

Chapter One

Hump Day

Glenn Nicely filled a paper cup from the push-button thermos perched on the tailgate of his pickup, took a long, steady pull, then spat a perfect jet into the gravel near his boots. The day was getting hot. It rained hard the night before and lingering clouds had drifted over most of the day. Now, at 4:30, the sun was burning through and the humidity was rising. The air was thick and close.

So summer was here. The days would grow steadily hotter. By the Fourth of July, the violent storms of spring and last night's driving, two-inch rain would be fading memories. By mid-August, the thermometer would regularly top 100 degrees and the wind would blow like a blast furnace until the earth wilted and pulled back into itself. Glenn had watched the seasons turn enough to know that summer on the plains could be just as savage as winter; that heat, humidity and frequent drought were just as merciless as the arctic winds that knifed down from Canada from December until March.

That was Kansas. You got used to it.

Fortunately, given the rising heat of the day, quitting time was near. Glenn crushed the paper cup, tossed it into the pickup bed and stared intently at the little building before him. With all the rain, it was a good thing he and Bud had managed to get the roof on last week. They'd set in the big front window earlier and would finish putting up plywood by day's end. Siding would arrive tomorrow. They could get that up in a couple of days and then go inside next week: setting the toilet and sink, building the counter, insulating, hanging Sheetrock and putting up trim.

Three months into it, maybe three to go. They were getting there.

Office workers and deliverymen hurrying to beat the yellow light at the busy intersection of 21st Street and Kansas Avenue in Topeka no doubt paid little attention to the two men working on the small structure nearby. But the fact was, a lot went into constructing a gas station.

You had your concrete work: pouring the slab and later, the eight-inch thick cap for the tanks, and the island, too. You had your carpentry: framing and roofing and

interior finish work. And the tanks: two 8,000-gallon steel beasts set in a hole 15 feet deep and 30 feet across. But before a crane could set them into place, you had to make sure they didn't leak. Air was pumped in and gauges set to measure any loss over a 24-hour period. A state inspector would come out to certify the results. After that, pipefitting: hooking up one-inch copper from the tank pumps to the dispenser pumps. And finally, welding: Roof panels for the canopy were arc-welded to a steel frame erected on two heavy posts bolted to footings five feet in the ground.

Glenn Nicely had gone through the apprentice program at Carpenters and Joiners Local 1445 after he'd been discharged from the Army in 1959. Now, seven years later, in June of 1966, there wasn't much he couldn't do. He'd been a cook in Germany. But Glenn was more like a Green Beret in the building and mechanical trades. Along with all the skills required to build a gas station, Glenn was qualified to do millwright work. He'd learned the trade — heavy machinery assembly, maintenance and repair — in apprentice school, and for previous employers, he'd worked on the giant steam turbines at the Kansas Power & Light power station by the river and on the big conveyers that moved tires through the Goodyear plant in North Topeka.

All of which was hard, physical work, and Glenn wasn't big, maybe five feet seven inches and 140 pounds. But what he lacked in size he made up for in toughness: He would attack a project with a quiet fury and go flat out until it was done. If he couldn't finesse the thing, he'd jam it, and if there was a problem, Glenn would quickly figure a way around. He worked smart and fast.

Glenn could be funny in a droll, hard-edged, job-site kind of way, co-worker Bob Clearwater recalled. One thing he didn't abide was ignorance. If Glenn thought something was wrong or impossible or foolish, like a schedule or a plan or a process or an idea, he wouldn't hesitate to speak up, fixing the boss with a flat, unwavering stare that suggested utter indifference to authority, if not outright contempt. He would argue his case steadily and fearlessly and more often than not, much to his co-workers' silent amazement, the bosses would come around.

But now, as he picked up his tools at day's end, Glenn had no problem with anyone. Home was close. For three years, building service stations for the Uhl Company meant working for one-, two-, even three-weeks straight in far-off towns from eastern Missouri to western Kansas. At the end of the hitch, Glenn and his co-workers would drive back to Topeka and make the most of three days off before heading back out. But this particular job was right in town, not 15 miles from Glenn's trailer near Auburn, a farm town just southwest of the city. Miracle of miracles: He'd be home another night with his wife, Inge (pronounced Inga), and their six-year-old daughter, Angie.

It occurred to Glenn that he ought to drop by his father's barbershop after work to get a haircut. So he climbed into the cab of his brand-new, black, Dodge pickup, lit a Pall Mall, nodded to Bud and swung north on Kansas Avenue, heading downtown.

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The languid pace of summer was slowly washing over the 127,600 souls of Kansas' capital city on Wednesday, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1966. School had been out for a couple of weeks, the big municipal pools had opened over the Memorial Day weekend and for kids, a three-month carnival of baseball, swimming, bike rides and endless TV had begun. Youngsters were especially excited about tonight's big event: The new Charlie Brown special, *Charlie Brown's All-Stars*, was set to debut at 7:30 p.m. on the local CBS affiliate, WIBW Channel 13. The show was one of the more obscure Charlie Brown specials of the 1960s and featured woebegone Charlie pitching the gang's baseball team to its 999<sup>th</sup> defeat. Older kids looked forward to the ever-popular *Lost in Space* at 6:30 p.m. or *Batman* on one of the Kansas City channels. Tonight's *Batman* episode was titled "The 13<sup>th</sup> Hat," and it sounded interesting in that weird, Batman-kind-of-way, according to the listing in the paper: "*When the Dynamic Duo meet the Mad Hatter, Batman gets stoned and Robin is mesmerized.*"

In the summer of '66, Topeka — or T-Town as teenagers called it — wasn't a lot different from hundreds of other medium-sized cities across America. The community boasted four radio stations, two daily newspapers and one television station. There were 166 churches of 42 denominations, 48 parks with a total of 1,100 acres, and 30 hotels and motels with 1,800 rooms. Topeka was heavily blue-collar and unionized, despite its large contingent of state workers. One of the biggest employers was the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway shops, located east of downtown. The shops were among the largest railroad manufacturing and repair facilities in the country and employed 2,400. Topeka was a major transshipment point for wheat, corn, soybeans and other agricultural products, and some of the largest grain elevators in the world stretched for nearly a half mile along the Union Pacific tracks in North Topeka. Goodyear made tires at a sprawling plant north of the river, and DuPont produced 45 million pounds of cellophane annually at a foul-smelling factory just east of the city. Forbes Air Force Base, three miles south of town on Highway 75, was home to the 313<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Wing. Lumbering, jungle-camouflaged C-130 Hercules transports, some bound for Vietnam, were a common sight over the city.

On June 8<sup>th</sup> the *Topeka Daily Capital* reported that former actor Ronald Reagan had won the Republican primary for governor in California. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael, the future Black Panther leader, had picked up the mantle for James H. Meredith and were marching south through Mississippi to the capital city of Jackson. Meredith, the first black to enroll in the University of Mississippi, had set off alone June 5<sup>th</sup> on a "March Against Fear." He intended to demonstrate that Negroes could walk safely through Mississippi and should not fear registering to vote. But the very next day, Meredith was dropped by a shotgun blast in an ambush near Hernando. He recovered to finish the march in late June.

Closer to home, Local 22 of the Commercial Telegraphers Union went out on strike at midnight Tuesday after negotiations between the national union and Western Union collapsed. And in south-central Kansas, rain was slowing the annual winter wheat harvest. This was not good, as wheat was the backbone of the Kansas economy.

In the 1870s and 1880s, German-Russian homesteaders had discovered that the hardy Turkish red wheat seed they'd carried over from the Ukraine did well in the rich soil and semiarid climate of the plains. The grain, which is used to make whole-wheat flour, is planted in early fall, out of the ground by Thanksgiving and survives through winter under a protective blanket of snow. By early June, swaying fields two feet tall begin to ripen from green to gold. The wheat harvest starts in the southern tier of the state's 105 counties and moves north to finish by mid-July. In 1965, Kansas was by far the largest producer of winter wheat in the country, with 236.4 million bushels harvested, or about 23 percent of the U.S. total. Oklahoma, the next-largest producer, harvested 133 million bushels.

In weather news, the big story nationally was Hurricane Alma, which had raked Cuba and was setting its sights on Florida. The forecast for Topeka called for mostly cloudy skies with occasional showers or thunderstorms and a high around 80 degrees.

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If Glenn Nicely happened to look as he drove past the car lots stretching along Kansas Avenue at the southern edge of downtown, he might have noticed a barrel-chested, sharply dressed man striding purposefully toward the Pla-Land bowling alley at 1024 Kansas Avenue. That would have been Lisle Grauer, the bowling alley's owner. Grauer, who was 66 years old, was born in Summerfield, Kansas, a little town hard against the Nebraska line in the northeast part of the state. His father, Sam, had come from Germany in the 1880s and ran a bar called the Switzer House in Summerfield. It was a rough-and-tumble frontier joint, and Lisle (pronounced Lyle) learned early on how to use his fists. A newspaper clipping from back in the day described how the strapping, teenaged Lisle had challenged the town bully to a fight and soundly whipped him.

Lisle never did back down. His son, Ron, remembered one night at the bowling alley years later. An obnoxious, loud-mouthed fellow had been making trouble during a pool game, so Lisle threw him out. Around midnight, after father and son had locked up and were heading for their car, there was that man again, standing across street and yelling: "Grauer, you son of a bitch! Get over here and I'll kick your ass!" Old Lisle shook his head and muttered, "I thought this might happen." He carefully removed his false teeth, put them in the pocket of his sport coat, took off the jacket and handed it to his son.

"This'll just take a minute," he said as he turned to cross the street. And sure enough, within a few moments, the malefactor lay battered and bleeding on the pavement. Then, much to his son's surprise, Lisle helped the man to his feet, put him into the car and drove to an all-night Chinese restaurant in downtown Topeka, where he bought Ron and the man a meal.

Baby-faced, jovial and always impeccably dressed, Lisle loved music and was a superb dancer. He'd taught himself to play piano, guitar, banjo and violin. In the '20s, Lisle joined a traveling jazz and ragtime band called the Blue Blazers. The combo

played dancehalls across northeast Kansas and northwest Missouri, and it was at the Frog Hop in St. Joe that Lisle met Erma Anderson, his wife-to-be. As a young girl, Erma lived in a sod dugout on the plains of Kansas. Her mother was a pioneer who could ride two horses bareback at the same time like a circus daredevil, one foot astride each animal. Once, when Erma was very young, she awoke to an ear-splitting crash and felt something heavy tumble onto the bed. It was a mountain lion. Apparently the panther had been sitting in the cabin's open window, perhaps eyeing a meal. But Erma's mother spied the danger in time and shot the big cat dead.

After Lisle and Erma married, they'd come to Topeka to make their way. Lisle managed to borrow some money in the mid-1930s and he bought a roller rink near downtown. But catering to kids proved a hit-or-miss proposition. So a couple of years later, he gutted the building and put in a bowling alley, Topeka's finest at the time. The business did well enough; although in the days before air-conditioning, it could get pretty slow in the summer. Old Lisle used to joke that he made more money playing golf in the summer than he did with the bowling alley. And he probably wasn't kidding, for Lisle was a gambler and a good one. Golf mostly, but bowling, poker and pool all were fair game. He'd gamble on just about anything, Ron recalled. Decades later, Ron still had a baby grand piano his father had won in a poker game. And he had shotguns and pistols, too.

On this particular night, serious money in all likelihood would be changing hands at the bowling alley. Big-time bowlers from across the city would be converging at 7:00 p.m. for the first night of men's summer leagues.

Lisle hurried inside to get ready.

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Glenn Nicely turned at the intersection of 6<sup>th</sup> and Kansas in the heart of downtown and glanced back toward his father's barbershop. The place was packed. Bankers, shopkeepers and state office workers were stopping in after work for a trim or a shave and shoulder massage. Glenn didn't stop. The haircut could wait. He kept driving west on 6<sup>th</sup> Street, past the carpenters' union hall and the Greyhound-Trailways bus terminal. Then he turned south and before long he was passing the stately, limestone buildings of Washburn University. The 160-acre campus, with its ivy-covered edifices, winding walkways and ancient pines, pin oaks and elms, looked more like a private school in the East than a small college on the prairie.

But Washburn had been a part of Topeka almost from the start. In fact, the school was celebrating its centennial in 1966. Its predecessor, Lincoln College, was founded just after the Civil War by the Congregational Church. The name was changed a few years later after a Massachusetts industrialist named Ichabod Washburn gave the school \$25,000. In 1942, the citizens of Topeka voted to make Washburn a municipal university, one of just a few in the country supported primarily by local tax money. Enrollment by 1966 had reached 4,000. Washburn's law school was well known throughout the Midwest and well respected, at least among those in the legal

profession. The school's mascot, "The Fighting Ichabod," was odd and quaint: a nattily-dressed 19<sup>th</sup> century chap in a top hat and bow tie meant to resemble the school's benefactor and namesake.

Glenn was clear of the city as he turned onto Auburn Road, five miles from home. The road shot straight south from the turn, rising and falling with the contours of the low hills that rolled easily toward the horizon. In the fields on either side of the highway, corn and soybeans muscled up from the rich, black soil and white-faced Herefords foraged on fresh prairie grass and brome. The occasional stand of hackberry, walnut and burr oak marked the creeks and draws.

Evidently, the rain wasn't finished. Glenn could see a storm building in the southwest. The temperature was falling. Fast, black clouds soon caught up to the sun and obscured it, and beneath the sudden, unnatural darkness, the rain began to fall. It came slowly at first, just a few, fat drops that hit the truck like splattering eggs. Then faster, tattooing the hood and roof with a steady roll. And finally, as Glenn turned into his driveway, the downpour became a battering torrent.

Glenn jumped out and sprinted past his parents' white, three-bedroom ranch (built on the site of his grandfather's homestead), leapt up the steps to his trailer and burst in, slamming the thin aluminum door behind him against the deluge.

"Coming down pretty good," Inge said.

"Yeah, it is." Glenn said, shaking the water off his hair.

"They said there might have been a tornado up by I-70. We're under a tornado watch, you know."

"Didn't hear that."

The television announcer's voice filled the family room off the galley kitchen as Inge reached into the refrigerator to start dinner. Twenty-six, with naturally curly, short brown hair and weighing maybe 110 pounds, Inge Nicely was a live wire and a long way from her homeland. She was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1940. Her father was a soldier and she'd lived in a small apartment building with her mother. Frankfurt was a major transportation hub and the target of heavy bombing during the war. All told, more than 5,500 residents were killed in the raids. Twice Inge and her mother were bombed out of their home. Inge remembered huddling on the banks of the Main River at night as flames danced across the water and fire engulfed the city.

Inge had learned English in school, and after the war she went to work in the purchasing department of Woolworth's-Germany. At 17, in a tavern, Inge met a cocky, redheaded American soldier from Kansas. The friendship soon became something more, and a year later — much to her mother's horror — Inge and Glenn Nicely were married.

Now she was in faraway Kansas, raising a daughter, living in the country and working part time in the bindery department at Hart Printing in Topeka. Strong and opinionated, she'd been through a lot in her young life. As a result, she was not at all intimidated by her new surroundings, Glenn's large, clannish family, or, for that matter, Glenn himself.

Glenn's co-worker Bob Clearwater remembered one telling incident. During a lunch break on the job site, the talked turned — as it often did — to women. Glenn was holding forth about how he was the boss at his home, how he wore the pants and how Inge did exactly what she was told, when she was told. As it happened, Inge had stopped by the job unannounced and, unbeknownst to Glenn, she was standing behind him in the doorway when he started in. Too late, co-workers caught Glenn's eye and motioned toward the door.

"You!" Inge barked, her German accent bristling with fury. "Outside! Right now!" Glenn got up and quietly walked out the door, where, according to Clearwater, a lively discussion ensued.

As fast as it came, the rain began to ease. To the west, the sun was breaking through. The Nicelys' six-year-old daughter, Angie, lay on the couch, thumbing through a picture book. A big Siamese named Tommy was curled up beside her. Inge dropped three hamburgers into the frying pan.

Growing up in the country, Glenn had always ridden and in 1966, he kept five horses in the pasture below the trailer. One of them, a quarter horse-saddlebred mare named Pixie, was recovering from tendon surgery. The horse had either gotten tangled up in barbed wire or been attacked by coyotes; the doctor at Kansas State University wasn't sure which. But the surgery was successful, and now, two weeks later, Pixie was on the mend. With the rain slowing to a sprinkle, Glenn decided to go out and check on the animal. Mitzi, Inge's brown-and-white, bug-eyed, Chihuahua-toy terrier mix, bounded to the door, bouncing eagerly and shaking her stubby tail.

With a bottle of antiseptic, Glenn stepped outside and walked 50 yards to the low shed that provided shelter for the horses. The air was unsettled and the clouds still boiled, but it appeared the worst of the storm had passed. Glenn nickered to the horses and they slowly emerged, one-by-one, from the open shed. There was Red, the big bay mare. And Pedro, a mean Mexican brushtail that had once been wild and pretty much still was. Glenn stroked Pixie and then painted the purple antiseptic on her fetlock with an applicator. The wound looked good.

Inge was at the doorway when Glenn returned.

"Don't you come inside with those damn muddy boots!"

Glenn sat down on the step, unlaced his boots, pulled them off, and then set them on newspaper just inside the door. Inge looked up from her cooking. The weatherman was reporting that more heavy weather could be on the way. Just then, Inge remembered the new barbeque grill. It had a small glass window in the front to check the meat as it cooked.

"Could you go lay the grill down?" she asked Glenn. "I don't want the wind to knock it over and break that glass."

Glenn grumbled. She could have at least told him before he'd taken off his boots. He headed back outside barefoot, eased the grill over and pushed it up against the trailer.

It was just before 7:00 p.m.

Then Glenn gazed off toward the Bundy farm, three-quarters of a mile to the southwest across open ground. He squinted and looked again. It didn't make sense. Near the barn... A dump truck and a red, self-propelled combine — a massive piece of farm equipment weighing three tons or more — were tumbling end-over-end 50 feet up in the air.

Glenn didn't ponder the sight for long.

"Tornado!" he shouted as he raced back up the steps and burst inside. "Tornado coming! Get your ass out of here. We'll go to Mom's. Let's GO!" He quickly lifted Angie into his arms and turned for the door. Inge was already moving from the kitchen to the living room, slamming windows down. Glenn raced down the steps, ran for his mother's house 100 feet to the north and slung open the back-porch sliding door.

"A tornado just hit the Bundy place! We gotta go!"

Mrs. Nicely, 61, stood in the kitchen in her housecoat and curlers. She looked straight at Glenn. Then she picked up the phone to call her husband. But the Nicelys were on a party line and the line was in use. She recognized the voice on the other end. It was a neighbor in the next house to the north, Clarice Wolf.

Mrs. Nicely interrupted: "This is Hazel Nicely. There's a tornado coming! You and Calvin need to take cover right now!" By now, Inge had finished closing up the trailer and had made the long dash to her in-laws' house.

"We gotta outrun it. Go! Go! Go! Get in the truck!" Glenn said, opening the side door to the garage and running through to the driveway with Inge and Mrs. Nicely close behind. They all jumped into the Dodge.

The keys...the keys! Where were the keys? Glenn fumbled for a moment. But time was running out.

"We'll go to the crawl space! RUN!" The truck doors flew open and bodies shot out. Everyone raced back to the garage. Glenn pulled the door down, grabbed Angie, stuffed her into the crawl space between the garage and the utility room and then pushed Inge in behind her.

But Mrs. Nicely would have none of it. She ran back out into the garage.

"No, I'm not going down there," she warned Glenn. "A tornado ain't hit here in 50 years and it ain't going to hit here now."

Glenn was yelling as he chased her into the garage.

"Get in the goddamn crawl space! Now!" he said.

At that point, the garage door panels started to rattle and buck. And then, oddly, the door began to lift on its own. So Glenn reached out to grab it.

And that was it.

The house exploded.

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There was a man in Auburn on June 8th from the state of Maine whose name, unfortunately, is lost to history. He'd evidently spotted the tornado and, never having seen one before, decided with a friend to shadow it north along Auburn Road. The men

had reached the Nicelys' lower driveway when debris flying across the road forced them to stop. Just after they'd come to a halt, the wind sucked the headlights out of their car. Then they looked up into the swirling gray cloud and saw Glenn's horses, all five of them, sailing 50 or 60 feet over the road. The men said the horses' legs were locked and their necks were lowered as if the animals were paralyzed or braced against the wind. Maybe that was the way they were standing when the wind picked them up; maybe they were frozen in fear. Maybe both. In any event, the horses were gently lowered back down in the pasture to the east, on the other side of the road. The herd regained its footing and, apparently unhurt, galloped away.

In front of the Nicely place were half-a-dozen white pines Glenn's grandfather had planted when he'd built the original family homestead in the late 19th century. Now the pines were mighty giants, 60- to 80-feet tall and three-and-a-half to four feet in diameter at the butt. After the horses flew over, the men watched in astonishment as the massive trees violently corkscrewed in the wind and then shot out of the ground, one after another — "like carrots," the man from Maine said — and soared off to the northeast.

Not a bough or branch was ever found.