

Reviews of Graham Garrison's debut novel, *Hero's Tribute*

“The book examines the human condition and succeeds in inspiring readers to follow lives of genuine discipline and faith. Highly recommended.”

—CHURCH LIBRARIES

“Fans will appreciate this terrific insightful look at a *Hero's Tribute*. To be human means to have flaws, but it takes *Amazing Grace* to move past them to greatness. With a final twist at the eulogy that will leave readers stunned and wanting to join in on the four song tribute, Graham Garrison provides a strong Christian tale.”

—MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

“*Hero's Tribute* is a human drama story and much more.”

—BVS REVIEWS

“Mr. Garrison selects an intriguing premise for his debut novel and follows it through with a great narrative style. . . . Excellent story, solidly written and definitely worth the read.”

—SUMMIT BOOK REVIEWS

LEGACY ROAD

A Novel

GRAHAM GARRISON

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Legacy Road: A Novel

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To my boys, Nicholas and Nolan.
Know that you are loved.

Chapter 1

Wes Watkins took a deep breath and opened the tiny box. Still there. Three months' salary—four if he'd stayed as a small town reporter for the *North Georgia News*. Other than rent, the largest investment of his life, and success hinged on Emmy Stewart saying yes.

Downtown Roswell restaurant noises filtered beneath the men's room door. Wes cradled the box in his hands and studied the ring. The solitaire diamond was sleek and classic—like Emmy.

He remembered vividly the first time he met her, at a Memorial Day barbecue. Lynn Gavin, Emmy's aunt, introduced the pair over ribs and tea, and Wes felt an immediate attraction to Emmy. Wes thought his friendship with Lynn might give him a bit of a leg up on any competition. But he'd had two things going against him. One was that Emmy's blue summer dress and sparkling blue eyes left him wobbling through their conversation like a six-year-old learning to ride a bike without training wheels. And the other, which was more important to Emmy, was that Wes displayed poor rib-eating skills.

"A fork? Really?" were her first words, in a slightly raspy, completely Southern voice. "What kind of self-respecting man eats his ribs with a fork?"

He had fallen in love right there. That had been more than seven months ago. Now it was five hours until the New Year on a Friday night with the whole world opening up for Wes, it seemed. He smiled as he closed the box and tucked it and the memories away. He'd spent too much time in the bathroom already and would hear about it from Emmy.

He took a quick look in the mirror to smooth back his dark hair and smiled to make sure he didn't have something stuck in his teeth. His brown eyes studied his average frame through the reflection. He took in the retreat of his double chin, a little more muscle on his shoulders, his more upright posture—all attributed to Emmy and her active lifestyle.

Then as he pushed through the men's room door, Wes did something that two years ago he would never, ever have done. He prayed, silently thanking God for all the changes in his life.

"What were you doing in there?" Emmy asked. "Powdering your nose?"

Wes laughed. He soaked in her voice, her dimples, her long brunette hair. How had he gotten so lucky? He wasn't sure. Until he'd met Emmy, his disheveled childhood, not much dating in high school and college, and practically no love life in the real world had him thinking he'd be a bachelor forever. He'd reached the midway point of his twenties with no prospects. But then an obituary assignment was handed to him one Monday morning, followed by an unusual request—to also deliver the man's eulogy. The assignment opened the doors to the community of Talking Creek, closed Wes's career as a full-time newspaper reporter, and most importantly, opened his eyes to see beyond his built-in skepticism of people's intentions, to possibly forgive and heal old wounds that'd he buried or tried to ignore. Meeting Emmy only confirmed to Wes he was on the right track.

"Want to join the living?" Emmy said.

Wes grinned and took a bite of chicken parmigiana. "I just wish I could live on this."

Emmy rolled her eyes and let him off the hook. "You should try eating something new. You know I'm going to have you eating tapas yet. I've heard John Smoltz lives around here and *loves* the tapas."

Another plus with Emmy—she was an encyclopedia in all things sports and even gave Wes a run for his money about his beloved Braves.

"Gotta get a better bullpen or we won't have a shot against the Mets," she said between forkfuls of pasta. "Can't depend on the starters all season—not like when we trotted Smoltz, Glavine, and Maddux out there in

the 90s. You saw the innings our rotation put up last summer, and it wore them down for the stretch run.”

“Do you realize those are some of the most romantic words a man can ever hear?” Wes said. She kicked him under the table.

They finished their dinner and walked to the corner for coffee. “Want to walk through the square before we head down to Atlanta to watch the Peach Drop?” It wasn’t a random question, although he tried to play it off that way. He’d planned their route for weeks.

“But it’s freezing!” Emmy protested. “And we’re watching the Peach Drop from a hotel ballroom, right?”

One of the coldest New Year’s Eves of the last few decades, the weatherman had said. And Wes knew Emmy hated being cold. She was a beach girl: tank top and flip-flops complete with sunny skies. The weather was the only part of this day Wes couldn’t control, but he wasn’t going to wait. He wanted the rest of his life to start right now.

“Come on. I bet a future Hall of Famer like John Smoltz would do it,” Wes said, smirking and trying to act cool. “Besides, we never get over here enough to enjoy it.”

With a warm coffee in her hand, Emmy agreed, and they strolled across the street. The Italian restaurant where they’d had dinner was one of about a dozen places to eat downtown, mixed in among antique shops, used bookstores, places to buy paintings, and a couple of coffee shops. Toward the center was a square with a water fountain, shut down for the winter, and a handful of benches. In the summertime bands played there and flowers dotted the edges.

Downtown Roswell had the feel of a college campus, which reminded Wes about his next collegiate stop, Tributary University. He’s always wanted to go after a graduate degree and teach history. He’d put the idea aside after getting his bachelor’s degree, put it aside earlier than that by not majoring in history or teaching, but he’d thought more about it after leaving the *North Georgia News*. As a freelance writer and editor with steady work (and making more money than a staff reporter), he could work at his own pace and still have enough time and money to pay for the graduate

classes in history that would begin next week. There was so much to look forward to these days!

Wes could feel his heart racing as they approached the square. He desperately wanted Emmy to be part of his future. He stopped and pulled Emmy to his side. His hands felt clammy and he knew he must be blushing.

“What’s wrong?” Emmy asked.

“Nothing.” He couldn’t decide whether to take her hand or bring out the box first, so he attempted both.

“You’re cracking me up, Watkins.”

He smiled, grasped the box in his pocket, and pulled it out.

But Emmy’s attention was diverted. “I don’t believe it. Look!” She pointed to the opposite side of the water fountain.

A girl was sitting on a park bench, talking to a guy. The guy was standing, but Wes knew what would come next. He watched the guy lower himself to one knee. The girl put her hands to her face, then extended her hand and let her boyfriend, now fiancé, put the ring on. Then they embraced.

“I don’t believe it either,” Wes said, deflated. Even with the frigid wind blowing in his face, Wes felt the blood drain from his cheeks. And when he turned, his heart sank.

Emmy was staring at the box in his hand. “Wes, no, I—”

The ring felt heavy.

Then everything happened at once. Emmy’s phone rang. Wes thought he saw tears as she turned away to take the call. The hospital where she worked needed her for a shift in three hours. She’d have just enough time to drive from Roswell to Talking Creek, an hour and a half away, change, and get to the hospital.

Wes didn’t say a word, didn’t move. The ring was still in his hand. But everything else felt like it was slipping away. Before she left, Emmy said something about meeting back in Talking Creek to talk, not to make any rash decisions. She gave him a hug, a strong one, but there was no warmth in it for Wes. He pocketed the ring, sat on the ice-cold walkway of the square, and marveled at how quickly a storybook ending could change.

Chapter 2

Emmy didn't hesitate. Once she received the paramedics' inbound radio report of a suspected stabbing victim, she phoned upstairs to alert the OR and prepped two other nurses while readying a room.

"Sue, you've got airway breathing." Emmy was the shortest person in the ER by at least half a foot, but with her experience as a US Army, then National Guard medic, she was used to belting out orders and being obeyed promptly. "Henry, you handle circulation. I'll take the head-to-toe exam."

The ER doors whisked open ten minutes into the New Year and a rush of cold, winter wind whipped through the hallway. Two paramedics wheeled in a wounded man, groaning.

"What's the report?" Emmy asked without looking at Wayne, one of the paramedics. They'd worked together enough to establish a routine with the more serious patients, for whom seconds were more precious than formalities. She searched for the wound as she listened. "Henry, get an IV in him." Often it was hard to find where the victim had been stabbed or shot. Blood was everywhere, and it was vital to find the wound and put pressure on it, clamp it if need be, before sending the patient for surgery.

Sue had done her airway check and given the thumbs-up, then stepped away. She was still uneasy in high-stress situations, and Emmy was trying to work her along slowly and build up her confidence.

"You need me?" Dr. Jessup poked his head into the room where the three nurses were working.