

★ TEXAS GOLD COLLECTION ★

A REASON TO STAY

—A—
TEXAS GOLD
NOVEL

KELLIE COATES GILBERT


Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Kellie Coates Gilbert, *A Reason to Stay*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gilbert, Kellie Coates.

A reason to stay : a Texas gold novel / Kellie Coates Gilbert.

pages ; cm. — (Texas gold collection)

ISBN 978-0-8007-2274-6 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS3607.142323R43 2015

813'.6—dc23

2015020131

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Published in association with MacGregor Literary Agency.

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my little Peanut and Gumdrop.
Grammy loves you.



*T*here's no need to fix something that isn't broken.

At least that was what Faith Marin's mother always said. And goodness knows, her mother was *never* wrong.

Unfortunately, the station's executive news director had expressed the exact opposite sentiment in his office yesterday. "Okay, listen. I'm not saying what we're doing isn't working. I'm only suggesting we might have to consider changing things up a bit. No one else is going to keep Faith Marin's star shining. You have to do that for yourself. Right now, your Q score remains high, but you and I both know this is a nearsighted business. Viewers are fickle, which is why we spend an inordinate amount of time and money keeping the *Faith on Air* brand fresh and relevant." Clark Ravino pointed at the stack of Niensens on the corner of his desk. "And sometimes a bit of recalibration is in order."

"Are you saying the show's brand needs recalibrating? Or mine?" He'd been getting a lot of pushback on her series after folding to her campaign for the station to take a risk on quality programming, instead of the popular morn-porn shown on nearly every other station in their market area. Personally, if she had to see Miley Cyrus gyrating half naked one more time, she would be sick to her stomach.

The devilishly handsome man sitting across from her slowly placed his starched shirtsleeves on top of the desk and steepled his fingers. “To be honest, the answer is both.”

“Oh, c’mon, Clark. Are we really going to be another butterfly station, never landing long on anything serious, instead fluttering on to the next pretty flower that smells good? And then the next?” She’d had this argument with Clark on numerous occasions. “Look, whoever is coming up with this nonsense is simply not giving women enough credit. Our viewers are smarter than that.”

He gave her a patient smile. “You’re missing the point.”

She scowled. “We went over all this last month. You agreed the show was getting too fluffy, that we needed to incorporate stories that significantly contribute to women’s lives.”

He tapped on the stack again. “The demos are telling us otherwise. The Most Valuable Viewer age is getting younger every day. I don’t need to tell you the station’s news shows subsidize the entire rest of the day’s programming. Even a tiny drop in household rankings is material when it comes to advertising dollars.” He pointed to the ceiling. “You can argue all you want, but that’s what matters upstairs.”

From across Clark’s desk, Faith squared her shoulders and looked her producer directly in the eye. “So the line you fed me months ago over dinner at Brennan’s was bunk? You said if I agreed to stay on the morning desk, you’d help make *Faith on Air* Houston’s premier morning show, that you’d let me do the kinds of stories that would position me to move on to a national market.”

Clark held up his palms. “I know what I promised. I think what we have here is simply a perception problem. If we let our ratings slip, so does your viability in the top three DMAs. You think the honchos in New York, LA, or Chicago aren’t interested in market percentages?”

He stood, came from around his desk, and placed his hand

on her shoulder, but not before letting his fingers casually brush against her neck. “I’m on your side, remember?”

Faith had played that entire conversation over and over in her mind, losing valuable sleep last night. And it showed in her reflection in the station’s makeup mirror this morning.

“Girl, there ain’t enough concealer to hide those dark circles under your eyes.”

“I know, Shanika.” She sighed. “Just do your best.”

Trying to hide her exhaustion, she glanced past the cameras at the countdown clock and thought about all the sacrifices she’d made.

A shrill alarm clock had pulled her from a warm bed at two in the morning far too many times to count since she’d moved into the anchor chair at KIAM-TV. While the rest of Houston slept, she’d pulled on her favorite nylon hoodie and yoga pants, grabbed a mega mug of coffee, and made the lonely drive to the station, singing to the radio to warm up her voice.

Her daily bedtime was no later than seven in the evening, which wreaked havoc on her social life. Her only friends were business associates. She’d left steaming turkey and dressing on her plate to cover a Thanksgiving Day explosion in the Channelview shipyards that left dozens fatally wounded. The receptionist at her dentist’s office teased that they always wrote her appointments in pencil, knowing how often she failed to show for her scheduled cleanings in order to report on some tragic fire, a sensational murder, or a high-profile arrest. General assignment reporters covered the day-to-day remotes, but big stories warranting breaking news status often required lead anchors to do live broadcasts from the scene.

She’d sacrificed much—success had come with a price. She recognized that now.

Sure, her job was glamorous in many respects. Certainly she’d attained celebrity status and was recognized wherever she went. The heels of her Jimmy Choo stilettos were finally parked on the

higher rungs of the ladder. But one misstep and her professional life would follow her dismal personal failures.

Now, more than ever, she couldn't afford to let that happen. This career was all she had left.

If she worked hard enough, stood up for what she knew was right, the tough choices she'd had to make would pay off. At least that was what she told herself when her exhausted head hit the pillow at night—in the bed where she now slept alone.

At the close of the first segment, Faith forced a smile at the camera. "The Houston Humane Society warns that all dogs found on the street without proper tagging and licensing are subject to confiscation. We'll be right back after this commercial break."

In this morning's broadcast, they'd led with a story about a cruise ship stranded a hundred miles off port with mechanical issues, a charity event at the Golf Club of Houston, and a projected rise in house prices reported by the Houston Association of Realtors. Traffic was tied up in the southbound lanes of the Southwest Freeway, a result of a semitruck that illegally changed lanes and crashed into a Toyota pickup. Remarkably, there were no fatalities to report. And Doppler radar was picking up a system approaching in the Gulf, causing the meteorologist to predict rain by Sunday.

Then her Humane Society piece.

After they returned from the commercial break, the producers aired a human interest segment, a story about the unveiling of a wax figure of Katy Perry at Madame Tussauds in London.

Mike Jarrett, her coanchor, gave the camera a wide smile. "Now, that sounds like something worth seeing."

"Sure does, Mike. I'm sure all our viewers traveling to London will want to pen that one in on their travel itineraries." Faith smiled even wider, hoping her sarcasm hadn't come across in her voice.

She was minutes from signing off the broadcast when Clark entered the studio, followed by a young woman in a stylish short hairstyle and an outfit not unlike those Faith often saw on the

Pinterest boards she studied at night, trying to stay on top of what women found fashionable. She thought of changing her own hair to something similar—a pixie-cut style recently made popular by Jennifer Lawrence. Of course, before she shortened her hair, she'd have to get the blessing of some focus group.

The cameraman gave the signal it was time to wrap up.

Mike leaned slightly forward. “And that’s our broadcast this Thursday morning. I hope you’ll tune in again at midday for KIAM-TV News at Noon.”

Faith straightened her scripts and gave the audience a final smile, showing off her expensive veneers. “And thank you, Houston, for letting KIAM-TV be your eye on the news.”

The music cued and the station’s logo, an eye with their call letters, flashed across the monitors. Lucas Cunningham, the technical operations manager, stepped forward with a clipboard in his hand. “Good show, everyone.”

Faith stood and took a deep breath. Out of the corner of her eye she caught Clark and the woman moving in her direction.

“Faith, I’d like you to meet Lynna Scowcroft. She’s going to be spending some time with you over the next couple of weeks.”

She extended her hand and gave the perky young woman a weak smile, knowing Clark’s careful wording was code for: *This gal, who barely looks past nineteen years of age, is the media consultant du jour who will be evaluating your every move and then reporting on ways we can make your life miserable.*

“Hello, it’s nice to meet you,” Faith said politely before turning to Clark, giving him a look that left no doubt how she felt about her new shadow. If Lynna Scowcroft noticed, she didn’t let on. Instead she pulled her buzzing iPhone from her bag and brought it to her ear while mouthing that she was sorry, she needed to take the call. She stepped back out of the bright lights and into a dimly lit corner of the studio for privacy.

Clark grinned. “Hold back your enthusiasm,” he teased.

Faith shrugged and lowered her voice. “You couldn’t find a grown-up to rake me over the image promotion coals?”

“You got the memo. We’re working to attract a younger audience willing to spend recklessly on consumer goods they don’t need.” His slightly bantering tone did nothing to defuse the reality of his statement. They both knew the station was strongly beginning to favor pop culture news. The difference between them was that as executive producer of the news division, Clark Ravino was determined to disregard his personal feelings in order to embrace what was on the horizon. Faith wouldn’t give in that easily.

Under the heat of the lights, he unbuttoned the cuffs on his shirt and rolled up the sleeves. “A call came in to the assignment desk while you were on air. Senator Libby Heekin Rohny has scheduled a press conference out at the Johnson Space Center. Rumor has it she’s going to announce some very unpopular budget cuts. I want you to cover the story.”

Faith’s eyes lit up. They both knew he’d just thrown her a bone—a story with national importance. If she played this one right, she’d corner the senator and urge her to come on *Faith on Air* for an extended (and exclusive) interview. A coup for sure, and the kind of airtime that would build her portfolio. “Thanks, Clark. I owe you.”

He gave her shoulder a squeeze. “*De nada, chica*. But you’d better get a move on. You have a little over two hours.” He leaned his head in the direction of Lynna Scowcroft, who had just put away her phone. “Take her with. And be good,” he added.

“Tell Tinker Bell to get a move on then.” Her mouth formed a wicked grin. “And about that perception thing you mentioned earlier—I’m not fresh off the playground. Faith Marin has busted her bunnies for years and she *is* good.” She winked in his direction and motioned for the consultant to follow.

Like a pro, Faith squared her shoulders and headed for the door, determined to face whatever was ahead.