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FOR ROBERT STEPHENS
MY GREAT-UNCLE WHO DIED
AT THE DOZIER SCHOOL FOR BOYS
IN MARIANNA, FLORIDA, IN 1937.
HE WAS FIFTEEN YEARS OLD.

PATRICIA GLORIA STEPHENS DUE
1939-2012

I MISS YOU, MOM.

JOHN DORSEY DUE, JR.

FREEDOM LAWYER

THANK YOU FOR COLLABORATING WITH ME, DAD.

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I



M C C O R M A C K R O A D



ONE

June 1950, Gracetown, Florida

ROBERT STEPHENS HELD his breath and counted to three, hoping to see Mama.

Some mornings his nose tickled with a trace of talcum powder or Madam C.J. Walker's Glossine hair grease, and he felt . . . *something* hovering over him, watching him sleep. His groggy brain would think . . . *Mama?* If he gasped or sat up too quickly, or even wiped the sleep from his eyes, it was gone like a dream. But sometimes, when the June daylight charged early through the thin curtain and broke the darkness, movement glided across the red glow of his closed eyelids like someone walking past his bed. He felt no gentle kisses or fingertips brushing his forehead. No whispers of assurances and motherly love. Nothing like what people said ghosts were supposed to be, much less your dead mama. That morning he was patient, counting the way he'd practiced—*one one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand*—and slitted his eyes open.

A woman's shadow passed outside of the window above him, features appearing in the gaps between the sheets of tinfoil taped across the glass. In a white dress, maybe. *Maybe*. Moving fast, in a hurry.

"Mama?"

The shadow didn't stop, or turn around, or step inside the room through the wall to show her face. His hope that she would say something to him died before it was fully awake. That's how fast she was gone. Always.

Robert jumped from his mattress to peek through a gap in the foil, but of course she wasn't there. Nothing was visible except the old chicken coop, long empty. And it was an ordinary day again, with Mama in heaven and Papa in Chicago—starting out wrong already. Robert had given up trying to convince his older sister, Gloria, that Mama was visiting him, unless she was just jealous that he still had a piece of her that she didn't. But it was such a small piece, not even enough to touch or hold.

Since Robert and Gloria lived downwind of the McCormacks' turpentine camp, the sweet scent of cooking breakfast ham filled the cabin like a shout. Robert's violent hunger overpowered any happiness he'd won from the quick-moving shadow that could have been Mama's ghost, but probably wasn't. That day started the same as the rest: the vaguest shadow and the smell of meat. Robert's empty heart whimpered and his empty stomach roared.

Later on, when the bad thing would happen and the judge would ask him, "Why'd you do a fool thing like that?"—and in the days to come he would cry himself to sleep in secret with the same question—the answer rested squarely with the frying ham at the turpentine camp. The camp was down the path from the two-room, ninety-year-old oak-and-brick cabin their grandfather built on the patch of land Master Powell had given him to die on when he was no longer useful—and luckily Papa had just fixed the leaky roof before he was chased off to Chicago. The money Papa sent the first week of the month never lasted long enough to keep the pantry stocked, so he and Gloria couldn't afford regular meat anymore except on Sundays. After church, Gloria might surprise him with a squirrel or rabbit she'd trapped, or she'd chop up a handful of smoked pork from Miss Anne in her greens so he could

remember the taste of something other than cornmeal and soup. And the camp was no more than a quick run from their cabin—close enough to smell the food, but as far away as the moon.

When he and Gloria opened the door that morning, the box from Chicago was waiting, dropped off overnight by Uncle June, Miz Lottie's grand-nephew, who carried Papa's packages from the post office. Papa never dared address his mail to his children directly for fear of reprisals or tampering by spiteful postal employees. This box was larger than usual, wrapped in brown paper, crisscrossed with twine and tape, slightly crushed in one corner during its trip from Chicago, or else in Miz Lottie's old truck.

"Told you they'd come," Gloria said.

The boots! Robert had been waiting on new boots since his soles had started falling apart in May. When Robert saw the box, he swooned with excitement, his hunger forgotten.

He ripped away twine, brown paper, tape. And stared.

The brown boots with bright white laces were large, crammed in the box from end to end.

Not for a child at all. His stomach curled in a knot with disappointment. "These are like Papa's boots—they won't hold my feet, Gloria!"

"Course not. You think Papa has money to send you boots special—all the way from Illinois—from a catalog every two weeks, racing to keep up with how your feet grow?"

Gloria's long sentences were dizzying. His school friends said his sister sounded whiter than white folks on the radio shows. His favorite programs were *Dragnet*, *Dimension X*, and *Suspense*, and Gloria sure enough sounded just like the hysterical ladies seeing an alien or staring down a gun barrel, the way she talked so fast.

Robert slipped his bare feet into the boots. His toes rattled inside. He flopped around the porch in the giant boots. "I can't even wear 'em!"

"We'll wrap your feet," Gloria said.

"I can't run in 'em like that!"

"Why do you need to run in your boots?"

"'Cause Papa says don't run barefoot."

"Then don't run," she said.

She might as well have said *Don't breathe. Don't let your heart beat*. All pleasure was gone lately. No Mama. No Papa. No sweets. No meat, most days. And now he couldn't run?

Robert's salty tears broke free. Gloria was forever telling him not to run—*It's just like Mama always told you*—but the Mama in his memory was a smiling face, birdsong voice, gentle touch. Gloria was forever talking about a scolding and rule-setting Mama he did not remember.

Gloria rubbed his chin. "By winter," she said, "your feet will fit."

Later, when Gloria would feel especially tender toward him because of his terrible ordeal, she would confess that she'd asked Papa to send boots two sizes too big. But that day she scolded him for his selfishness when so many children had no shoes at all. Made him promise to write a thank-you letter to Papa.

Robert was unhappy in two pairs of hot woolen socks and too-big boots as he and Gloria let themselves out of the chicken mesh fence they still kept latched tight even though the chickens were long gone. With a grumbling stomach and sweating feet, Robert was in a bad mood as they set out on the uphill climb through woods to the clay dust farm-to-market road that passed within shouting distance from their door. Rusty barbed wire from a long-ago hog pen was still strung along the path.

"Why we gotta wear shoes at school?" Robert said, but he stopped short of complaining about school. Luckily, it was the last week of school before summer break. Half his class was already gone to start picking in Quincy, although Gloria said Robert could never go to any white man's cotton field no matter how little money they had. That was what Papa wanted. Gloria had been forced to quit school after Papa left, and he often caught her wiping away a

tear before she left for Miss Anne Powell's to clean. Gloria treated school like it was holier than church. Robert liked to kick off his shoes under his desk, but Gloria had told Mr. Harris to rap his knuckles with a ruler if he ever saw him barefoot in the classroom. Papa had written in one of his letters that no one in Chicago would be caught dead barefoot, and Gloria hoped to beat Robert's country habits out of him so they would be ready for city life.

They *would* join Papa in Chicago one day. Gloria had promised him.

The dirt path let out on State Route 166, or McCormack Road, which stretched from one end of the county to the other, mostly through timber farms. He and Gloria lived just outside the Gracetown limits, with a three-mile walk to Frederick Douglass colored school on Lower Spruce, so they needed an hour to get there on time. In winter, the sun was still hidden when they began their walk to the school. If Robert was tardy, Mr. Harris gave him a paddling in front of the class. Robert had been late only once, and once was enough to last his whole life; the surprisingly sharp pain from the paddle hadn't smarted nearly as much as the eyes of his classmates on him, and the titter through the room: Robert Stephens's son being paddled! He could almost hear them planning how they would tell their parents. Like Papa said, everyone knowing your name wasn't always a blessing.

As they passed the McCormacks' fence, Robert heard the snorting of six-week-old piglets rooting near the roadside. Four of them, already fat enough to eat. The sight of the piglets made Robert's stomach growl again. He wished he could reach through the McCormacks' log slats to swipe one of the piglets. It would hardly be like stealing, with all the money the McCormacks had from slavery days. No one but the piglet's mama might ever know he was gone. But Robert walked past, his belly complaining as he recited his commandments under his breath: "*Thou shalt not steal. Thou. Shalt. Not. Steal.*"

He'd promised Mama he would keep God in his life. She'd said God was the only thing she had to give him. She'd given Robert plenty more than that—almost gave him Miss Anne's old piano once, if she'd been able to find someone to haul it into the woods for them, and if it could have fit inside their cabin. But when Mama had played for him during his lessons, Robert heard Mama sing how much she loved him even if she couldn't give him the piano to keep.

Robert remembered Mama's hollow-jawed cheeks and wide-open dead eyes before Mr. Kendrick had come to fetch her in his hearse to take her to the colored graveyard. Whenever Gloria said "Mama" or someone mentioned her name, Robert saw her dead face instead of the smiling one he'd known. He was thinking of Mama's dead face when the voice called out from the thin Florida pines.

"Hey there, Robbie!"

Two years had roughened Lyle McCormack's voice, but Robert still knew it well enough to stop and turn to him with a smile. Papa had taught him that if a McCormack addressed you—any white man, really, but especially a McCormack—you smiled like he was family you thought you'd lost in Normandy. You smiled like he was Christmas morning itself.

"How come y'all don't come to the swimmin' hole no more?" Lyle said.

At fourteen, Lyle McCormack had been another boy splashing with him and his cousins at the swimming hole near the swamp just beyond the McCormack fence. Two years later, at sixteen, Lyle McCormack was nearly six feet tall, broad-chested, with a patchy beard trying to grow over his ruddy cheeks. Robert had never considered Lyle McCormack a friend, but Lyle could not be a playmate now that he was becoming a man. Why was Lyle even asking?

"Don't know," Robert said. He shrugged in the way his sister hated. He felt her nudge his back, a silent correction.

Robert didn't mention he'd been busy with school. Six months before, he'd been walking in town with a primer under his arm when a white man he'd never seen knocked it free and kicked it into the street. "Strong-lookin' boy like you don't need to think about anything except tobacco," he said. Robert had been too shocked to smile. He'd stood gape-jawed while the stranger examined him. Asked him how old he was. Got angry when Robert said he was only twelve. Insisted he was tall enough to be fourteen. The tears in Robert's eyes seemed to convince the stranger of his age, and he finally walked on, leaving Robert with shaking knees.

Later, Gloria said he was probably one of the growers' agents looking for pickers, and he probably worked for the McCormacks. Men who didn't hire themselves out for picking got thrown in jail for vagrancy and sent into the woods or fields by the sheriff. Since then, Robert never walked with his primer in town unless he hid it in a sack. Tried not to walk in town, period. Anyone knew it was best for Negroes to stay clear of Main Street, not to venture beyond the railroad tracks that separated Upper Spruce from Lower Spruce. None of that fear had touched Robert on McCormack Road—until now. Lyle McCormack was asking about swimming, but Lyle didn't give a snot about Robert, so he must have another meaning. Guessing at a white man's meaning was a dangerous game.

"We don't got time for swimming now," Robert said.

Robert expected Lyle to say, *Condolences on the passing of your mama, and I know you must miss your papa now that he's gone*, but he didn't. He was staring at Gloria.

Gloria had brought Robert and his cousins to the swimming hole each night after supper until the end of summer two years ago, wading alongside the young McCormack twins under Lyle's watch. White and Negro, they all raced under the water to try to catch the flat, shiny stones Lyle McCormack threw in; they all pulled strands of moss from their hair that floated like snakes on the water.

They had thrown their clothes on the riverbank and complained about mud stains. White and Negro, they had lain in the soft soil with their fingers locked behind their heads as pillows, staring up at moss strung from the old oak's branches, speculating on whether or not haints lived in the rotting wood and dropped moss into the water to try to tangle and drown them. Those swimming days had been the last good days, with sunset so late in the summer, Mama still alive and breathing, Papa coming home each night.

"You oughta come by like before." Lyle McCormack ambled closer to them, leaning on his fence bordering the woods. Closer to Gloria. "You too, Glo. We could swim, you and me."

Gloria hated being called Glo, but Robert knew she wouldn't sass at Lyle McCormack. All at once, Robbie understood that Glo was the real reason Lyle had stopped them. His sweaty feet made him squirm.

"Robbie's right," Gloria said. "No time to play these days, Lyle."

Instinct made Robert glad for the fence that separated them, but Lyle suddenly hopped over the rails to sidle closer, breathing as if he'd come running across the field.

"Everyone's got some time to play," he said. "How 'bout on Sunday?"

"She says she don't want to," Robert said. His mouth moved before he could think.

His muscles felt tense all over, coiled like a rattlesnake. He said it like Papa would.

Gloria's head whipped around. Emotions paraded in her eyes, one by one: Shock. Delight. Anger.

"I can speak for myself, Robbie," Gloria said, schoolmarm proper. She gave his arm a sharp yank for emphasis. "*Hush*."

"Yeah, hush," Lyle McCormack said. "Nobody's talkin' to you."

"Sure you was," Robert said. Hadn't Lyle called him over first? But Robert decided to keep the rest silent when the angry blaze in Gloria's eyes burned at him.

Lyle squinted at Robert, a challenge. "What you say?"

"He ain't said nothing, Lyle," Gloria said. "He's a stupid kid."

The hunger in the pit of Robert's stomach twisted, making him feel sick. Gloria had stripped the schoolmarm out of her voice, replacing it with country sweetness, like lemonade with too much sugar. She took a halting step closer to Lyle, showing him her full face, her lips upturned as if she were really smiling.

Lyle's eyes drifted back to Gloria. "So come swim on Sunday, then. After church. Close to dark. The sun sets pretty on the water."

"Bet it's pretty, all right," Gloria said. "But I'm goin' on to work. I'm Miss Anne's girl now, you know. Good mornin', Lyle McCormack."

She took a step farther down the path and Robert quickly followed, glad to be away from a moment pricked sharp, even if he wasn't sure why. Something to do with the swimming hole, and Lyle asking Gloria to go swimming as if they were courting. But no McCormack would court a Negro girl—no white man, period, would—so why was he bothering Gloria?

Lyle McCormack flipped a tuft of flat golden hair from his face as he matched Gloria's pace. He took her arm to stop her walking and lowered his face close to hers. For an amazed instant, Robert thought he meant to kiss her—but instead, he whispered in a voice just loud enough for Robert to hear, "You look nicer'n those gals at Pixie's."

Gloria stared at him with a moon-eyed face Robert had never seen on his sister, so childlike it frightened him.

Lyle McCormack grinned. "You can do more'n scrub floors, Glo. I know you can."

Then he winked at her. As Lyle McCormack's eyelid slid shut above his grin, locking into a leer, Robert understood one of the last things his father had told him before he fled to Chicago: he was never, ever to wink his eye at a white girl or white woman. Foolishness like that can get you killed, Papa had said.