

Forward March

A Novel

Also by Fon James

Back and Forth

A Mother, Her Son, and THE Father,
a short story appearing in *The Triumph of My Soul,*
an inspirational anthology

Forward March

A Novel

FON JAMES

Tucker House Publishing

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Author Dedications

*This book is dedicated to my beautiful daughter, Emersyn.
Mommy loves you always.*



*I also want to dedicate this book to the
memory of my grandfather.
Rest in peace always Pa Pa.*

Acknowledgments

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Forward March

Prologue

Journal Entry #1:

I wish he would stop trying to contact me. I am finally out of Jackson, and I still can't seem to get away from my crazy past. But now that I am living in San Francisco, my life is going to be different. I have put the past behind me. Okay, Journal, I'm lying. I have buried the past due to fear of facing it. But I am determined to put it behind me.

When I left Jackson, I was scared. Gavin and I were no longer going to be a couple. He and my best friend Chrissy were new parents to their baby girl Grace Christian and my family was on the mend from a long kept secret. I mean, I got over the fact that he slept with her and the fact that they had a baby, AND the fact that I am that child's god mother (what was I really thinking by accepting that responsibility). And then on top of all that, my folks. What can I say...it's not that I didn't get over the fact that my real mother is my aunt Jackie or that my real father is her long ago boyfriend Darnell, it's just that I grew up in a lie. Even though I pray to God everyday to help me through it, I still hold on to the fact that I am not who they said I was. My parents are Jackie Walker and Darnell Smith, not Leah and Tommie Walker. My name is still Faith Walker though. Guess since Aunt Jackie or should I say "Mom's" last name is Walker, it's okay. But I am really Faith Smith. Wow, that doesn't even sound right...Faith Smith. I can't even write it without turning up my mouth and nose.

Anyway, I haven't been home since moving out here to San Francisco to work for Elite Advertising. I know my family understands why, but I know they miss me as much as I miss them. Truth be told, I miss Gavin and Chrissy, too. Yeah, they messed up, but outside of

my folks, they were two of the most important people in my life. They send me pictures of baby Grace all the time via email. I pretend like I am so busy with work and don't respond. I at least hit the button that I received it, so they know I'm getting the message. I know that's wrong, but it's weird how it all worked out with Gavin and Chrissy. I do know, however, God will continue to help see me through.

One of the pictures they sent when I first got here was the picture of all of us we took on the day I left. The entire crew was there: Me, Gavin, Chrissy, Grace and our friends Remi and Giselle. At least Remi and Giselle are doing well. I hear they're married now and living in Houston. I know I should keep in touch with them more, too, but I just try to live my life here in California, with as few reminders of my last days in Jackson, MS as possible. California is my future and I am determined to move forward.

Faith's phone buzzed. She ended her journaling session and clicked the button. She had a new email. It was him...again.

Chapter 1

“Ms. Walker, you’ve done it! You scored the multimillion dollar account to do the advertising campaign for celebrity Christian artist and model Shay Praise and Pure Beauty Bars,” Josie Bartrand said, shrieking. “You’ve only been here for a little over a year and you have managed to win one of the most sought out new accounts in the advertising industry.”

“Well, Josie, it’s all in a day’s work. I knew I was cut out for this stuff,” Faith said, blushing, “but I couldn’t have done it without the entire team though. I may have come up with the ad concepts, but I definitely didn’t do the art work. Malik did his thing, too, isn’t that right, Malik?” she asked as if he walked by on cue past the glass doors of her 30th floor office.

Since moving from Mississippi to San Francisco, Faith had made her mark in the advertising world. Many of the employees at Elite had heard about her achievements, but she didn’t want to rest on her previous accomplishments; she knew in order to move up in the ad world, she had to hit them with something big and this *big* deal was just that.

“If it ain’t the big-timer who got us the big deal,” Malik schmoozed. “I am just happy to be a part of *your* team, Faith. I mean, I am just elated that we work together.” He laughed.

Faith and Malik had been cool since she landed in San Francisco. He had been the one to pick her up from the airport and take her around town to show her all the hot spots. As one of only a few African-Americans in the company, Elite made sure they sent someone they thought Faith could relate to. She was glad they had. There was nothing more irritating than being new and trying to get to know someone who

wasn't cool or acting stuffy. Being from Mississippi, the hospitality state, Faith knew when she saw Malik, everything would be a-ok.

"Whatever, Malik! You know we couldn't have landed this deal without your magic graphic fingers. We did this together... along with the rest of the team," she said while clearing her throat and correcting her statement before someone took offense. She and Malik knew exactly who won the account with the African-American celebrity. It was them. The other people were simply on the project team.

As more people stopped by to congratulate Faith on a job well done, she realized that this career had been a great choice. While at Jackson State, she had often dreamed of landing a big time deal that would take her over the top, but she always knew she had to remain grounded, so after everyone left her office, she talked to the real man who had made this deal possible.

"Lord, it's me. I just want to thank you for this deal. I know that I couldn't have done anything without you. I thank you for putting me with the right people like Malik and for making us successful. Lord, I thank..."

Before she could finish her statement, Anastasia burst into her office.

"Faith, girl, you did your thang, huh. All that overtime with Malik really paid off. I thought you guys were just up here messing around during those late night hours."

Controlling the pupils of her eyes that she absolutely wanted to roll, Faith swiveled her chair to meet Anastasia face to face.

"Hi Anastasia," she acknowledged her presence with a dry tone. "Do you ever knock before just barging into people's offices? I could have been on the phone or something."

"You didn't look like you were doing anything to me. You looked like you were sleeping. So you're lucky I came in here before one of the managers stopped by and saw you slacking off already. Don't think because you got that new deal they're still not watching *us*."

Other than Faith and Malik, Anastasia was the other African-American at the company. She was an administrative assistant and always seemed to speak negative every chance she could get. Faith wasn't trying to hear anything negative today though. Not after landing one of the biggest deals to ever hit Elite.

“What’s up, Ana? What is it that you want?”

Anastasia moved around to Faith’s side of the big contemporary espresso-colored desk and sat on the edge and crossed her legs. “Look, don’t be acting all brand new because you did something big. You are still black and *they* are still only going to let you go so far. You hear me, Faith. Them people will only let you go so far before they cap your butt! Look at me. Shoot, I started as a temp and I haven’t gotten anything from them other than a permanent assistant job. Don’t you know I got one of them fancy degrees, too?”

Faith noticed her chest heave up and down as she breathed out a sigh. She wasn’t in the mood today to hear Anastasia’s, *poor-black-woman-who-can’t-move-up-in-the-corporate-world* story. It was beginning to get old. Plus adding an ‘s’ to the word “got” made her sound like she didn’t have a degree.

“Ana, I appreciate you coming in to let me know that I still haven’t arrived yet. I will make sure I kick my A game up and be ready for whatever the corporate big wigs try to throw my way. Thank you, girl. You really do know how to keep a girl on her toes.”

“Oh, you welcome, Faith. You know I got your back. We’s got to stick together, you know. That’s how they do. They stick together and get each other jobs and everything. By the way, I heard that Cynthia is considering hiring a junior account executive to assist you with the new account. Think you can put in a good word for ya girl?” Anastasia popped her gum and switched it from the left to the right while waiting on an answer. Faith didn’t know what to say. There was no way she was going to recommend her. What would that do to her reputation?

Everybody knew Anastasia was looking for a hand-out anytime a job came open, whether she was qualified for the job or not. She just wanted a hook-up.

Quick, Faith, think of something to get out of this, she thought while frantically wracking her brain. Just as she was about to try to think of something, Cynthia walked in. *Thank you, God, because I know you didn't want me to lie to that girl.*

“Hi, Faith,” Cynthia said with a perky voice. Then she half-heartedly spoke to Anastasia, which Ana took as her cue to dip out of Faith’s office.

“Just wanted to come by and commend you again on a great job.” Faith noticed Anastasia still lurking by the door, making eye and hand gestures behind Cynthia as if to say with her eyes, “Hook a sistah up.” Faith diverted her attention back to Cynthia just in time to nod and smile.

“So what are your plans to celebrate? We would love to take you out for drinks if you are down?” Faith hated when her managers tried to act like they were as young as she was. Cynthia was especially the worst one. She even went as far as trying to dress young with short skirts and tight suits. Cynthia was 55 years old, but unlike most women her age, she kept herself fairly well. Her short pixie-cut red hair complemented her tanned Caucasian skin and slim build. She wore the latest in designer suits and always smelled of Chanel. Jewelry was her vice. She had to wear something that clanked and banged. You could always hear her coming. It was her signature.

“Well, I was actually thinking about having a little something at my apartment tonight. You know I’m more of a homebody. You’re definitely welcome to come over.”

“Faith, why don’t you let Elite pick up the tab on your house *partay*. You order what you want from our preferred caterer and have them deliver it. I’ll have some wine delivered from our favorite winery and it’ll be a blast.”

“Well, I hadn’t really...”

“Faith, really! Let me do this for you. You deserve so much for all your hard work. So it’s a done deal. Have Anastasia email you the catering menu since she normally handles all of the catering for our office. I’ll tell her what the plans are and she’ll handle everything for you.”

Faith hesitantly accepted. She really didn’t want to have a big shindig at her place, but since Elite was picking up the tab, she may as well make the best of it. After Cynthia left, she sent Malik an email: *Guess what? Elite is picking up the tab for my get-together at the apartment. You know it’s on for real now. We gone have more than soda pop. Cynthia sending the winery over. LOL.*

Malik responded almost immediately: *Oh, that’s what’s up fa sho. I know I am going to get my buzz on now (kidding). Because you know your boy don’t drink. But do make sure you order some good food and not any of that foo-foo mess we always have here at the office. Get some wings, meatballs, egg rolls, Rotel dip. LOL. Just playing. They probably don’t even have Rotel dip on that foo-foo catering menu. Lata.*

The next new message on Faith’s email was from Anastasia: *I already know you gone invite your girl. Cynthia just gave me my pecking orders. Just let me know what you want me to order, and I will make it happen “BOSS LADY” LOL. Just playin, girl. Don’t forget to hook a sistah up.*

Faith laughed. She had pegged Ana perfectly when she was gesturing earlier. She sent her an email back requesting the food and confirmed her attendance for the night time affair. Just as she was about to close out of her email, a new email popped up. It was him.



Faith left work early and rushed home. She needed to make sure her apartment was spotless for the impromptu gathering that was to begin right after work. After stacking a few industry magazines and running the swivel dust mop across her floor, Faith looked around her apartment one last time to make sure everything was in its rightful place. Even though she was only entertaining a few friends and coworkers, she wanted to make sure everything looked up to par in her loft.

Since moving to San Francisco, she had become somewhat of a minimalist. Her simple platform bed and loft furniture she picked out from IKEA in nearby Emeryville made her feel as if her life was simple and uncluttered. Gone were the cluttered dorm day madness of college and the old school bedding at her aunt Jackie's home back in Mississippi.

Her bedroom, which could be seen from every spot in the 22nd floor loft was pure white. As a part of her moving forward in life from all the craziness and drama she left behind, she wanted a fresh start. And what better way to have a fresh start than with pure white. She reflected on the cross-stitched verse she had sitting in a frame on her nightstand. Isaiah 1:18 - "Come now, let's settle this," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool."

That was her new theme in life...even though she had gone back and forth and sinned while in Mississippi, her trek to California was the beginning of a purification journey. Just as she was about to straighten the moveable partition that served as a wall separator when she wanted to block off areas of her loft, the doorbell rang.

"Hey, Shawny, what's the dill, pickle?"

"You know you got it, baby girl," Shawny replied as he kissed Faith and handed her the large colored bouquet of assorted flowers he was carrying.

“Shawny, are these for me? You shouldn’t have.” Faith admired the beautiful bouquet.

“Well actually, I didn’t.” He laughed, but then quickly cut it off when Faith frowned at him. “Stop looking like that, baby girl. Don’t act like I wouldn’t buy you flowers because you know I would, but these ain’t from me. Maybe you got some kinda secret admirer because they were just sitting at your door when I came up. Maybe there’s a card or something tucked in there.”

Faith smelled the flowers and looked for a card. Before she could even find the small card hidden beneath the bouquet, she surmised that it was probably from Elite. They had really been going all out on the congratulations today and flowers wouldn’t be a far departure from them trying to let her know how much they appreciated her getting them the big account. She reached for the card as her cell phone rang.

“Shawny, can you open the card and see who sent these flowers? This may be somebody on the phone from my job trying to find my place.”

Shawny opened the card and read the message. He rolled his eyes and looked to see if Faith was still on the phone. “This dude never stops,” he silently mouthed. Just as he was about to put the card back in the little envelope, Faith reappeared.

“So who’s it from? Elite?”

“Nah, baby girl, but before I give it to you, I want you to promise me that you are not going to overreact or get mad. Today is a great day and we are celebrating all that you have achieved since you’ve moved out here to Cali, so promise me.”

“Look, Shawny, I can’t promise you anything until I see the card. So hand it over.”

Shawny reluctantly handed over the card and watched Faith as she opened the envelope and slid out the small card. It read: *Congratulations on your success! I always knew you would do something big in*

California. I miss you so much. Please call me or accept my emails. I love you, baby. I do still love you, Faith. Gavin.

Faith let out a long sigh. She had been doing a great job avoiding him and his messages. She thought he had caught the clue when she didn't respond to any of his *reach-out* tactics.

“See that’s why I wanted you to promise me.”

“Why does he keep doing this? I am done. Doesn’t my lack of communication say that loud and clear?”

Faith felt herself getting flustered, and as he had done since they both moved to California, Shawny wrapped his arms around her and comforted her.

“Thank you so much for always being there for me when I need you most, Chrishawn Jackson.”

The doorbell rang again and this time it was the food and wine being delivered. Faith let them set up in her kitchen and not long after the food arrived, most of her guests showed up to celebrate her latest accomplishment. While entertaining her friends and coworkers, she kept noticing the bouquet in the corner of her eye. It was so colorful against all the white, she couldn't miss it. The flowers, as beautiful as they were, was a bold and ugly reminder of her past, now sitting in a large room filled with her present.

How did he even find out about my deal? she thought. I know they sent out a press release, but he couldn't have possibly found out unless he was stalking me or something. Maybe if I just respond to his reach-outs and let him know that I would prefer he not contact me, he will catch the hint and leave me alone.

The party was fun and Faith felt good about celebrating her new accomplishments with her coworkers and friends. It was still pretty early after everyone left and since she was on Pacific Time, Faith decided to call her parents and share her good news. She had put it off for the day just to bask in her achievements, but now it was time to call home, both homes.

“Hey, Momma, what you are up to?”

Leah and Tommie were lying on the couch watching a movie when Faith called and immediately paused the movie when they heard her voice.

“Hey, Faith, girl it is so good to hear from you. Hold on and let me put the phone on speaker so that your daddy can hear you.” See it was things like that that still made Faith feel uneasy. Tommie wasn’t her daddy.

“Push past it, Faith, and let it go,” she heard the voice in her head whisper.

“Can you hear us, baby?”

“Yep, I can hear y’all loud and clear. Move away from the mouthpiece some because I can hear you breathing and everything.” Faith laughed.

“That’s your daddy, Faith. He’s all up in the phone. Move over some, Tommie, so we can both talk to the girl. You know she don’t call us that much.”

And there it was. Faith knew it was coming sooner or later. She knew they wanted to hear from her more often, but it was what it was.

“Well anyway, guys, I just called to tell you all my good news.”

“Good news, what’s good, baby girl,” Tommie chimed in.

“Well Daaa,” Faith paused before she completed the word Daddy.

“Uh, well basically, y’all I got us a million dollar account at work.”

“What you say! Hot dog, Faith! That’s our girl. I knew you were over there doing your thing on the West Coast. That’s why I told your daddy you don’t have time to be calling us everyday. That is truly awesome, honey. So what does that mean? Are you getting a raise, a bonus, a promotion?”

“Whoa, slow down, y’all with all the questions.” Faith realized that saying *y’all* helped her not refer to Tommie and Leah Walker as

Momma and Daddy. “I am definitely getting a bonus and I hope that my work will eventually land me a promotion and fa sho a raise.”

“We are so proud of you right now, Faith. Have you called Jackie yet?”

“No, I haven’t called her yet. I was planning on doing that after I talked to y’all first.”

“Okay, well we won’t hold you because I know she will want to hear this great news. Matter of fact, she will probably share her great news with you, too.”

“What great news?”

“We’ll let her tell you,” they said in unison.

“What? Can’t y’all tell me?” Faith hated surprises.

After several attempts, Faith gave up and decided to call Aunt Jackie herself. She said goodbye and immediately dialed the familiar number.