



# Chapter 1

August 1987

**[ NEWSWIRE ] : PRES. RONALD REAGAN PROPOSES CEASE-FIRE BETWEEN SANDINISTA GOVERNMENT AND CONTRA REBELS . . . DOW JONES INDUSTRIAL AVERAGE REACHES ALL-TIME HIGH OF 2,722 . . . FCC ABOLISHES 'FAIRNESS DOCTRINE', REQUIRING BROADCASTERS TO PROVIDE BALANCED COVERAGE OF CONTROVERSIAL EVENTS . . . LAST FEW 'BABY BOOMERS' TRICKLE INTO WORKFORCE**

IN HIS TWENTY-TWO YEARS of life, he'd never once witnessed a death. He'd never lived away from his mother either. Both things were about to change.

August in Oklahoma. Hell couldn't be much hotter. As he pulled into the gas station, sweat dripped from his forehead to his chin. He wiped it with the back of his hand, a hand that was trembling. It was a big day. A huge day. One he'd dreamed of—and feared—for as long as he could remember. The day Stacy Zwardowski would finally become a man.

"Fill 'er up?"

"Please." He stared at the attendant through the grimy windshield, the man shambling to the nearest pump. In the distance, a marquee flashed 90 degrees, but the humidity made it feel like 120. Stacy adjusted his tie, glancing at the suitcase on the floor, the books in the backseat, the wind-blown banners above. *How had he gotten here?* It was a bit of a blur.

He'd been working two jobs in Portland, the kind a kid gets to fill the gap between college and career—one in a fast food restaurant, the other in a used book store—the paychecks giving him just enough money to help his mom with groceries and buy

beer. When he wasn't working, he was writing, reading a book, or shooting hoops. The last summer of childhood.

The call came on a Monday morning. *'This is Terrance Meeks,'* the man said. Half asleep, Stacy struggled to make sense of his words. *'I had a chance to review your tape. You're a little rough around the edges, but I think you show some promise.'* The news director broke into a memorized spiel about the TV station and the requirements of the job. His philosophy was simple. *'We give viewers 'News They Can Use.'* Stacy had no idea what that meant, but an interview was set for the following Monday, enough time for him to buy a cheap suit and make the three-day drive over two mountain ranges, six highways, and seven states. He'd pulled into Avalon late last night, tired, hungry, and nearly out of money. If things didn't go well, he wasn't sure he could get back home.

The nozzle clicked, the hammer of a gun. Stacy rolled down the window, taking in the endless horizon. Not a mountain in sight. Not even a molehill. Then again, no self-respecting mole would ever put up with this heat.

"Twelve even," the attendant drawled.

Stacy handed him a twenty. "Channel Eight's up the road?"

"You on TV?"

"Just an interview." He grabbed the change and steered past the pumps. On the radio, Expose sang *Point of No Return*. "Good morning, Avalon!" a voice rattled the speakers. "Time for a KAVN news update. I'm Nate Shefler..." The man paused, organizing his notes. "...and here's what's happening on this last day of August, 1987. A Dexter County jury..."

Stacy killed the radio as a huge brick building came into view, a row of satellite dishes looming behind it. He squinted to read the sign—*KEGT-TV CHANNEL 8*.

This was it.

After letting a truck full of chickens pass, he turned into the lot, glancing at his watch. Ten on the nose. Grabbing his coat, he climbed out of the car and hurried up the walk.

THE DOORS WHEEZED OPEN as ‘Stormy’ Raines stepped on the mat. His mother had nicknamed him ‘Stormy’, a reference to his cloudy gray eyes. His real name was Vernon. After a beat, he moved inside, the cold air embracing him like a dead relative. He looked left, right, then pulled a cart from the waiting arsenal. The air smelled of fresh-baked bread, Boston’s *Peace of Mind* playing over the Musac.

As he moved to the Produce section, he passed a balding store manager and bagger. Gripping the cart’s steel handle, he made his way to a fruit display, the enclosure housing colorful rows of oranges, lemons, grapefruit, pineapple. “How ya’ll doin’?” a man in a blue smock asked over a hill of bananas. “Help ya find somethin’ today?”

Raines ignored him, moving from Produce to Meat & Poultry. As he grabbed a bloody pork shoulder, his image danced off the chrome. The supermarket was quiet this morning. Only four customers. A woman and her child. An old man with a walker. And ‘Stormy’ Raines.

He moved up one aisle and down another, collecting items. A jar of pickled okra. A tin of smoked sardines. His feet ached in his stiff, leather shoes. He’d worn them just twice before. Once at his wife’s funeral. Again on his silver anniversary at the Uniroyal plant, a job he’d hated for twenty-five years.

“Clean-up on aisle six,” a loudspeaker crackled. He heard nothing. There was a buzz in his head, a tingling in his flesh. As he made his way down the last aisle, sweat pooled in his concave chest. He’d always been a frail man—a weak man. But not today.

He tossed one more article in the basket—a jar of gefilte fish in liquid broth. The floating tissue looked like chunks of human brain.

“I can help you down here,” an attractive checker spoke up, waving him over. He pushed the cart past a newspaper rack to her register. “Helpin’ out the missus today?” She smiled, her lips parting to reveal a wad of gum. He stared at her. She had big, brown eyes—deer’s eyes. “Cash or credit?”

He reached in his windbreaker and pulled out a .44 Mag. As the woman gasped, he squeezed the trigger and watched her forehead explode.

“YOU MUST BE STACY.”

Stacy nodded and stood—all six foot, three inches of him. The man coming toward him was forty-something and crimson-cheeked. He wore loose slacks, a pit-stained shirt, and a tie that looked like a gift.

“Terrance Meeks. We spoke on the phone. You’re a tall one.”

“Pleasure to meet you, sir.” Stacy studied his expression. The interviewer looked more nervous than the interviewee. “I—”

“Come with me.” He tore out for the hall, Stacy hurrying after him. “Sorry to rush you, but we’ve got a situation.”

“Oh, that’s...” The man stopped at a door marked *ENGINEERS*.

“Wait here.” He stepped inside, Stacy peering through the crack. “Unit eight ready to go?” A slovenly tech pointed to a camera in the corner. “Ever use an Ikegami 730?” Before Stacy could answer, Meeks shot past him, camera in tow. “Pretty simple,” he called over his shoulder, disappearing in a closet at the end of the hall. By the time Stacy caught up, the man had stuffed a bag to capacity. “Shouldn’t need more than two camera batteries. Gave you an extra for the deck, too.”

“But...” Stacy’s face grew hot. “...I’m here for an *interview*.”

“Congratulations, kid. You got the job. Now, where’s your car?”

“My car?”

He grabbed a tripod and deck, pushing his way past. “Yeah. I apologize, but I’ve got two reporters out sick and everyone else on assignment.” He lowered his shoulder against the door, sunlight beckoning. “Nearest crew’s in Tishomingo, a good forty-five minutes from here.” Stacy followed him outside. “All our news cars are gone. You’ll have to use your own today.”

As they reached the lot, Stacy scraped to a halt. “Sir.” The

news director turned, a look of impatience replacing the one of worry. “I’ve never...I mean, this is my first—”

“I know, kid. But that’s the nature of the beast.” Despite the heat, the first-time reporter shivered. “Which one’s yours?” Stacy pointed to his ’76 Celica. As they loaded equipment, the man spewed instructions. “When you get there, set up the tripod and mount the camera. Deck’s ready to go. Camera needs a battery.” He slammed the trunk. “When you’re ready to roll, just hit the black button.”

It was all happening so fast—too fast. “But...what about a monitor?”

“We don’t use monitors. And your deck only records. There’s no playback, rewind, or fast-forward.”

“Then how do I check footage?”

“You don’t.” He opened the door and shoved him inside. “Take a right out of the lot. It’s a mile down on your left side.”

“*What* is?”

Meeks looked more nervous than ever. “A shooting. At the Super-K Market.” Stacy gulped, cranking the engine. “And don’t forget to white balance.”

THE MANAGER’S GLAZED EYES stared at nothing. He was dead before he hit the floor.

‘Stormy’ Raines moved from the checkout stand to the Produce section, proud of his efficiency. Two bullets. Two bodies. His gait was smooth, his senses heightened. He could smell every vegetable—onions, asparagus. He could taste them—eggplant, tomatoes, butternut squash. The colors were magnificent. The world was his.

A sudden move caught his attention, the Produce manager darting from one display to another. The frightened employee took refuge behind a mountain of potatoes, the Lord’s Prayer on his lips.

Raines moved left, gun drawn. He’d never killed anyone

before today, never even struck a man in anger. He was making up for lost time.

The man in the blue smock bolted for the door, catching the gunman by surprise. He fired but missed, shattering a jar of salad dressing. Raines thought about going after him, but there was more prey nearby—easier prey.

As the sound system droned on, he heard the faint sound of whimpering. The noise grew louder as he approached the Dairy section. Behind a refrigerator, a woman and her child cowered, hoping—praying—the gunman would miss them.

He didn't.

Raines drew down on the pair, his eyes two stagnant pools. "Run, Breanna..." The woman shoved her four-year-old daughter away, the girl stumbling as she looked back to her mother. "*Run, damnit!*" Darting off, she heard the sound of a gunshot behind her. Raines stared down at his victim—a loving wife, community volunteer, mother of three—slumped on the floor, blood gurgling from her chest.

THE SKY OVER SUPER-K Market was the perfect blue of a Hollywood backdrop.

But this was no movie.

Stacy's hands shook as he steered the Celica into the lot. Screeching to a stop, he dashed to the trunk. Adrenaline was in charge now. He could feel his arteries expanding, hear blood rushing through his ears. A shot rang out as he raised the lid.

"Are you fuckin' nuts?" Stacy looked up to find an angry cop heading straight for him. "Move the hell back! You wanna get yourself killed?"

"No, sir." He dropped back twenty yards and began assembling his gear. The tripod was easy enough—he spread the legs and dropped it. The camera came next. *How the hell did it fit on the tripod?* After three attempts, he locked it in place.

Another shot rang out as he reached for the deck, his skin turning to gooseflesh. To the left, police hunkered down, guns

drawn. To the right, officials set up a makeshift control center. Every few seconds, a new vehicle sped into the lot, sirens screaming, lights flashing. Stacy looked around as he attached the camera cable.

*My God...he was the first journalist to arrive!*

“This is Sergeant David Eckles of the Avalon Police Department,” a bullhorn sounded. Stacy slammed a tape in the deck. “Give yourself up.” He hit the camera’s power switch. Nothing. “Come out with your hands in the air.” He hit it again. Still nothing. *What the hell was wrong?* Sweat flowed from every pore. As he moved for a closer look, he kicked the bag at his feet—*ouch*—a battery! He grabbed the brick and locked it in place, the viewfinder leaping to life. *Yes!*

Aiming the camera at the gun-toting officers, he hit the black button, the deck clicking, then humming. He stared through the little window—*tape was rolling!* Panning the camera to the front of the store, he captured a wide shot, then moved in for close-ups. He rolled on the sign, the man with the bullhorn, a young bagger fleeing from an exit. How he maintained his composure, he didn’t know. But one thing was certain—Stacy Zwardowski, *TV reporter*, was doing his job.

WHEN THE OLD MAN heard the first shot, he knew he was in trouble. He couldn’t move quickly—not with a walker. As he inched forward, he heard a second shot, then a third. He hadn’t felt such raw fear since storming the beach at Normandy. He’d survived that ordeal by thinking of his lovely wife. He was doing the same now.

A fourth shot sounded as he reached the checkout stand—ten feet from freedom. But as he passed the counter, his walker snagged the leg of a candy rack. ‘Stormy’ Raines fired, blood spraying the keys of the register, walker collapsing under the weight of the body. Admiring his deed, he heard the commotion outside—the sirens, the screeching tires, the cop on the bullhorn. None of it stopped him. He still had work to do.

Making his way up the center aisle, he listened for little feet. As he reached the turnaround, he glanced at the overhead mirror. The circular glass held the warped image of the little girl, her body reduced to a fetal ball. Raines stepped around the corner, stopping in front of her. She'd lost a shoe somewhere. Her knee was bleeding. And she held a fuzzy, gold duck, plucked from the stuffed animal rack behind her.

Raines pointed the gun at her face. But as he covered the trigger, the pair locked eyes. He wanted her to look away—needed her to look away—but she refused. Between uncontrolled gasps, she uttered one word. “Why?”

He held the gun till it shook. “Stop looking at me!” he screamed. The little girl held her stare. “Stop it, goddamnit... *that's enough!*”

“Come out with your hands in the air.” The voice resonated around him, echoing inside his brain. “I repeat, drop your weapon and come outside. Hands where we can see them.” He stared at the little girl, wanting desperately to hold her now, to tell her how sorry he was for taking her mother. *But what good would that do?* He raised the gun and fired the rest of his bullets at the ceiling, screaming—a deep, primordial scream that released the last few ounces of pain he was holding onto. When he had nothing left, he turned and headed for the door.

STACY WINCED AT THE bone-chilling scream. He wasn't alone. Even to the casehardened eyes of the law enforcement community, the unfolding scene was a disturbing one.

As the standoff continued, more media began to arrive. A reporter from the *Avalon Herald*. Nate Shefler from *KAVN*. A maroon van with the words *KPXZ Channel 2* on the side. Stacy watched a brawny cameraman climb out. “Wow, Channel 8 first on the scene?” He set up his gear. “Now, *that's* a story!”

Stacy ignored him, pretending to focus. But as he stared at the viewfinder, he saw movement. Pulling back, he watched a man emerge from the market. He wore a rumpled coat and

shiny shoes, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. One was empty. The other held a .44 Magnum.

“Hold it right there!” the bullhorn sounded. Stacy’s heart leaped to his throat. “Drop your weapon and put your hands in the air.” Cops took aim. The suspect didn’t move. “I repeat, drop your weapon and put your hands in the air!” Still no movement. To the left, an officer crouched behind a bulletproof shield. To the right, a sniper stared through paper-thin crosshairs. “You are completely surround—”

The perp raised his gun, shots exploding on all sides. The first bullet struck him in the chest, the next in the neck, the one after that in the head. In all, they’d find nine slugs in ‘Stormy’ Raines’s body, but eight were unnecessary. The sniper was lightning-quick—and deadly.

The gunman sagged to the ground, blood pouring like tomato juice down the curb. Stacy’s body went numb, his eyes locked on the image. *Jesus, could this really be happening?* It was surreal, nightmarish. But it *was* happening. And he had the video—he checked to make sure he was still rolling—*yes*, he had the video to prove it.

As police swarmed the body, Stacy forced himself to zoom, then pulled back for crowd shots. Heart pounding, he unlatched the camera and moved left for a better angle. But as he dropped to a knee, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Looking into the sun, he saw the glowing face of a female reporter. She had dazzling brown eyes and near-perfect teeth, her chestnut hair holding firm against the wind. “Katie Powers,” she introduced herself. “We got here fast as we could, but the road from Tishomingo’s a two-lane.” An obese camera op came up behind her, breathing hard and eating an Eskimo Pie. “This is Bob. He’ll take over for you.”

“But I don’t...” Stacy climbed to his feet.

The woman smiled, an efficient smile that masked a lifetime of pain and told the world she was going places in spite of it. “It’s okay. Terrance sent us.” He still looked confused. “Terrance Meeks. Our news director.” He glanced at the pin on her chest—a gold 8. “He needs you back at the station to go live at noon.”

*Live? On day one?*

He handed her the camera and turned for the car.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” He looked back, having no idea what she was talking about. She smiled again. “Your tape.”

Stacy felt like a complete idiot. “Oh...right.”

He punched the *EJECT* button. When the cassette unspooled, he pulled it out and walked away. “You might want to hustle, sweetie. You’re on in half-an-hour.”

MEEKS SHOVED THE TAPE in a machine. “Okay...” He glanced at the clock, a cigarette dangling from his lip. “...we’ve got fifteen minutes to air, and you’re the lead. I’ll have Randy slam this together while you write the script.”

Stacy felt his heart race again. He’d come here for a simple interview and now, just two hours later, was about to walk onto a set and tell thousands of people about the most horrific thing he’d ever seen. *Could he really do this?* If he expected to make it in this business, he’d *better* do it.

“Here.” Meeks grabbed a Steno and ripped away the top page. “I phoned Avalon P.D. and got some more details.”

Stacy stared at the scribbled notes. *Shooting began after ten. Male customer. Motive unknown. 4 bodies.* It wasn’t much to go on, but he’d seen enough in person to fill in the gaps.

“Oh, shit!” Stacy looked up to see Meeks adjust the color on a pair of monitors, both screens a dull, dark blue. Deep within the azure sea, he saw vague silhouettes—police officers, the front of a market, the Super-K sign.

“What’s wrong with the TVs?”

As Randy the editor sneered, Meeks shook his head, taking a deep drag. “What did you white balance on?”

Stacy’s palms grew moist. In college, he’d shot all his stories on VHS. The tapes were inexpensive, the cameras simple. Just focus and shoot. He had no idea what a white balance was. “I...uh...”

“Randy...” Meeks’s brain kicked into high gear. “...we shot a

feature at Super-K last month. Throw some exteriors together, and we'll run with it." As the man darted off, Stacy swallowed, sick, shaky, his boss offering a conciliatory smile. "No worries, kid. I'll take the fall for you on this one. Just don't let it happen again." He flicked ash, cutting his eyes to the clock. "You better get busy."

Stacy nodded, heading to a typewriter. As he fed the machine, he stared at the empty page, mind blank. "No," he whispered. *Not writer's block.* "Not now." Sweat beaded on his forehead, the clock ticking unmercifully. Ten minutes to twelve. Nine-and-a-half. "Come on, think." He'd written hundreds of stories in school, thousands maybe. If there was one thing in the world he felt comfortable doing, it was writing. He glanced at the notes. *4 bodies.* A sentence bloomed. *FOUR PEOPLE ARE DEAD, THEIR ONLY CRIME—BEING IN THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME.*

The rest of the story flowed easily. As he typed the last word, someone strode into the room. "Where's my lead?" Stacy yanked the script. The man had blonde hair and orange skin, Kleenex protruding from his collar like the peels of an onion. "Raul Gutierrez." *Funny, he didn't look Hispanic.* "I anchor at noon and six. You ready?" Stacy nodded, grabbing his coat. "What about makeup?"

"Makeup?"

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a compact. "You can use mine today, but you'll need to get your own." Stacy took it—though reluctantly. "Bathroom's up the hall. Make it quick." He headed for the set, Stacy staring at the thin, pink canister in his hand.

*This would be a first.*

To his relief, the restroom was empty. He looked in the mirror, applying makeup to his forehead, cheeks, and chin, then rolled his eyes. His face had an orange tint to it—he could've passed for Raul's brother. As he ran a comb through the dark curls of his hair, the door flew open, a skittish floor director leaning in. "Two minutes to air."

STACY TREMBLED AS HE took his seat at the anchor desk. It would've been easy to blame the air conditioning, but he couldn't lie to himself—he was scared to death.

"You'll do fine," Raul spoke up. "Just wait for my cue." Stacy nodded, looking around the room. The set was small and sterile, the flimsy walls painted with italicized 8s. To the left, a green screen dwarfed the man in front of it. To the right, a separate set featured two chairs, a plant, and curtain. There were three cameras in the room, one for the establishing shot, two for close-ups.

"Minute-thirty," the floor director announced.

"You want to run through this once?" the anchor asked.

"You read my mind!" Meeks butted in, snuffing out a cigarette on his way to the set. "First time out, never hurts to do a run-through."

"I'll say it doesn't." All three men turned to see a hawkish man in an expensive suit approach from the left. He had an air about him that said, 'I'm better than you, and don't forget it.' "Thad Barker. Meteorologist." He smiled, one eyebrow arched. "Why, I'll never forget my first—"

"I'm sure it's a great story, Thad," Meeks humored him, "but we're fighting the clock here." The man shrugged and walked off. "Okay, let's try it."

Raul read the lead-in with mock enthusiasm. As he finished, he turned to Stacy. "I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Stacy Zwardowski."

"Stacy...Zu—"

"That's not going to work," Meeks intervened. "First name's too effeminate. Last name's too...*Polish*. What's your middle name?"

"My what?"

"One minute," the floor director barked.

"Your middle name. What is it?"

"It's..." Stacy hesitated. "...William."

Meeks nodded, mouthing something, then smiled. "Okay, you're Bill Stacy."

“What?” Stacy was aghast. William was his father’s name. And he had no desire to share it—or anything else—with the man. “Hold on—”

“Gotta give ’em the name upstairs.” He bolted for the door. “Trust me, the C.G. op’ll love you.”

Stacy turned to Raul, shaking his head. “I like it,” the anchor offered. “My real name’s Paul Goldberg.”

“Thirty seconds. Mic check, please.”

Stacy clipped a mic to his tie, then shoved an IFB listening device in his ear. When the others finished speaking, he recited a line of script.

“Fifteen seconds,” the floor director cut him off. Stacy drew an icy breath. *He could do this*, he told himself. “Ten.” The lights grew hotter, the air thicker.

“Hey, Stacy,” Barker hollered at the last possible moment. “Don’t pull a ‘Cindy Brady’ on us.” He laughed at his own joke, then composed himself.

“Five...four...three...”

“Ready camera one,” the director called from the booth. “And roll intro.”

Stacy heard synthesized music in his ear, followed by the words, “This is the Channel 8 Noon Report. With anchor Raul Guttierrez. Meteorologist Thad Barker. And Chett Starr with sports.”

The music built to a crescendo, then faded. “Take one. Cue talent.”

Raul smiled. “From the Oklahoma oilfields to the Texas plains, a good day.” His expression grew ominous. “Texomaland is in shock at this hour...”

Stacy glanced at his script, a backup in case the teleprompter crashed. His hands were two blocks of ice. His stomach roared like the nearby Red River. *Just look at the camera and read the prompter*, he told himself. No different than the newscasts he’d practiced in school. *Like hell!* No classroom held *this* many people.

“...Reporter Bill Stacy joins us, back from the tragic scene.

Bill.” Stacy nodded, then turned to the camera, ready to utter his first words on TV.

“Thank you, Raul.” Not exactly *Masterpiece Theater*, but at least he didn’t stutter. “Four people are dead...”

In the booth, Meeks held his breath. “Roll tape,” the director whispered, careful not to throw his young reporter off. As the tape op nailed her cue, the producer crossed her fingers. But Stacy’s delivery was flawless. True, he looked a bit nervous, but that was to be expected. After all, this was his one and only television debut.

“...we’ll have more details as they become available. Raul.” Stacy turned to the man on his right, relieved—overjoyed actually—that he’d made it through without fainting.

“Thanks, Bill.” The anchor smiled, turning to his best friend, the camera. “In other news...”

Stacy sat quietly till the segment ended. When he heard the word, “Clear,” he gathered his script and made a beeline for the restroom. Racing into the stall, he grabbed both sides of the bowl, revisiting his ninety-nine-cent ham-and-egg breakfast. Coughing and spitting, he didn’t hear the door wheeze open, Thad strolling in to check his hair.

When Stacy emerged from the stall, they stared at one another, the weatherman fighting a turgid smirk. “Welcome to Channel 8, *Bill*.”