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Chapter 1

Lillie Matkin was a switchboard operator. She worked in the eight-story R. T. Dennis furniture store in Waco, Texas, in 1953.

May 11 was an uneventful day until the late afternoon. Matkin noticed thunderclouds when she looked out her office window, but she continued working, unconcerned. Suddenly, the lights in her office began blinking on and off. That was more of an annoyance than anything else.

Lillie Matkin did not know what had just happened in San Angelo, Texas. The sky had turned inky black and a funnel-shaped cloud called a tornado dropped from the rolling, tumbling

clouds. Eleven people in San Angelo were killed and sixty-six were injured.

A police officer in San Angelo tried to warn the authorities in Waco that the tornado was heading for their town, but the telephone lines blew down before he could get through.

The 90,000 people who lived in Waco had no idea what was about to happen. They were all going about their business as usual. Near downtown, Ira Baden was trimming wood for a garage door. The air was calm but muggy. It seemed unusually dark for 4:30 in the afternoon. Wind gusts started picking up, and then Baden heard a scary sound.

It sounded like several freight trains roaring through Waco at the same time. The clouds seemed to be growling as rain began to fall. The rain was unusual, too. It did not fall straight down to the ground. It moved sideways in a horizontal pattern, pelting the store

windows.

Ira Baden looked up and saw the dark clouds swirling violently, like a whirlwind. He knew what was coming—a tornado.

Baden grabbed onto a steel post in the sidewalk and hung on with all his strength. He saw the business district of Waco flying into pieces right before his eyes. The front of a large building was torn away, and he could see panicky people inside. The roof of the Joy Movie Theatre came crashing down.

Baden saw bricks, chunks of cement, lumber, and broken glass whirling around him. The tornado flattened a block of one-story shops. Then it hit the Dennis building, where Lillie Matkin still sat in front of her switchboard. The roof of the Dennis building collapsed in the powerful winds. A funnel cloud hovered right over the building, wrenching the top floors off the ground level. The Dennis building exploded

as if filled with dynamite. Dust and debris— broken, scattered remains— sprayed out over a five-block area.

Finally, the tornado raced from Waco, and the residents were left to search for survivors. Ira Baden and many others dug through stones and wood to answer muffled cries for help from trapped people. By 5:00 P.M., the police and fire departments were working furiously to dig out victims. The National Guard joined the effort.

Bright lights were brought in so the rescuers could keep working even after it got dark. A large group of men worked at the mound of debris that had once been the Dennis building. They searched for signs of life. They hacked at the rubble and then called for total silence so everyone could listen for any sounds of survivors. They heard something that might have been a cry for help, but they weren't sure. If there was any chance someone was trapped

down there, they would work nonstop to get to that person.

For five hours the men worked, digging a tunnel into the rubble toward the cries they heard. It was hard, painfully slow work that had to be done by hand. Bringing in large equipment could endanger anyone still alive.

So piece by piece they worked. As the tunnel was completed, the men shone their flashlights forward. They heard a woman cry out, "I can see the light! I can see the light!" Now they knew for sure someone was alive in that mass of wreckage, but it would be hours before they could reach the injured woman. By then, it might be too late.