

A Novel

The
Stories
We
Carry

Robin W. Pearson

Praise for Robin W. Pearson

In *The Stories We Carry*, Pearson gives us an unflinching look at a marriage and all its highs, lows, and loving compromises. It's also an ode to bookstores, the stories contained within them, and deep-seated dreams—both those we chase and those we release. Fans of inspirational fiction will love Pearson's latest engrossing read!

LAUREN K. DENTON, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Hurricane Season*

Robin W. Pearson has proven yet again that her pen is anointed. *The Stories We Carry* is a deeply moving novel about the burden of secrets, the ache of loss, and healing through a journey to God's truth. With rich storytelling and unforgettable characters, this story offered the gift of restoration. Readers won't soon forget the messages found between the pages.

RHONDA MCKNIGHT, Emma Award-winning author of *The Thing About Home*

In the small fictional town of Gilmore, North Carolina, novelist Robin W. Pearson brings to life an intriguing coterie of old friends, customers, and mysterious strangers, all drawn to protagonist Glory Pryor and the welcoming bookstore she lives above. As secrets from the past come to light, Glory and her circle must decide where the path to love and redemption lies—and whether they have the courage to follow it.

VALERIE FRASER LUESSE, Christy Award-winning author of *The Light on Horn Island*, on *The Stories We Carry*

In *The Stories We Carry*, Pearson illustrates the complexity of family dynamics with authenticity and grace. She paints a poignant picture of grief and regret as the characters grapple with learning when to let go and when to hang on tight. It's the type of book you close with a happy sigh and tears brimming in your eyes.

AMANDA COX, author of *Between the Sound and Sea*

Crafted with exquisite details that make you long for more time in the lush Carolina mountains with the flawed, relatable characters and the charming bookstore they inhabit, *The Stories We Carry* is premier upmarket fiction at its best.

JAYNA BREIGH, author of *The Hunted Heir*

Pearson paints a vivid and moving picture of the stories that shape us and what is required and gained in surrendering to love greater than our own. An emotional, thought-provoking story that speaks to the heart of every generation.

CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Hall of Fame author of *This Promised Land*, on *The Stories We Carry*

A fascinating and insightful story. Beautifully written. . . . I felt immersed in the story from the first page. Robin W. Pearson's writing has that rare mix of depth, raw honesty, while still maintaining an undertone of humor and hopefulness.

CINDY MORGAN, award-winning singer/songwriter and author of *The Year of Jubilee*, on *Dysfunction Junction*

Southern charm flows like molasses through barbed conversations in *Dysfunction Junction*. . . . Secrets and guilt wrestle their way to redemption in this quirky family tapestry. Robin W. Pearson's unique voice is complex and captivating.

TESSA AFSHAR, award-winning author of *The Queen's Cook*

Robin W. Pearson has a gift for capturing the complexity and nuances of family relationships. She brings a remarkable tenderness and compassion to the struggle we all face to know and be known in a family. Prepare yourself for a rich and satisfying read!

SARAH LOUDIN THOMAS, award-winning author of *These Blue Mountains*, on *Walking in Tall Weeds*

Pearson's excellent characters and plotting capture the complexity and beauty of family. . . . Pearson rises to another level with this excellent story.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY starred review of *'Til I Want No More*

Robin W. Pearson's novels never fail to sing directly to my heart. . . . [Her] voice is strong and powerful. Listen up! You don't want to miss a note!

SUSIE FINKBEINER, author of *The All American*, on *Walking in Tall Weeds*

A heartfelt tale about faith and family, readers can walk toward the altar with Maxine Owens as she tends to her past wounds.

DEEP SOUTH MAGAZINE on *'Til I Want No More*

Robin W. Pearson's authentic faith and abundant talent shine through in this wholehearted novel. Bee and Evelyn will stir your heart and stay with you long after the last page of *A Long Time Comin'* is turned.

MARYBETH MAYHEW WHALEN, author of *Every Moment Since*

Pearson delivers a poignant debut that explores the faith of one African American family. The writing is strong, and the story is engaging, and readers will be pleased to discover a new voice in Southern inspirational fiction.

BOOKLIST on *A Long Time Comin'*

The Stories We Carry

The

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The Stories We Carry is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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PART ONE

Dog-Eared Pages

1

IT WAS GLORY'S CHILDHOOD FRIEND who introduced her to *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, her all-time favorite book. She determined to become one of the Logans, bold and full of sass, for she surely loved as fiercely as they did. And she wanted to protect her family just as much—her big brother in particular. Her only brother and hero. The difference was they played for keeps, and Glory had lost big time.

Her bestie was also the first to redefine the word *drunk*, to give it a brand-new, sinister definition when she'd hissed it, her breath hot in Glory's ear and smelling nutty and cinnamony like the waffle cone they'd taken bites of. Instead of "She'd drunk a whole glass of Kool-Aid," Glory's friend made it a noun, and a proper noun at that, with a name and a familiar face: Glory's larger-than-life brother, Davis.

Ten years old at the time, just a year older than her favorite character, Glory had no idea what that word and its consequences looked like. Her church-going mama and daddy never would have allowed such a person or activity to abide in their home, let alone anything other than the kind of alcohol they dabbed on their daughter's

skinned knees. But once her classmate had whispered its meaning, Glory had dropped both scoops of her prized ice cream . . . and their friendship. The girl had just enjoyed the telling a little too much, even to Glory's inexperienced mind. After all, a dog who brings a bone, carries a bone, something Mama had made clear, though the woman hadn't explained much else.

Now, six months shy of sixty-four years old, Glory knew that the man staggering across Springs Church Road was toting something other than bones toward the maple tree, chair, and blanket he considered home. He led her to wonder yet again what had become of her brother, because her ten-year-old self was right: her folks hadn't permitted anything but teetotalers in their holy and sanctified existence. Wondering and worrying were about as close as the middle-aged Glory would ever come to praying for Davis, or for herself or anyone else. Both were wasted efforts that took her to the same dead-end street; it was *working* that drove her to the answers she needed. Yet, she couldn't help but hope that, perhaps, her brother had managed to scratch out a living in some other small North Carolina town like Glory's, that he'd come back to himself and used that grin and winsome nature to help him turn things around. Hoping was all she'd had the courage to do; her guilt kept her from finding out if he'd ever become a hero to somebody else.

Ooh, there's Vernelle with the kids. Where've they been all this time since school let out? I'm glad to see his daddy ran a comb through that poor child's head. Mmm-mmm-mmm . . . they walk right by the barbershop every day; wouldn't take no time to pop in.

Realizing she'd been absentmindedly fiddling with the tattered edges of the page resting in her palm, she looked down and again read,

*The shadows gave chase at our first step,
as we hurried through the moon's evening light.*

*Our pulses throbbed and our hearts, they leapt
at the beauty only childhood perceives.*

*We didn't know to seek wisdom's former ways,
before the matter's end o'ertakes its beginnings.
We reveled in the now, lost then in youth's haze,
and those moments, they were better than these.*

No, there was no way her brother could be on this side of the dirt . . . or was there? Eyes almost shut against the tears that threatened, Glory peered through her lashes into the late afternoon sun. Her brain barely registered the man as he stumbled around the corner and disappeared behind *By the Book*, her home that doubled as her bookstore. Sitting there in her favorite position in her decades-old business, she set one label after another on her mental scale, offsetting its weight against her guilt, before dismissing it in favor of another more pernicious, heavier name to call herself. Something more fitting for what she had done, for all she had left undone. What those forthright characters from *Roll of Thunder* would never have done, though it was so like them to “revel in the now” and make the most of each moment.

Glory imagined her once-upon-a-time best friend flipping her ponytails over her shoulders, cupping her hand over somebody else's ear, and muttering, “Poacher. Thief.” She wondered, *What other names would she call me if she knew? Liar . . . impostor?*

“Honeybun . . . Glory!”

Eli's voice, nearly swallowed up by the thousands of volumes on the surrounding shelves, elicited a sigh of gratitude from deep within her. She welcomed the distraction her husband tended to present, and she shed the self-condemning words like old skin, though her heart still felt tender and exposed. This painful habit of name-calling would

reclaim her thoughts the next day and the one after that, the moment she took up her afternoon roost by her front window. Fretting had become her daily ritual the moment Eli had broached another scary word: *leave*.

“Baby girl, where are you?” His baritone ricocheted off the plastered walls of the back stairwell connecting their third-floor living quarters with the first two floors that comprised their store.

“I’m where I always am this time of day!” *You want to know where I am, Eli? I’m where I’m gon’ stay*. Her thoughts always slipped into the vernacular from her childhood when she was deep in conversation with herself, another longtime habit of hers. She cocked a bejeweled ear to make sure her husband wasn’t close enough to hear her and muttered, “Now, don’t come down here talkin’ more of your nonsense,” before shaking her head. But Glory smiled a little because this game, *their* game, was more fun than the one she’d been engaged in when she was sitting by her lonesome. *That man*.

She tucked the poem back into the book she’d torn it from, but it no longer fit perfectly, and the feathery-light paper’s corners extended past the others. Using the glossy squared tips of her fingernails, she pressed a braided red cord deep into the gutter until only the fringed end of her handcrafted bookmark protruded from between the pages, like a telltale splotch of blood. When Glory closed the precious book with a soft thump, it seemed to exhale, and she took an appreciative whiff of long-ago days. Her mouth puckered as she tapped along the gold-stitched diamonds crisscrossing the hardcover, as if she was about to blow a kiss to the author, and she tsked, “But I’m not playin’ with you, Eli Pryor.”

Setting her bracelets a-tinkling, Glory rested a silk-draped arm along the back of her chair and clasped the scarred, black, cloth-like cover to her chest. The scents of freshly brewed coffee and warm something-or-other—*Is that more snickerdoodles?*—wafted from the

kitchen in back and commingled with the mustiness of the first edition that was dying at about the same pace she was. Winking at her faint reflection in the wavy, one-hundred-year-old windowpane, she vowed, “Mmm-hmmm, I see you there, and you’re not going nowhere either, despite what Eli might say about it.” Glory couldn’t say whether it was her persnickety old self or the sprawling, historic Tudor that had sheltered her and her books from many a storm. Regardless, Glory Pryor meant every word. No way was she going to part with this place. It was who she was.

Resolved, Glory’s vermillion-colored lips compressed as she smoothed the orange, gold, red, and blue fabric of her muumuu across her narrow, well-arranged lap and gazed at their “children,” as she and Eli dubbed their inventory. When it first struck her years ago that these books would be her only babies and grandbabies and nephews and nieces, it had landed as a gut punch. The passage of time had nearly wrung the pain from this designation, and these days, she suffered only a quick yank of her heartstrings. No prolonged ache made the organ thud instead of beat in her bosom against the book she was now pressing to it, and it merely took a moment or two to resume its normal rhythm. Thank goodness she had Eli now, and he was good and plenty.

Glory listened to the faint thumping of her husband’s steps in the back of the house, where he must have headed after coming downstairs. Eli was up to his usual antics, which accounted for the tempting smell of cookies. Their baker, Ophelia, would have a fit when she came back to work and found he’d been clippety-clopping all through her kitchen. Even though Glory considered the not-so-old troll both friend and family, the woman brooked no interference when it came to whipping up goodies; Ophelia took her work for the bookstore’s café to heart. “You’d better leave your cousin’s domain, or she’ll have your head! If you know like I know, you’ll join me by

the window, my de-ah.” She always said *dear* that way when it came to her precious Eli.

By this time of day, Glory found herself near or on this pale-yellow two-seater, its burgundy-and-green stripes worn to a soft sheen. She’d staked a claim on the overstuffed chair two decades earlier in the back of Downtown Cheapskate, a thrift store around the corner that carried the castoffs from the town’s few well-to-do families. The moment she’d laid eyes on it, she’d known its unusual L-shaped back would fit just so, wedged into the corner of her bookstore’s large front room.

For longer than Glory could remember, the sofa provided the ideal vantage point for her to peek through the triple-cased window without being seen by folks on the other side of the glass. Perched on its oversized, tufted cushions, she kept time by monitoring the birds or passersby, who- and whatever happened to be crossing Springs Church Road. She didn’t have to look at her watch to know when Noemie was locking up Pearline’s Jewels on her right or when that man with his bottle would be making his way from Hillman’s in the middle of town with his free plate—*Let’s see, today is Wednesday, so it must be barbecue and coleslaw*—to hunker down for the rest of the evening. “I should take him something sweet before we turn in for the night, whatever Eli is cooking up,” she decided.

At last, Eli’s footsteps clomped from the rear, his voice hitching a ride to each heel-toe. “I’m bringing you a cup of coffee. I need you to try it!”

Glory crooked a silver-streaked brow. “Now, you know better than that. I thought you were brewing some for yourself!” *First, he tried to take this store from me, and now my Earl Grey. This man must be losing his ever-lovin’ mind!*

Eli sent a throaty chuckle ahead of him, as if it would extract a peace prior to his arrival.

Since her husband had started working with her full-time after

he'd sold his marketing firm, Eli would squeeze in beside her some days, his coffee mug propped on a crossed knee that was grazing hers. If folks had a mind to mill through the aisles and rooms of *By the Book* at this hour, she'd leave her husband to hover over their guests, straightening shelves, dusting archways, and asking pointed questions to direct their search. All so she could wrap up business by six p.m. sharp and send them home with the perfect read. If pressed, she advised them to return Saturday when she and Eli closed later, at eight o'clock. On weekdays, they locked their heavy front door at the same time as the bank, along with the other stores and offices on either side of this old section of Springs Church.

If *By the Book* was empty and she had a moment to herself on a late afternoon such as this one, she lounged in her corner, half of her attending to a book and the other to the window. She liked being up front, especially since it was getting a might harder to hear the tinkling of the ancient bell triggered by the opening of the door in the entryway. Whoever ignored the Pryors' store hours, brandished on the plaque mounted on the brick wall, and depressed the antique brass latch on the weathered oak door deserved to be greeted right off. So, Glory positioned herself like an eagle in its roost, ready to swoop down and take care of business. Her business. Situated in one of the largest and quirkiest buildings still standing between the Ebenezer Baptist Church at the top of the street and the courthouse at its end, before it curved to the more commercial areas of Gilmore.

The floorboards creaked, informing Glory that her husband had at last crossed the threshold between the hall and the front room, where she sat. She wedged the book under her cushion and angled away from the window to give Eli and his suspicious brew her full attention. Her eyes widened when they landed on the cup clinking against the matching saucer in his large hand. "Good gracious—!"

"Darlin', I know, I know. But I need to ask your taste buds a

question, seeing as how particular they are. If we're going to serve that coffee cake this weekend, we need to provide the right accompaniment." Eli's right hand extended the coffee to her; the other palm balanced two small plates barely big enough to hold the hefty squares of cake.

Reaching out both her hands to carefully accept his offering to the merry tune her bracelets played, Glory snorted, "Snickerdoodles after lunch and cake before dinner! What is this world of mine coming to? There was a time when I only snacked on cucumber slices and *tomayto* sprinkled with black pepper and salt. These hips of mine don't know what to do with you and Ophelia. And I take it Mama's favorite cup is the 'right accompaniment'?"

Over a half century ago, her mother had saved up a month's worth of coupons from the Winn-Dixie supermarket and picked out a porcelain, six-piece place setting—cups, saucers, dinner plates, and bowls—along with a chafing dish, all decorated with light-green vines and hints of blue. They'd sat on the top two shelves of her parents' chifforobe, and her mama would bring them out every Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas to grace their secondhand kitchen table. Delia insisted on washing them herself before wrapping them in brown paper and returning them to the safety of her bedroom.

One hot July afternoon, Glory had pulled up a chair to her parents' wardrobe and sneaked a cup from its tucked-away place. Her brother was out with friends, and she'd grown tired of entertaining herself. As she took a sip of her imaginary tea, her mama had caught her unawares with a tap on the shoulder, and the cup had slipped from the tips of Glory's fingers.

"Those idle hands . . . can't do wrong and get by," Mama had clucked, ever ready with an axiom and able to mix and match them skillfully. "What's done in the dark . . ." She'd hummed the rest, like the church mothers rocking in the front pews.

Glory had squinted into the dust motes dancing over her mama's shoulder and tried to decipher her meaning. Nothing much got by Delia or that God of hers, no matter the time of day. Despite Glory's protests and promises to reattach the handle with a blob of Elmer's rubber cement, Mama had dropped the precious cup in the trash bin in the kitchen, her eyes glistening and her mouth a straight line.

Glory had held on to the one remnant of those holiday dinners more tightly than she'd gripped that grocery store porcelain years ago. And here was her husband daring to serve her some coffee, of all things, in one of the few tangible memories she'd managed to salvage of her childhood. Her hands trembled a bit, and the steamy, light-brown liquid sloshed over the side of the cup into the saucer.

With a grace and agility that belied his size, Eli quickly set down the plates of cake on the deep window sash behind Glory and squeezed into the empty space to her left. He enveloped her svelte frame and steadied her hand with his warm one. "You alright? I can get you a different one."

"No, hon. I was just thinking Delia Gibson must be having a fit wherever she is, seeing me drink out of this," she laughed, wondering if her mama had ever shed tears over her daughter's brokenness or the cup's.

"Wherever she is," Eli murmured, his eyes thoughtful as he repeated her phrase. "Can't bring yourself to say heaven, can you?"

"Or hell." Glory no longer counted herself among the praying persuasion; still, she was well aware of her options. "But what I can do is bring myself to try this coffee of yours, along with a bite of cake." She adjusted its position to avoid the chipped edge and took a small sip. "Huh. I will say it's not mud."

Her husband abruptly withdrew his arm.

Glory threw her head back and let out a laugh that was twice as wide and half as long as she was—and short-lived, once she saw

his expression. She grasped his knee and waggled it back and forth, mindless of the coffee splashing into the saucer. “Baby, I’m just teasing you. You know I love myself some Earl Grey, but this coffee is giving it a run for the money.” Still smiling, she slurped from the saucer first and then from the cup, unwilling to waste a drop of his loving effort though it didn’t hold a candle to her tea. “What, is that hazelnut tickling my tongue?”

Eli looked as though he’d grown and harvested the beans himself. “I knew I could rely on those buds of yours. Yes, it’s hazelnut. I think it’ll taste good with the cake, and imagine how it’ll smell in the shop. Books and brew.”

“We’re not serving beers, love, but I see your meaning.” She hid her moue of distaste and set the cup gently on the deep windowsill, exchanging it for the second plate he’d brought her. That cake would ease the taste in her mouth, along with the memories that were more bitter than the coffee grounds.

“Eli, I’m surprised you’re looking for ways to help the business.” Glory took a bite and choked down her resentment.

He reached for his own cake, his knee bumping hers. “Why, because I’m trying to get you to retire? That doesn’t mean I don’t want to have some fun while it lasts, to ensure the success of the bookstore.” Eli picked out a pecan with his fork.

“So we can command a better price if we sell it?” Glory’s fork clanked to the plate, appetite dissipating.

“No-o-o-o. Because this is my child, too. And I’m only asking you to leave it for a while. *Later* we can sell it.”

That word again. “But you didn’t birth this baby; I did. It’s the only family I have!”

Eli stopped chewing.

Glory huffed, regretting her words, and searched for a way to stem the flow from the wound she’d inflicted. She wrapped her fingers

around his wrist, hoping her softened tone and gentle touch would dab at his sore spots. “What I meant was, it was the only family I *had* . . . until you came into my life.”

“Came *back* into your life, you mean. We’ve been married almost five years now, Glory. Didn’t it become our baby when we said our vows?” He slipped his free hand into hers.

Glory squeezed his fingers, studying the wisps of gray hair growing on his knuckles. “But I reared *By the Book* by myself for thirty of these past thirty-five. That’s a lot of years of nursing and tending to and rocking this baby to sleep all on my own. And you’re trying to make me let it go. What kind of mother would I be if I sold *By the Book* on your say-so? That would be the worst of times.” She picked up his unfinished copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* he’d stowed on the windowsill and waggled it.

But her attempt at a joke seemed to fall short. “But what kind of wife will you be if you hold on to it? This store is killing me, Glory. You’ve got to make a choice: the fully grown baby or the baby’s step-daddy.” Eli plopped the last forkful of cake into his mouth, obviously pleased with himself and his argument.