."

Faith laughed at the idea of her anti-technology husband starting a Facebook account. "Amazing."

The deejay began playing the wedding march and Jenna handed Faith a beautiful bouquet of daisies, her favorite flower. Troy took her to the end of a strip of red carpet she hadn't noticed before. At the other end of the rug, a decorated arch had been erected and the minister stood beneath it. They were going to renew their wedding vows. Right now. Here.

Faith swallowed hard, the beauty of this moment shaking her more than everything that had come before. Troy was offering her the ultimate do over.

Her bridesmaids and the two groomsmen walked forward, in time to the music, taking their places off to the side. Faith started to step forward, but Troy held her back.

“Not yet. The best man and maid of honor will lead us in.”

Faith gave him a quizzical look until Jackson took Jenna’s arm and led her to the front of the room. As they reached the arch, her two grown-up children turned and faced her, both of them smiling widely.

She looked up at Troy, shaking her head slightly in utter disbelief. “This is the best day of my life.”

He grinned, then bent forward to rub his nose against hers. “Every day since the night of senior prom has been my best day. I love you, Faith.”

Pulling gently, he escorted her to the archway and there, under the gazes of their children, their family and friends, they renewed their wedding vows.

She gasped when the minister kept the exchange of rings part. Jackson pulled a ring on a string out of his pocket and handed it to Troy, who placed it on her finger. It was an anniversary band, large and sparkly and stunning.

“A more worthy trade,” he whispered. “I’m going to need my jacket back now.”

She laughed through her tears at his joke. Only Troy could make such a moment so touching...and funny.

The minister gave Troy permission to kiss the bride and as he did so, the room burst into loud applause.

The rest of the evening flew by in a beautiful blur and Faith was reminded of Troy's letter about their first wedding. She knew, like him, there were special moments of the evening she would carry in her heart forever. Beautiful scenes she would always remember.

Her children standing beside the arch as they walked down the aisle.

Troy taking her in his arms for their second *first dance*, the sounds of Billy Joel singing their wedding song, "You're My Home."

Troy proposing a toast to his mother and her father, who'd both passed away since their first wedding.

A series of tiny pieces that all floated together to create the most magical night of her life.

Waving goodbye to the last guests in the parking lot, Faith glanced at her watch, surprised to find it was after 1:00 a.m. She'd danced and talked the night away. As she and Troy walked hand in hand to the truck, Faith decided her first wedding hadn't been half as much fun as the do over.

"So you were really surprised?" Troy asked.

"Stunned, shocked, taken completely unaware. Troy, I—" She paused as they stood by the passenger side of the truck. Her mind raced for something to say, some words to express what the night had meant to her.

He kissed her before she could formulate the first thought. She wrapped her arms around his neck and let her lips show what she was feeling. For several moments, she relished the sincerity, the beauty of his kisses.

When he pulled away, she smiled. "Does this mean we get to do the honeymoon over too?"

"Thought we did that last night."

She narrowed her eyes. "Troy. I want my second honeymoon."

He grinned at her demanding tone. "Get in the truck."

She laughed at his sudden haste. Climbing in the cab, she giggled as he broke more than a few speed laws trying to get them back to the hotel. Jackson and Jenna were spending the night with her mom and they'd all made plans to have breakfast together the next day.

Even though she'd seen both of the kids just a month earlier, one of the highlights of her evening had been disco-dancing with them and Troy. She'd truly been blessed with her family and tonight had driven that fact home to her.

As they drove to the hotel, Faith picked up the photo album and lightly rubbed the cover before opening it and looking at all of the pictures again. When she got to the last letter about their original wedding day, she started to turn the page.

Troy noticed her actions and placed his hand on hers to stop her. "The rest of the book is empty."

She gave him a curious look.

"I figured we'd fill the rest of it up over the next twenty-five years or so."

"So much more to look forward to," she said.

"College graduation, Jackson's and Jenna's weddings, retirement."

She smiled. "Grandkids."

He nodded. "I'm sort of looking forward to that the most."

"We'll definitely fill it up."

"Here we are," Troy said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“Come on, Mr. Wainwright. I think I promised you we were going to take a little ride.”

She and Troy raced each other to the hotel room and by the time he had the door unlocked, he'd shed his cumberbund, bowtie and belt. Faith kicked off her shoes as they entered the room before pushing her husband against the door as he closed it behind them. She took charge of the kiss, trying to give him back a fraction of everything he'd given her this weekend. Gripping the top of his shirt, she yanked forcefully, pulling the material hard enough that the buttons popped off and bared his chest to her lips.

“Jesus,” Troy muttered when she bit his pec hard enough to leave a mark. His hands traveled to the back of her dress and as she covered his chest with love bites, he unfastened the material. Once he'd freed the last button, he pushed the dress down, lifting her away from it and backing her toward the bed.

“Need you,” he murmured against her lips as her legs hit the edge of the mattress. With a hand on her shoulder, he pushed her down and she fell back with a laugh. Stripping off his pants and shoes, he climbed over her. Rather than remove her bra, he pushed the lacy material down until her breasts popped out. His lips descended and he gave her a dose of her own medicine, sucking and biting the sensitive flesh until she was a squirming mass of hormones beneath him.

“Sex, now,” she demanded.

Troy shook his head as he rose, still kneeling on the mattress. “No, not this time. This time, I'm making love to my wife.”

He pulled her panties off and lifted her until she was in the center of the mattress. Spreading her legs, he took his place in between and she cried out when he placed the head of his cock at her opening and slowly, lovingly entered her. They rocked gently together as they kissed and touched and loved.

When they came, it wasn't loud and raucous like a rock concert, rather it was melodious and soothing as a symphony. In a word, it was perfect.

Taking her in his arms, Troy held her, his chest her pillow as the excitement of the evening gave way to exhaustion. She was just drifting off to sleep when he murmured, "Happy anniversary, Mrs. Wainwright," against the top of her head. "Love you."

"Love you," she replied.

About the Author

Writing a book was number one on Mari Carr's bucket list, and on her thirty-fourth birthday, she set out to see that goal achieved. Now her computer is jammed full of stories—novels, novellas, short stories and dead-ends—and many of her books have been published. A winner of the *Passionate Plume*, Mari found time for writing by squeezing it into the hours between 3:00 a.m. and daybreak, when her family is asleep and the house is quiet.



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