



CHILD of
the DREAM

A MEMOIR
of 1963

SHARON ROBINSON



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CHAPTER 1

Tomorrow is my birthday. I'm turning thirteen. Which makes today—January 12, 1963—the very last day of me not being a teenager.

I stare at myself in the full-length mirror attached to my closet door. I see Dad's smile and Mom's eyes and nose. The gap between my front teeth is distinctly mine. So is being nearsighted. I squint at the rest of my reflection. The way my body has started to curve. The way my skin breaks out around my forehead. There's a look of concern on my face.

Honestly, I'm worried about tomorrow. My older brother, Jackie Jr., started to rebel once he became a teenager. I assume this will happen to me next. Maybe it already has.

I shut the door to my walk-in closet and get dressed for the day in jeans and a T-shirt. *It's best that I thoroughly enjoy*

these final hours before descending into teenage darkness, I think to myself. I decide to ride Diamond, my beautiful black-and-white horse with a white diamond shape on his dark black muzzle. He is my four-legged best friend. Together, we push boundaries and release the restlessness that's buried deep inside both of us. Riding Diamond is my definition of freedom.

We're able to have a horse because our home sits on a hill overlooking a lake and is in the middle of six acres of land. My parents, Jack and Rachel Robinson, bought property in Stamford to build this house in 1954, when my father was still playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Before that, we lived in an integrated neighborhood in St. Albans, Queens. I was four when we left there—just old enough to have a few memories. But our Connecticut house is where I've spent most of my life. With all of that land, the only thing missing was a horse! We found the perfect spot for the barn and corral. While it was being built, my younger brother, David, and I learned to care for Diamond at a boarding farm a few miles away.

I dress for warmth and adventure, in beat-up riding jeans and two layers of shirts and sweaters. I leave my room, passing by my brothers' rooms as I head down the hallway to the kitchen. Mom is standing at the stove, frying bacon. Usually, Dad would be standing beside her, stirring grits. But he's still in the hospital recovering from knee surgery. Instead, my grandmother shifts between the grits on the stove and fresh

biscuits in the oven. Seeing them makes me anxious for an update on Dad. I can't hide my disappointment. I was expecting him home for my birthday.

"Morning," I say.

"Good morning, Sharon." Mom's smile is bright. "You're just in time for breakfast. Please set the table and call your brothers."

After putting five placemats, silverware, and paper napkins on the table, I skip back down the hall, tapping on my brothers' doors and calling out to them. "Jackie! David! Breakfast." Then I turn around and walk back to the kitchen, slipping into a chair at the table.

While I wait for the others, I plan my morning ride. Cascade Road is a winding country road with minimal traffic, no streetlights or sidewalks. It curves up and down hills for a few miles and ends at a bridge over a waterfall—the perfect place for a morning ride.

First I'll head up Cascade to the dirt road, where I can run Diamond and warm him up for a longer ride. I picture it in my head. Then I'll go check out the road along the reservoir. I want to feel the breeze on my face and Diamond's strong body carrying me as we race down the straightaway.

My thoughts are interrupted when David bounds into the kitchen and slides into the seat next to me. He is followed by a sleepy Jackie. At ten and sixteen, my brothers are polar

opposites. David's ability to make us laugh and his high energy are in sharp contrast to a sullen Jackie, who is a constant worry. I look up and smile at Jackie as he takes a seat across from me. We speak with nods.

Besides Dad, there is another member of the family missing from breakfast. Willette Bailey lives with us during the week, helping Mom with everything from cooking to watching over us. On the weekends, Willette goes home to a section of New York City called Harlem. Sometimes, we trail along with her. Willette's been with us so long, she's like a second mother to me. I know she hates missing my birthday party.

"I've got hockey practice at nine," David announces as Mom places a platter of scrambled eggs and bacon next to a bowl of grits on the table. We pass the plate around, taking large portions of both.

"Am I driving you over to Michael's house?" Mom asks David.

"No, his dad is picking me up."

"I'll take care of Diamond," I offer, scooping hot grits onto my plate.

"He tossed me into the pond yesterday," David reports.

That's the grumpy Diamond. I hope his mood has changed.

"David, that's the third time he's done that. Why don't you bring a bucket of water with you to the stables instead of taking Diamond down to the lake to drink?" Mom suggests.

"Aww, Mom. That's no fun."

“Do as I say, please,” Mom replies, then turns to me. “It’s below freezing. The dirt roads will be icy,” Mom warns. “Use the saddle.”

I nod, careful not to make a promise. I prefer to ride Diamond bareback, but I can give the saddle a try today.

“You won’t catch me on that crazy horse,” Jackie says without lifting his eyes from the food on his plate.

“He is not crazy,” I snap.

“Then you are, for riding him without a saddle,” Jackie says.

“You’re the crazy one for hanging out in those pool halls late at night,” I shoot back.

Mom warns us with a stern look.

“Sorry,” I say to my brother. I fork grits into my mouth, savoring the buttery taste and grainy texture.

“It’s okay, sis,” Jackie replies. “How about a game of pool after dinner?”

“You and me?” I ask, surprised. Jackie has little tolerance for bad pool players and, believe me, I am one of those.

“Why not? It’s your birthday, right?”

“Cool,” I say, touched by this gesture and a bit suspicious. *Why’s he being so nice to me?*

“Jackie, I want you to come to the hospital with us tomorrow so we can celebrate Sharon’s birthday as a family. Okay?” Mom asks, though it’s not really a question. Jackie hasn’t been to visit Dad since he went into the hospital two weeks ago.

Jackie says nothing at first. He just stands up and glances briefly at our mother.

I am holding my breath. It's not a conscious thing. It just happens while I anxiously await Jackie's reply. *Please, Jackie. Please, I pray.*

My brother shakes his head. "Can't," he says, walking away from the table. "I have plans."

Air escapes from my lips and I feel deflated like a balloon. I watch Jackie leave, then I turn to face Mom. *There it is*, I think. The look of disappointment on her face. I can't stand it.

"What are you doing today?" I ask my mother, moving the conversation away from Jackie's rejection.

"I have to go on a few errands and visit your dad," Mom says as she tries to recover.

Grandma glances at Mom and they exchange an adult worried look. "How is he?" she asks.

"His knee is infected."

"What!" This is the first time I'm hearing of this complication. I start to panic. My heart races, but I stay glued to my seat.

My dad means the world to me. For years, he was considered one of the best athletes on the planet. Tens of thousands of baseball fans would come from all over to cheer for him playing second base for the Brooklyn Dodgers. How could someone who was once so healthy be stuck in the hospital like this? It doesn't make sense to me.

“It happens sometimes,” Mom says. “Your father will have to stay in the hospital until it clears up.”

“How long will that take?” David asks.

We all have places to go, but no one moves. I grab hold of the table leg.

“At least another week. Maybe two,” Mom replies.

I tear up thinking of my dad in some scary hospital room instead of home with us. David must have seen it, too, because he jumps in with one of his funnies.

“I’ll bring him my sword.”

I don’t even know what that means, but we all laugh at the image of a little boy arriving at his father’s hospital bedside ready to save the day. “Why’d you say that?” I ask my brother when everyone stops chuckling.

“So he can protect himself from the doctors,” David replies, like it’s perfectly logical.

“David, what are you talking about? The doctors are helping your father get well,” Mom reminds him.

“Dad was feeling good when he went to the hospital and now he’s sick. They must be doing something wrong,” David says, slamming his knife down on the table. He stands up, drops his plate into the sink, and leaves the kitchen without saying another word.

“Your father will feel much better when he sees you tomorrow,” Grandma tells me.

“We can save the birthday-cake part until we’re with Dad,” I offer, ignoring the fact that he’s not supposed to eat sugar because of his diabetes. *Would a single slice of cake send his blood sugar soaring?*

“Great idea, Sharon,” Grandma agrees. “I’m counting on you to help me make this cake.”

“Soon as I get back from riding Diamond,” I assure her while I gather up my plate and empty glass.

“Don’t forget to clean Diamond’s stall,” Mom adds.

“I won’t,” I say, and drop my plate in the sink.

“Rachel, you go on. I’ll get the dishes,” Grandma offers when Mom heads to the sink.

“Thank you. Dinner’s six sharp,” Mom calls to whoever is within earshot.

“What are we having?” I ask halfway out the door.

“Steak, baked potato, and salad. Does that meet with your approval?”

“Oh yeah,” I reply. “It’s Candy’s favorite, too.” If Diamond is my best animal friend, then Candy Allen is my best human friend. She lives a few miles from us and is the only other Black girl in my school. Candy is sleeping over tonight so that when I wake up tomorrow on my birthday, she’ll already be here. “When it comes to steak, Candy thinks you have special powers,” I say before rushing off to get ready for the barn.