PROLOGUE

The Longest March

ON A PITCH-BLACK NIGHT, a crescent moon barely visible in the sky, three teenaged boys walked along the gentle slopes of Highland Avenue on the edge of Lookout Mountain, then to U.S. Highway 11, north of their hometown of Gadsden, Alabama.

The oldest, a seventeen-year-old named Frank Thomas, led. The two younger ones, a sixteen-year-old named James Foster Smith and a fifteen-year-old named Robert Avery, walked ten or twenty feet behind. James and Robert tried to stay out of earshot of Frank.

Tall and lean, these boys became men during the summer. They didn't just play football in the street, act in school plays, walk up to the waterfall, or hang out on Sixth Street. They traveled the world, places like New York, Atlanta, and Birmingham. They learned from some of the legendary figures of the civil rights movement, like Julian Bond and John Lewis. They confronted the white supremacist mobs in the Gadsden demonstrations.

"Are we really doing this?" one of the younger ones said as they trudged along the road. "He's going to turn back," the other answered.

At about ten o'clock at night, the teenagers began a journey of 675 miles to the nation's capital. They carried a sign reading "To Washington or Bust." Now, after midnight, they wondered whether they would really walk to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the grand finale of the civil rights movement in the sweltering summer of 1963.

Earlier that night, they gathered at Sip Harris's nightclub, one of the regular meeting places of the Gadsden Movement. James and Robert had just gotten home from a two-week trip to New York, where they raised funds for the movement by speaking about their experiences down south. Over Cokes, they told Frank about the famous people they met. Frank missed out on New York. He wanted one last adventure before starting school again.

"The March on Washington is coming up," Frank said. "Man, I *sure* would like to go."

"Yeah, but we ain't got no money," Robert said.

"Well," Frank said, "I been thinking of hitchhiking. I want to go *bad*."

"Hey, that's a good idea. We could do that."

The conversation continued for a few hours. They debated whether their parents would let them set out on foot for Washington, D.C., without any real plan or money. They talked about how long it might take to walk. They didn't know whether they could hitchhike rides.

"It's going to take a long time," Robert said. "That's a long way."

"We have to leave now to get there in time," Frank said.

Then they stood up. Someone offered a ride to James's house in East Gadsden, then to Robert's house, near another nightclub and church where the civil rights movement gathered. It took a while to persuade James's parents, but Robert's mother said yes right away. Then they walked to Frank's house and convinced his parents.

Then they walked up the mountain road, at the foot of Lookout Mountain. The road into the mountain begins long and straight, then twists every hundred yards or so on the way up, then straightens out again at the plateau.

Good thing it was dark out and everyone was sleeping. The road to Noccalula Falls was not necessarily the worst part of town for blacks, but no white parts of town were good for blacks in the summer of 1963.

"Are we really doing this?"

"I don't know. I think so."

"This fool is joking."

"He's going to turn around."

Frank turned around.

"Come *on up*. Get *up*."

They passed a big house, set up on the hill on the left side of the road. That was the house where the most notorious killer in Gadsden's history was rumored to live.

They walked a couple hundred more feet. Robert moved out toward the center of the road. Then James moved farther into the road, to Robert's left.

Frank noticed the two drifting.

"Wait a minute," he said. "We all know where we're about to be. This ought to *inspire* us. We don't need to be afraid. Let's have a prayer."

They approached the spot where a white Baltimore postman named William Moore, resting near a picnic table by the side of the road, was shot dead on April 23. It was on the border of Etoweh and DeKalb counties. Everyone knew—or thought they knew—that the killer was the owner of the house the boys just passed.

William Moore was a marine in World War II and a former social worker, a white man who conducted a one-man campaign against racism. He protested a segregated theater in Baltimore and picketed the courthouse of his native town of Binghamton, New York. As a postman, he decided the best way to dramatize injustice was to deliver letters. He marched from Baltimore to the Maryland state capital of Annapolis to deliver a letter to the governor. He marched from Baltimore to Washington to deliver a letter to President John F. Kennedy at the White House, where a guard told him to "drop it in the mailbox." Then, in the spring of 1963, Moore decided to march from Chattanooga to Jackson to deliver a letter to Mississippi governor Ross Barnett. The letter asked the governor to "be gracious and give more than is immediately demanded of you."

Friends warned that his mission was too dangerous, and family members treated the journey as the irrational act of a deluded man. Moore went anyway. He pushed a mail caddy and wore a sandwich board reading "End Segregation in America" and "Equal Rights for All Men." When he entered Alabama, he befriended a stray dog and talked to a man at a store.

Moore settled in for the night near Reece City, about six miles north of Gadsden. He found a patch of pavement just off the highway, with a picnic table and benches under the shade of a sweeping tree. Someone shot him twice with a .22-caliber rifle. A motorist found him facedown, with stocking feet; he had a clean wound over his left eyebrow and a jagged hole on the left side of his neck. Tests showed that Floyd Simpson, the white storeowner whom Moore met earlier that day, owned the gun. No one was ever indicted for the murder.

Moore's murder brought the civil rights movement to Gadsden. The previous summer, attempts at demonstrations and sit-ins sputtered. But when Moore was martyred, organizers from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) moved into town. They held meetings every night and targeted the segregated establishments along Broad Street—the Princess Theater, F. W. Woolworth, White Castle, Sears, Grant's, Nelson's.

They marched through the black neighborhoods, picking up people as they went. If they started with fifty, they ended up with a hundred. One day, they reached the courthouse with over a thousand demonstrators. Hundreds got arrested that day. When parents and friends gathered outside, police chief Al Lingo ordered his men to attack with cattle prods. Gadsden became a national story.

These three boys plunged into the movement. Now, they walked all night, three dark figures silhouetted against a dark night.

The three boys got on their knees. "We were all churchgoing kids," Robert Avery later said. "Most black folk were churchgoing people. You had to be to survive."

They prayed to God, asking for guidance and protection.

"That's the first time I knew we were going all the way to Washington," Robert Avery said.

The boys got their first ride about seventeen miles from their starting point, on Highway 11.

For a brief stretch, the boys rode a bus. But that trip exhausted their travel funds and so they hitchhiked up Highway 11 until they got to Virginia, and then got rides up Highway 29 to Lynchburg. White people gave them all but the last ride. In Lynchburg, where they saw Confederate flags and effigies of blacks, a black family picked them up and took them the rest of the way to Washington.

They arrived at two o'clock in the morning on Wednesday, August 21, a full week before the march. A cop directed them to the local office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, where they saw Walter Fauntroy's name painted on the glass. They called Fauntroy, the local minister who coordinated Washington planning for the March on Washington, from a phone booth. Fauntroy first thought the call a prank, but Frank convinced him they were serious, so he got up and met them. Fauntroy put the boys up at a YMCA for the night and gave them jobs for three dollars a day. They stayed in the dorm of a beauty school. Settled for a week in Washington, they met all the major figures in the civil rights movement—the march's organizers, A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, Andrew Young and Fred Shuttlesworth, and the radical kids from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Rustin gave them money to supplement their wage. He also bought them bus tickets to return home.

The Gadsden trio and hundreds of thousands of others would mass on the National Mall, before the Lincoln Memorial, to appeal to Americans for civil rights. Seventy-eight percent of Americans now acknowledged that the nation's racial problems "cannot be defended in the court of world opinion," according to a Harris poll. Something, then, had to be done. But 55 percent of whites "would mind" a black living next door, 32 percent would mind their children going to school with blacks, 23 percent would mind going to the same church, and 21 percent would mind working side by side with blacks.

Since spring, the Gadsden boys watched and participated in the movement in its busiest year.

They went to Birmingham to help Martin Luther King's assault on the most violent big-city bastion of segregation. Nicknamed "Bombingham"

—more than fifty explosions had ripped the city's homes and churches since the end of World War II, one just days before—Birmingham posed the movement's biggest test. If segregation could be beaten there, it could be beaten anywhere. King and his team started with a campaign of sit-ins, which fizzled. On Good Friday, King marched downtown with fifty others; they were arrested and jailed. In captivity, King wrote "Letter from Birmingham Jail," a document destined to be a classic statement of dissent.

Then the young people—high school kids, like the boys from Gadsden—took over the Birmingham campaign. On the first day of the "Children's Crusade," 600 were arrested; the next day, 250 more were arrested. Frustrated, police chief Bull Connor ordered his men to attack children with dogs and fire hoses, cattle prods, and nightsticks. One day, children spontaneously broke away from the march and dashed downtown, where they unfurled banners and signs. This symbolic takeover scared businessmen, who pressured the mayor to call a ceasefire and negotiate a settlement.

The Gadsden trio eagerly watched the news as 758 demonstrations took place in 186 cities, with 14,733 arrests. To track the civil rights wildfire, the Justice Department created a poster with a grid of activities across the country. "We didn't want to rely on the alarmist statistics produced by the FBI," said John Nolan, a Justice Department lawyer. "We needed honorable and legitimate data. Everything you have read about the FBI, how it was determined to destroy the movement, is true."

The Gadsden boys even traveled north to help spread the movement. As they reported what was happening in Alabama to northern fundraisers and organizers, they got firsthand accounts of the explosions in Danville and Cambridge.

For almost three years, a broad coalition petitioned officials in Danville, a tobacco and textile center on Virginia's southern border, to end segregation. The city council repeatedly rejected pleas to integrate public facilities and give blacks representation on public boards. The coalition filed a federal lawsuit in 1962 and launched a wave of protests downtown in 1963. When demonstrators blocked traffic, a segregationist judge ordered the protesters to disperse, issued a sweeping injunction against all forms of protest, and convened a grand jury that indicted protesters under the slavery-era John Brown Law. But the demonstrations continued, even after a "Bloody Monday," when police—and a gang of deputized firemen and garbage men—chased protesters into an alley and beat and fire-hosed them nearly to death. As they lay on the ground, the police posse thrashed their curled bodies. By the end of the summer, six hundred protesters were arrested and stood trial in the court of the segregationist judge Archibald Aiken.

Events in Cambridge, a declining canning town on Maryland's Eastern Shore, resulted in martial law. The Citizens Nonviolent Action Committee—the only adult-led chapter of SNCC—demanded not only an end to segregation, but also a concerted effort to give blacks better economic opportunity. Barely one in ten blacks lived in a family with a steady jobholder, most making starvation wages. When protests and counterprotests in June turned violent, with rock throwing and shooting, the governor mobilized the National Guard. In July, Attorney General Robert Kennedy brokered a "treaty" that called for the creation of a biracial human relations committee and an end to segregation in schools, housing, and public facilities. But a public referendum, scheduled that fall, endangered the few rights blacks already enjoyed. The city remained tense all year.

Violence swept the South all year. Vigilantes in Clarksdale firebombed the home of Aaron Henry, the head of Mississippi's NAACP. After a gas bomb went off in a church in Itta Bena, Mississippi, mobs threw bottles and rocks at activists spilling onto the streets. Vigilantes shot into the home of college professors helping the movement in Jackson. A civil rights worker traveling from Itta Bena to Jackson was shot in the neck and shoulder. A bomb destroyed a two-family home in Jackson. Whites in the North Carolina town of Goldsboro ran down demonstrators in a car and threw bottles and rocks. Whites in Pine Bluff, in Arkansas, attacked civil rights workers with ammonia and bottles. Someone shot into the home of an NAACP board member in Saint Augustine. When nine activists prayed in a county courthouse in Somerville, Tennessee, police allowed hoodlums into the building to beat them up.

Calls for a national demonstration swirled through the civil rights movement for years. Some wanted to bear witness, to present a "living petition" to the president and Congress. Others wanted to disrupt the politics of the nation's capital, with sit-ins at congressional offices and loud demonstrations outside the White House. Some wanted to highlight the economic plight of blacks; others wanted to focus on civil rights. James Bevel—who in the spring proposed that Americans from all over march on Birmingham—now wanted those marches to converge on Washington.

Marching to the nation's capital from far away was what these three boys from Gadsden were doing.

In the week before the March on Washington, Martin Luther King met the Gadsden boys' parents when he visited their hometown. The parents asked King to look after their children. That Saturday, King stopped by the Washington headquarters for the march, a vast warehouse at the black radio station WUST. The boys heard a commotion at the other end of the room.

They thought it might be another bomb threat. Then they heard King's baritone. King walked straight toward them. People parted.

"I just came from your home town," he said. "I have to take care of something, but I'll be back."

After twenty minutes or so, King returned and talked for about a half hour with Frank Thomas, James Smith, and Robert Avery about their dreams and the movement.

The Gadsden trio worked all week making signs. They took preprinted signs—with slogans approved by the March on Washington committee, like "We Demand Voting Rights Now" and "We March for Jobs for All & Decent Pay"—and power-stapled them to wooden staffs.

The night before the march, the trio loaded those signs onto a Hertz truck to take to a green-and-white-striped party tent on the National Mall. Back and forth they went, loading and unloading the signs with bold red and blue lettering.

On August 28, 1963, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators would carry those signs down Constitution and Independence avenues in what Martin Luther King called the greatest demonstration for freedom in the nation's history.