

**FIVE DAYS  
IN MAY**

**BY  
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# Prologue

It dropped out of the sky at 3:41 p.m. central daylight time on Friday, May 10, 1963, into a field in southeastern Oklahoma eight miles west of Tishomingo. It was so big you could have seen it from Tishomingo if it hadn't been dark as midnight there, hailing hunks of ice the size of hockey pucks. But you could see it from Madill, eleven miles away. Well, the top of it anyway. And the monster super-cell thunderstorm that birthed it, you could see that for more than a hundred miles in every direction.

It didn't look like a tornado, though. At well over a mile wide, it looked like a bubbling black wall, like a curtain coming down onto the stage after the last act of a play.

If there'd been anybody nearby to see the behemoth descend out of clouds the greenish-purple of a day-old bruise, they'd have stood there gawking, wondering *what in the world ... ?* But there was nobody around to see it touch down and chances are they wouldn't have lived to tell the tale if there had been.

The field it landed in was full of old corn stalks from last summer, dry and brittle. Farmer died and nobody'd got around to plowing them under. The twister sucked the stalks up, thousands of them, and the top ten inches of the dirt they'd been growing in. Turned the wall a rusty brown color as it rumbled across the prairie toward the stampeding herd of Black Angus cattle in the next field.

It gobbled up the cattle, too, all eighty-eight head of them. Lifted them up and slammed them into the ground over and over before it finally spewed their mangled corpses over the next two and a half miles of prairie—tangled up bodies impaled with dry corn stalks. Bloody porcupines.

*Skinned* porcupines. The hide had been sucked clean off every last one of them.

The brownish-black wall turned then, headed northeast toward Graham.

# CHAPTER 1

## Monday

### May 6, 1963

#### Graham, Oklahoma

Her heart banged in her chest like a fist pounding on a locked door. Princess lay in the dark and listened to it, felt each individual heartbeat in that big vein in her neck. She raised her eyes to the little piece of sky held captive all these years by the tiny barred window on the cell wall above her and wondered if what she was feeling was fear. She had trouble with that, knowing the names of the things she felt. The sense that her heart was right up in her throat, and the empty, airy feeling just under her ribs, like there was nothing there at all, like her body had a big rip and the wind was blowing through it. She was pretty sure that was fear.

But maybe other folks didn't feel that at all when they were scared. Maybe that feeling was something else altogether. If it wasn't fear, though, what was it? And how awful must fear be, if that wasn't even it?

She made a *humph* sound deep in her throat. She'd get the answer to that question on Friday afternoon at five o'clock. She'd find out what *real* scared was when they strapped her into Ole Suzie and turned on the juice!

Uh huh, Princess had finally come to the end of it. The state of Oklahoma was gonna fry her the end of this week.

But the thing was, now there was a niggling itch of uncertainty to it and somehow that made it even harder. For all the years she'd sat in this cell, she hadn't had no say about nothing. Maybe she did now. Things was gonna change in the next few days. She didn't know *how* they would change, but she knew they would--the same way she knew all kind of other things she couldn't possibly know but she did. And when the change come, she might be able to alter the course of her future, take hold of it and maybe write a whole new ending. Shoot, she might be able to save herself!

*Save herself.*

The thoughts in her whirling mind stopped spinning so abruptly they slammed into the back of one another like train cars crashing into a stalled engine.

This wasn't about *her!* It never had been.

"That's just scared talkin'," she said aloud. Her husky voice sounded shaky but she kept speaking and it grew stronger with each word. "Just fear

babblin', sayin' things it don't know nothin' about. Can't listen to scared! It lies. Scared lies and mad lies and hate lies. But love don't lie." She lifted her head and shouted into the shadows, "My last week on this earth, I ain't gonna listen to lies!"

Her *last* week. Not even a whole week, really. Just five days. The shakes threatened to come on her then but she glared at 'em and they run off and hid.

She breathed in and out carefully to slow her heart down, make it stop racing. It was hard to think with her heart pounding, and she wanted to think. Most times, she expended considerable effort *not* to think. Today was different. Today, she could let go and savor the memories.

Princess had taken such good care of the memories all these years: little gemstones, each one different and perfect and with its own light, its own glow like a firefly on a summer night. Green ones and red ones and bright white ones. Golden ones, too—they were the best. But she'd always understood that the light wouldn't last, that there was just so much of it and then it would start to go out. That's what happened to a candle. Keep it lit all the time and after awhile there wasn't no candle left. So she saved the light. Didn't just haul the stones out and look at them any old time, using up the precious light, wasting it. She limited herself, like somebody lost in the desert saved the water in the canteen. Just a few drops now and then. Just barely enough to stay alive.

But it didn't matter anymore now. No reason to save the light. She could turn up the canteen and drink deep from it, swallow great gulping mouthfuls of the cool liquid, even let some of it run down her chin and drip off onto her dress.

She planned to fill up every second she possibly could with the glow of her precious stones, stare into the twinkling light of each one of them. If only her heart would stop pounding so.

sat up on the side of her bunk in the chilly pre-dawn air. Then she reached over and pulled the moldy-smelling blanket back around her shoulders, scratchy wool, an old army blanket. When her bare feet hit the cold concrete floor, she sucked in a gasp, shivered, and let the gasp out in a slow, steady stream as she watched the little piece of sky turn from gray to pink, then a pink/yellow combination that slid through yellow into blue. It did that every day it didn't rain. This morning the sky'd be blue. She knew it would be. Blue and sunshine. It was May, after all, and on a May morning in Oklahoma, there'd be sunshine.

That's not why she knew, of course. She just did.

Like she knew she was going to see Jackson soon. Of course, he'd come. Her last week, he'd come. And she was even, just a little bit, looking

forward to seeing him this time, the last time. But she also knew the other one would come, the good man, the father man, the one with the smile on his face and the tears on his cheeks, the one she'd seen that time with eyes that weren't hers. She knew he'd be here *today*. There was no possible way it could happen, but she knew it would.

And she knew something else, too. Something that caused that open, airy feeling below her ribs, made her heart pound hard in the vein in her neck. Something was wrong with the child, the father man's girl. The knowing of it had been growing on her for weeks. There were dark, bat-like creatures in her head that fluttered around frantic when she closed her eyes. They made a low hum in her ears, like a generator.

The whole knowing would come eventually; it always did.

Then a horrible feeling seized her chest and squeezed her heart so tight she didn't know how it could keep on beating. She didn't have to wonder what the feeling was, though. Soon as the thought flashed into her mind, Princes made eye contact with pure terror.

*What if there wasn't enough time left to do anything about it once she found out what it was?*

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In a bedroom with lace curtains six miles south of the prison, Joy McIntosh woke up, sat up, and threw up. One, two, three. Happened every morning.

She didn't run to the bathroom, though. Daddy'd already heard her twice. She couldn't chance waking him again. So she'd sneaked Grandma Maggie's old chamber pot out of the attic and slipped it under her bed about a week ago; she'd been using that.

She leapt out of the bed, dropped to her knees on the cold hardwood floor, and dragged the porcelain pot out from under her bed. She slid the lid off and leaned over it just in time to spew out a foul spray of bile and stomach acid that burned the back of her throat and the roof of her mouth on the way out. She heaved two or three more times reflexively, then sat back panting, tears running down her cheeks.

Slowly, the nausea passed. She slid the lid back onto the pot and pushed it under her bed and climbed back between the sheets. They were still warm.

Then she lay there, staring at the dappled dawn light that shown on the pale blue ceiling in her room through the mulberry tree outside her window.

She tried to cry. She thought it would make her feel better, the way you feel better after you throw up when you're nauseous. But she was cried out.

*How do you know it's mine?* Gary had said.

Had *said* that!

Like she was some floozy. Like she'd done *that* with somebody else. Like she wasn't a good girl at all but some *tramp*.

Well, she was a tramp, wasn't she? Come on, look it in the eye, Joy, face reality. Tramps did it with boys and got in a family way—right? Hard to find a way around that.

No, you weren't a tramp if you got married right quick—*at sixteen?*—and everybody who knew you pretended they'd suddenly lost the ability to count to nine.

You weren't a tramp if nobody knew, if nobody found out.

And you weren't a tramp if you *fixed* it, if you did something about it.

She balled her hands into fists and pounded them into the feather mattress on both sides of her, over and over again. Tears squirted out of her eyes and flowed down the sides of her face and into her hair, and she'd honestly believed she didn't have a tear left to cry.

She wanted to scream, wail, do something to make that awful feeling in her gut go away, make it ...

"Oh!" It was just a little sound, but she spoke it aloud into the silent room. Surprise and wonder.

What was that? That fluttering? That feeling right *there*, in the same place that was tied in a knot all the time.

Again! She felt it again. She hadn't imagined it! Like something had ... No. Couldn't be. Couldn't *possibly* be.

But it was. Something had *moved* inside her.

She cried then. Oh, my yes, she cried then! Sobbed. Curled up in a ball, buried her face in her pillow and sobbed.

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Mac thought he heard a sound in Joy's room. A scraping sound, then a little later a voice, a word. He lay still and listened. Yeah, she was crying. Muffled, but he could hear it.

And?

Did he go to her? Tap on his daughter's door, slip quietly into her room and comfort her, put his arms around her and say ... Yeah, say what?

Oh, he knew what to say. Knew exactly what to say. Not many people had actually taken courses on what to say in difficult situations. But he had. Seminary was all about comforting the hurting.

The stages of grief. Knew them all. Started with denial and ended with acceptance and had anger and bargaining and other things in between. He'd only made it as far as anger. He didn't want to go any further. What was the point? The absolutely proper response to certain life situations was rage: pure, unadulterated rage. Any other reaction was ludicrous—or phony. And he'd tried phony. He'd lived phony. He'd pretended until ...

So, should he pretend just a little longer? Jump into a phone booth and hop out with a big M on his chest, the mighty Minister, able to leap tall buildings at a single bound?

Tell Joy, "It's okay, sweetheart. Your mother's in a better place."

Or maybe, "You'll see her again someday, honey."

Perhaps throw in a little, "Pray about it and you'll feel better."

Nope, not a chance. No. Can. Do.

She'd see through it if he tried. Joy was a smart girl. She'd see through the flimflam game. Probably already had.

It might just be that his daughter was the only person in the whole town of Graham who wouldn't be surprised at the "suicide" he had planned for the board of elders meeting Friday night. She'd understand. He thought for a moment. No, Joy wasn't the only one. His father-in-law, Jonas, would understand, too.

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Jonas rubbed lotion all over her that morning, first thing, wasn't even light outside yet. Maggie always did wake up early. She used to have breakfast ready—eggs and bacon and home-made biscuits and gravy—'fore he ever even knew she was out of the bed. He'd smell the coffee and bacon and he'd roll over and reach for her, but there was just the warm spot in the sheets where she'd been.

She'd stand at the foot of the stairs and holler up, "Jonas, are you going to sleep all day?"

All day? Shoot, the rooster hadn't even crowed yet!

He'd come staggering down the stairs, hair all upside down with bed-head, a big ole sheet crease across his cheek, and she'd look ... oh my. She'd take your breath away. When she was young, folks said she favored the actress Greta Garbo. But Maggie was way prettier than Greta Garbo.

She hollered out, "Jonas!" that morning, too. But she was just talking in her sleep. Made him think maybe she dreamed about him, though, so he didn't want to wake her up.

But she was wiggling around, just couldn't seem to get situated, and he figured the lotion would help. Her skin had got so dry it looked like a creek bed during a drought, all cracked and peeling. Had to itch.

What must it be like to itch and not know that's what's wrong with you? Or what to do about it? Something as simple as an itch, and you don't know to scratch it. Which of course, begged the question: how do you know what you don't know? What is there to think "I've lost my mind" when you've lost your mind?

He got out the green bottle of hand lotion that said it had aloe and herbal extracts mixed in. Started on her right foot with a big handful of it, smeared it on every toe and in between them. Around the callus on her big toe and the bunion just down from it, up on the top of her foot, to her ankle, her calf, her knee and her thigh. Smoothing it, rubbing it in, stroking gently in the dark with his big, rough hands.

He did it with his eyes closed. Remembering.

And yeah, he felt a stirring, 'course he did. He was old; he wasn't dead! All those years he touched her, felt her lean into him and melt like warm butter.

Then he got to the diaper she slept in and he squirted another handful of lotion into his hand and started on her left foot.

Soon as he'd smeared lotion all over her, she stopped wiggling. Didn't itch anymore and she could sleep then. He lay beside her, staring into the darkness, listening to her breathe, wondering if he could do it and knowing he had to. Tears streamed out of his eyes and ran down the sides of his head into his big ears as the sun came up. There were only a handful of sunrises left to spend in bed beside his Maggie before he killed her.