

Truths and Roses

To Mac, for believing. To our four beautiful daughters,
Lola, Kavvi, Tatti and Nadia for your sweetness and love.
To Mama, for always being there.
And to our dogs, loved, each and every one.

Truths and Roses

Truths and Roses
Print Edition
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Truths and Roses

Dear Readers,

When ***Truths and Roses*** was first published in 1994, I never would have imagined that I would one day have the opportunity to revisit this story and give it new life all over again.

But when I asked for the rights back to my first published book a year or so ago, I began to realize what an incredible time in history it is to be a writer. Never before have we had the opportunity to release our work as much in synch with our original vision as we now have.

These characters, Hannah Jacobs and Will Kincaid, have always been close to my heart, sort of like a first love. They were the characters who helped me secure my first publishing contract, the first characters I released into the world and held my breath, waiting to see if others would like them. Thankfully, I received many letters from wonderful readers, letters I have kept and still cherish.

With my plunge into this new digital world, I have taken the opportunity to bring some things in this story up to date and have taken some editing license as well. But the heart of the characters and the story remain the same. Hannah and Will and the other folks of Lake Perdue feel like old friends to me. I have loved spending time with them again. I so hope you will enjoy getting to know them as well.

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Prologue

New Orleans, Louisiana

The ball flew out of the quarterback's hands, whistling down the length of the Superdome field like a missile. A missile aimed at Will Kincaid.

From his spot on the fifteen-yard line, he narrowed his gaze, willing the oncoming ball to land in his waiting hands. Nothing existed except this moment. There were no fans lunging to their feet, no vendors hawking popcorn and Cokes in the stands, no TV cameras zooming in on him. Just the knowledge that within his reach hung the brass ring.

The moment he'd waited for all his life. The Super Bowl. A single chance in which to make his mark in history. He could taste the victory, feel its reassuring caress through the sweat and grime that covered his face. His. It was his. Before his eyes flashed an image of his father's face—

"You'll make me proud out there, son. Never given me reason to be ashamed yet. I know you won't start tonight."

Winning. Nothing else mattered. Determination roared up from deep inside him. He launched himself at the ball, reaching, reaching....

It landed solidly in his grasp, and he catapulted forward. A hand grabbed for his shoulder, missed and snatched again. He ran, flat out, every self-doubt that had ever plagued him pushing him down that field. But just as Will's feet crossed the line, the safety tackled him, taking him down, slamming him into the unforgiving turf. His right knee twisted and took the full impact of his weight.

The resounding crack echoed in his ears.

He lay there, not moving while thousands of fans roared their support, hero worship for a young man who, at twenty-nine, had reached the top of the ladder he'd chosen to climb. Nausea rose inside him, swift

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enough to draw a groan from his midsection. Then the blackness overtook him, and everything else faded against the backdrop of his father's unreadable frown.

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Chapter One

Hannah Jacobs had long been aware that most of the people in Lake Perdue considered her a mystery. They thought it odd that a young woman would go months without showing her face at a public function. Odd that she seemed content to work in a small town library week after week, month after month, year after year, when most of her peers had moved away to make their fortunes.

They didn't know that the old brick building with its slate roof and musty memories of the flood of '64 suited her. It no longer mattered that she'd once entertained other dreams. The library had become her solace. Her refuge. Books did not question or judge. They made safe companions.

As assistant librarian, Jenny Dudley did not share Hannah's passion, but she went about her work with singular efficiency and enthusiasm. In the past few years, she had become Hannah's closest friend. But even with Jenny, she avoided talking about anything personal, preferring, instead, to discuss topics associated with the library—which books had received favorable reviews in *Publishers Weekly*, how many they could order and stay within budget.

Today, though, their conversation did not run toward anything so dry. Hannah would have given a day's pay to be arguing the merits of stocking the shelves with extra copies of Faulkner. Avoiding Jenny's eyes, she reached for the L encyclopedia and shoved the volume into its proper spot.

"It would do you good to get out for a change, Hannah," Jenny said. "A parade would be just the thing. You need to start living a little." At forty-five, Jenny followed her own advice, coming in with a new hairstyle every week. Keep a man guessing, she said, convinced it would eventually

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help her find the man she'd been searching for in the twenty-odd years since she'd lost her husband.

"I don't have time today."

"Don't you ever get tired of the same old routine? You're here every day except Sunday. And every night you head straight for that old mausoleum you call home. You're the only person I know whose spice cabinet is alphabetized. Not to mention that you've read ninety-five percent of the books in this library. Books and reality are two different things, you know. What you need, Hannah Jacobs, is something to ruffle your feathers a bit."

Hannah closed her eyes and rubbed a hand across the back of her neck. She'd heard it before, how the romance of spinsterhood had gone the route of the wooden icebox. "Jenny, don't start this again—"

"A young woman like yourself ought to be getting out more."

"Jenny." The word was a warning.

"And I can't understand why you insist on playing down your God-given good looks. It's like you're trying to hide them or something. Why on earth don't you—"

"We've been through this before, Jen. Please."

Jenny muttered something about the folly of a woman hiding her light under a bushel, then made a mock salute of truce. "All right. But it's not as if a local hero comes home to roost every day of the week." With a what's-this-world-coming-to sigh of exasperation, she urged the metal book cart down the aisle and said, "You really aren't going?"

"It's February," Hannah said, hoping to divert Jenny's mission. "How can you have a parade in February?"

Jenny shrugged. "No one ever complains about having the Christmas parade in cold weather. What's the difference?"

A gust of wind caught a limb of the pine tree outside the front window, slapping it against the pane. Hannah flinched, then reached for another book. "Parades are for soldiers coming home, retired war veterans, even Santa Claus. Not football players," she added with a shake of her head.

"For goodness' sake, Hannah, you act like Will Kincaid's an ax murderer or something. He won the Super Bowl."

"And the rest of the town is acting like he's the messiah."

"Oh, that's hogwash. You know he's just a local boy made good. What's wrong with giving him a little pat on the back?"

"Certainly a contribution to mankind." Hannah aligned the row of encyclopedias in soldier-like precision, despite the fact that the two-thirty

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school bus would drop off a dozen or so hands to interpose A with C and P with Z.

"Come on. Sandy will be here after school to work the front desk. We could slip out for a few minutes—"

"I have a dental appointment at four." For all the sorrow in her voice, she could have been announcing her imminent departure for Tahiti.

The corners of Jenny's mouth puckered in a frown. "I guess I'll go by myself, then."

Hannah didn't take the bait. "I'm sure you'll have plenty of company."

"Well, then, you might just be sorry," Jenny said, attempting one last tack. "He's awfully good-looking, if all those magazine articles are anything to judge from."

Smoothing the front of her dress, Hannah grabbed the remaining books from the cart, sending her coworker a look that said it wouldn't have mattered if he'd been Adonis himself. "I need to run a few errands before my appointment. I'll see you in the morning, Jenny."

Hannah slipped the last three volumes into their appropriate spots, then walked to the front desk. She opened the bottom drawer and pulled out her purse, humming as she went, an apparent portrait of indifference.

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Chapter Two

The yellow twenty-five-miles-an-hour sign warned would-be speeders of the hairpin curve marking the entrance into the Lake Perdue town limits. Will Kincaid took note of it, then dismissed it much the same as he'd once dismissed his ninth-grade algebra teacher. He knew today the same reckless uncertainty for his future he'd known then.

Downshifting, he sent the car accelerating into the curve. The new red Ferrari hugged the pavement at well over double the sign's advised speed. The tires squealed in protest before the car hummed on, fourth gear, back to fifth, leveling off with a purr that was to the auto enthusiast what Rachmaninoff might have been to the New York Philharmonic patron.

Limits. Life these days revolved around them.

Will didn't have time for speed limits today. He was late. Late for this parade his father had planned. He'd wanted nothing more than a few weeks to recover. A few weeks to put body and soul back together again. To forget about football. And Grace. To convince himself he'd done the right thing in walking away from both of them.

The Super Bowl. The high point of his life. It had shattered not only his knee, but all sense of direction, as well, leaving him with no idea of where to go or what to do.

Not that he hadn't had his share of well-meaning friends and relatives intent on showing him the way. *Head for Hollywood. New York's the place for you. Come home for a while, son. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two hundred dollars.*

Despite the barrage of well-intended advice given him, Will had let Lake Perdue beckon and win for the time being. Will's father had wanted

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him to move back home, an option totally out of the question. He'd rented a house in Tarkington's Cove, instead. Close enough to visit. Far enough away to secure the space he needed.

Although, so far, physical distance hadn't been a deterrent for his father. John Kincaid had still managed to talk Will into sitting on some ridiculous float and being pulled around town like a monkey in a cage.

"How can you turn them down, son?"

"I'm tired, Dad."

"It's just an hour or two. Surely that's not too much to ask from someone who's made it as big as you have."

Guilt. John Kincaid played it better than anyone Will had ever known. No one had pushed him harder toward his success in the NFL. No one had reminded him of it more often.

Will had relented finally, certain by the end of their discussion that his father would get more pleasure out of the event than anyone else in Lake Perdue.

He hadn't exactly dressed for the occasion, a fact his father would be certain to point out. Will had never been much for Armani suits and the like. His taste had remained constant over the years. He still preferred jeans, the kind that had been washed so many times they'd gone soft and white. Today he'd paired them with a white shirt and a worn-looking leather jacket that cost more than a lot of used cars.

He reached forward and popped in a CD. The sound of Wagner's "Die Walkure split the air, blasting away at the edges of his impatience. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, while he controlled the steering wheel with the other. The car had been a bonus from Hank Calhoun, owner of the team on which Will had played wide receiver. A farewell present for a job well done. And maybe a bit of a bribe, as well, Will had later realized. For him to consider going back to work for Hank in some other capacity. To reconsider not forgetting Hank's daughter once he left L.A.

"You and Grace make a fine couple, Will," Hank had said the last time they'd talked. "There aren't too many men I'd hand my daughter over to, you know." Will knew it was true. But it had taken him three years to realize he wasn't the man for that particular honor.

Like the rest of the world, Hank had known Will's career was over. No one seemed willing to dispute the evidence that he would never again play football. "With the number of injuries you've had on that knee, this was just the final straw, Will," one of the doctors had said. "The average playing time is three-and-a-half years," another had consoled. So he'd had

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more than most. But that didn't make the verdict any easier to accept. A verdict he'd sentenced himself to years ago. Time to pay the hangman.

Using his left foot, Will braked to a halt at the first of the town's three stoplights.

No one understood why he'd left the West Coast mecca of wealth to come back to a town where the population hovered around five thousand. He wasn't sure himself. He just knew that home was the place for him to recover—both physically and mentally.

With one wrist draped over the wheel, he glanced at his surroundings. Things had changed since his last visit. Progress had stuck its big toe into Lake Perdue. Aaron Tate's General Store, which had since risen to One Stop Gas & Go status, still sat on the corner of Second and Main. A pizza joint had been wedged in between it and Kawley's Drugstore, more than likely giving Simpson's Ice Cream, the old high-school hangout, a run for its money. On the other side of the street, Ethel's Fine Fashions had been replaced by a shop that looked as though it belonged on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, a concession to the customers coming in from some of the lake's new developments.

Disappointment shot through him. Nothing stayed the same. The rest of the world was beginning to discover Lake Perdue, the quiet little town that had been his refuge in the years of traveling from one big city to another.

The light turned green. He put his foot to the accelerator and continued along Main Street, dodging the potholes and passing a car and then a truck. He didn't know either of the drivers, but he lifted a hand in greeting, anyway. Here, everybody waved. Will pictured himself cruising down Sunset Boulevard, waving at every car he passed. He shook his head and smiled to himself for the first time that day.

Tom Dillon, an old friend and now a town deputy sheriff, stood just ahead in the middle of the street, directing traffic for the parade. Will rolled down his window and lifted a cautious hand in greeting. The two had been buddies in high school, until they'd had a falling-out just before graduation. Will hadn't forgotten it.

Tom apparently had. He grinned and yelled, "Hey, Will, man how's it going?"

"How ya doin', Tom?" Will threw back, a cool note in his voice.

Tom blew his whistle and motioned a lane of traffic forward, shouting over his shoulder, "Come on out to Clarence's when you get a chance. Buy you a beer."

With a half nod and a wave, Will swung off Main onto McClanahan for the First Baptist Church. He checked his appearance in the mirror and

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then glanced up just in time to see a stop sign ahead that hadn't been there the last time he'd been home.

Brake lights flashed as the car in front of him rolled to a stop. Nothing short of a miracle would allow him to miss it. Tires squealed, rubber smoked against asphalt as the Ferrari plowed into the back of the stopped car.

The air bag exploded, preventing Will from going through the windshield.

He slammed a palm against the steering wheel and leaned forward to get a closer look at what he'd done. The brand-new Ferrari now sat with its nose tucked under the ancient relic in front of him.

The car was the color of his aunt Fan's grasshopper pie. It appeared to be a good thirty feet long, sporting twin pointed extensions just above each taillight. He recognized the make—a Cadillac Sedan de Ville. Had it been a convertible, it would have looked a lot like something Batman drove.

With another muttered curse, he climbed out of the car, pulling his leather bomber jacket close against the February chill. He cast a glance at the damage and decided it might not have been as bad as he'd thought. A few scratches maybe if they were careful about separating the two cars. Not worth calling the police.

Lips pressed together, he limped across the pavement to the other driver's door. A woman. He should have guessed. Judging from the antique she was driving, she probably hadn't been on the road in fifteen years.

Will knocked on the window and leaned forward. The woman sat there, staring straight ahead as if in a trance. Alarm stabbed at him. What if she was hurt?

Before he could complete the thought, the car door opened, barely missing his nose. The woman slid out of the front seat, sidestepping him until they stood a good four feet apart. Focusing to the left of his shoulder, she asked in a frigid voice, "Was there a problem with your brakes?"

The question sounded innocent enough. But her tried-and-convicted tone rankled Will. He took a step back and arched a brow, taking in the wool cap pulled so low on her head that she appeared not to have any hair, the round glasses that seemed to dwarf her small face, the scarf wrapped around her neck and tucked under her chin. From the way she'd mummified herself, he could barely see where the hat ended and the scarf began.

"Hey, I'll be the first to admit this was my fault. But you were barely moving, you know."

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The woman kept her eyes averted and appeared to be searching for words. Her response, when it finally came, was calm and reasonable. "McClanahan wasn't exactly made for drag racing."

He slid his sunglasses down his nose and stared at her, his eyes narrowed. Something about the woman seemed familiar. Only he couldn't see her well enough to figure out what. He stepped back and frowned at her. "Do I know you?"

The woman hesitated. Then she quickly pushed past him and slid into the car to shuffle through some papers she pulled from the glove compartment. "I have an appointment in a few minutes, so if you don't mind, I'd like to get this over with. I assume you have insurance."

Will couldn't remember the last time a woman had given him the cold shoulder. Maybe he'd gotten spoiled, but her attitude ticked him off. "I do," he snapped. "And I'd rather not get the police involved in this. I've had a pissar of a day, if you'll pardon the language. Your damage is minimal. I'll take a chance on mine. I'm late for something myself."

Her eyes widened. "If you could please give me your company's name." She kept her gaze on the notepad in her hand, pen poised in midair.

"Better yet," he said, his voice softer now, "how about if I just pay you for the damage? We could make a reasonable estimate, and if it's more, you can get in touch with me later."

"I'd prefer to keep this within the law."

"I wasn't suggesting anything illegal, just—"

"Convenient. You're interested in convenience." She nodded impatiently. "All right. We'll do it your way."

"Sounds reasonable enough." He turned and made his way back to the Ferrari, deliberately taking his time. Reaching for the wallet inside the glove compartment, he pulled out a wad of cash and counted out several large bills. That ought to do it. He doubted the whole car was worth that much.

Favoring his right leg, he ambled back to the woman's car and leaned inside to hand her the money along with a few insurance papers. "It's all there. With a toll-free number. I don't imagine you'll need it, though. This should cover it."

The woman glanced down at the money and shook her head.

"I made what I thought was a generous guess," he said. "If it's too much, keep the rest for your trouble."

"Fine," she said, looking suddenly angry. With surprising strength, she yanked the door closed, leaving him staring at her through the window.

He took a hasty step back and then grimaced when a pain shot through his leg. Suddenly he realized he hadn't told her he'd disconnect

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the two cars himself. It would need to be done carefully, just right in order to—

He reached out to pound on the window just as she fired the old clunker, jerked it into gear and surged forward.

Speechless, Will stood there watching as she floored the heap and roared through the intersection at a speed that couldn't possibly be described as a snail's pace.