

## ***Prologue: Stormy Weather***

Johnny Moonbeam loved tornadoes. He loved the thunderstorms that spawned them. The way a single lightning bolt lit up the whole sky, crisp, booming thunder, so close it made the house rattle, and the wind, screaming across the landscape, plundering everything in its path, were tonic for the boy's soul. There was nothing unusual about this. And yet, in Johnny's case there was more to it. What truly captivated his heart, and what he envied beyond anything else about these atmospheric demigods was this: they were absolutely, undeniably, free. Freer even than the king of the jungle, because a lion could still be captured and caged. Like Johnny.

Even as a baby Johnny liked stormy weather. A colicky infant, he would scream for hours, inconsolably. The only thing that seemed to settle him was, as his father put it, "Give the little son-of-a-bitch a good thunderstorm, and he sleeps, well, like a baby." However, at six feet, one and a half inches tall, and one hundred and eighty pounds, Johnny Moonbeam was no baby. He was almost fifteen years old. Sleeping was no longer an issue, and he didn't scream anymore—though there were times he still wanted to.

Johnny had lived through hundreds of thunderstorms—growing-up in central Indiana as he did, they were an unavoidable part of life. And yet, as much as he still enjoyed them, he longed for something more. It was time to move on, a natural progression as far as he was concerned. Johnny Moonbeam wanted to experience a tornado. He ached to see one with his own eyes, up-close and personal. As a charter member of cyclone alley, there was no shortage of tornadoes in the Hoosier state. Watching them, however, was a bit trickier. Still, Johnny knew it could be done. He'd seen the videos on The Storm Chasers website, and figured if they can do it, then so can I.

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The sky was black and sirens screaming in Mystic Indiana, a small town just north of Indianapolis. The wind picked up, now blowing with purpose as the torrential rain came down sideways in large sheets mixed with hail the size of marbles. Save for an occasional flash of lightning, the power outage encompassing most of Central Indiana left the day darker than night.

The citizens of Mystic had long since retreated to the safety of their basements, but they were not afraid. Having lived through so many tornado warnings, they could no longer sense the danger. They did, however, continue to accept it as fact and held on to their respect for it. Some played cards or read by candlelight. Some engaged in activities such as ping-pong, or if they were lucky enough to have a table, shot a game of pool. Most just shot the shit. And when there was nothing left to say they sat in the dark silence, hypnotized, waiting for the storm to pass and return to the heavens, or move on to the next town.

The sidewalks and streets and parks and yards of Mystic were empty. Even the pets were taken inside to ride the storm out. There were no golfers on Mystic's famed and usually packed Crooked Creek Golf Course that afternoon. Even the most ardent and stubborn linksman knew it was foolish to argue with an angry Mother Nature. So they picked up their clubs and headed for cover.

The golf course, however, was not entirely empty. Atop the man-made mound of grass guarding Crooked Creek's famous fifth hole stood fourteen-year-old Johnny Abel, hands held high above his head as if victorious. Like everyone else in Mystic Johnny was waiting out the storm, anxious to see what it was going to do. Everyone in their right mind hoped the storm would pass through uneventfully, as it had so many times before. Not Johnny. He was hoping the huge storm cell racing straight towards him, and the Crooked Creek Golf Course would give birth to a tornado. This was going to be the day. In every nerve of his young body, he could feel it. As he waited there atop the grassy knoll, it occurred to him that, Johnny Moonbeam is no ordinary storm chaser. He's a storm rider. Johnny no longer wanted just to see a tornado. He hoped it would pick him up and carry him away, because anywhere it might drop him would be better than being in Mystic.

"YESSSSSS!" he screamed when he saw the tail of a young funnel cloud descending from the cell. It was right on track. Johnny's long unrequited lust to witness nature's most violent spectacle was about to be satisfied.

And with it, the hope of a free ride out of Mystic.

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On another May afternoon, when Mystic wasn't shrouded in stormy darkness, had Johnny looked up from where he stood on Crooked Creek's fifth hole, he might have

seen a jet passing overhead, dipping a wing. Inside, the pilot would be waving to the golfers and pointing out the site of next year's U.S. Open to his passengers.

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Earlier that day . . .

The gate attendant took Lisa's ticket and paused. "You look familiar," she said. A few awkward seconds of silence followed as the two women assessed each other.

"Should I . . . know who you are?"

"You must be mistaken," Lisa answered curtly.

"Hey, let's keep it moving up there," said a man from back in the line.

Reluctantly, then, the attendant scanned the ticket and handed it back. "Have a nice flight," she said, and waved Lisa on her way.

Renowned child rights advocate Lisa Johnson, Time Magazine's current Person of the Year, had braved many-a-battle on her meteoric rise to the top, smashing glass ceiling after glass ceiling in the process. But nothing in the twenty-nine-year-old attorney's life had ever been as difficult or frightening as what she was about to do. The one-hour flight from Chicago's O'Hare field would take her back home to Indianapolis—for the first time since she'd run away at the age of fourteen. The air around her turned cold and time tumbled out of control. Each step down the jetway to Flight 428 was like walking against a surging tide.

Lisa always took a window seat but just then, looking down on Indiana's checkered landscape of never-ending cornfields laid out in perfect rectangles unveiling below her, she wished she'd been in the luggage hold like a cat, drugged and oblivious to her surroundings.

The first leg of her journey, from San Francisco International to Chicago's O'Hare Field had gone well. Between working on her laptop and the in-flight movie, she was distracted enough to keep the unwanted memories at bay. Now on the second leg of her journey, O'Hare to Indianapolis International, she was reminded of everything she ever wanted to forget. A favorite song from childhood, *Back Home Again in Indiana*, began playing in her mind.

*Back home again in Indiana  
And it seems that I can sing*

She could hear Jim Neighbors singing it at the Indianapolis 500 as if she were there.

*The gleaming candle light still shining bright  
Through the Sycamores for me*

Except she couldn't turn it off.

*When I dream about the moonlight on the Wabash  
Then I long for my Indiana home.*

The voice in her head grew louder, and took on a haunting lilt, taunting Lisa until her usually impeccable logic became a tempest, raging out of control. Inside her Library-of-Congress-like mind, room after room after floor after floor of perfectly cataloged files were ripped from their shelving. Shredded beyond repair, the unbound fragments were caught up in the firestorm, uselessly flitting about like so many pieces of dust in a whirlwind.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!” She screamed, not realizing she said this out loud until the two hundred eyes glaring at her assured her that, indeed, she had.

“Are you okay,” asked several flight attendants, almost in unison?

Lisa looked at them dumbfounded. Had she been given the option of jumping out of the plane right then and there, she would've gladly seized the opportunity. Instead, all she could do was stay in her seat, humiliated and terrified at the same time. “Sorry, I'll be okay,” she lied, then closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep even as her tears kept falling.

Lisa dreamt. In the Cineplex of her mind, she is watching herself star in a drama loosely based on Shakespeare's Hamlet. Terrified, she wants to get up but the fasten seat belt sign flashes blood-red, and she is forced to stay securely strapped into her seat. When she looks up at the screen, young Hamlet, pointing his poisoned rapier right at her, says:

*Get thee to a nunn'ry,  
Get thee to a nunn'ry now!*

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Several hours later . . .

For two hours, rain and hail and wind came and went as Johnny stood and waited atop the man-made mound of grass behind the fifth hole. Leaning into the fray, and looking half mad, half noble, he swayed only occasionally as he fought the elements. The clouds grew darker and denser, eventually forming an anvil-shaped mass. The Supercell looked just like the pictures he'd seen, and studied so hard. "Come on, do it!" he yelled, and then, "Yes!" a couple of minutes later when he saw the first funnel drop down. It lasted a few seconds and dissipated. "Come on." Then another dropped down, and another until finally one persisted. It couldn't have been more than a mile or two away at that point, dangling from the darkness and moving fast.

Johnny watched the now well formed funnel drop to earth, twisting and turning like a rope ladder hanging in the breeze. It touched down somewhere on the other side of the seventeenth fairway, pulled and sucked and filled itself up with dirt and sod and all manners of debris. Then like a two-year-old in a tantrum, spat out what it didn't like. The sight of this tornado was beautiful and dangerous and awesome and terrible all at once as it danced its way across the fairways, swerving left and right yet staying on course for the fifth green.

And then, there it was, just across the green from where Johnny stood, roaring like a freight train. The air was full of sod and benches and yellow sticks with their green flags torn and tattered and hanging by a thread among the other debris. Golf balls twirling around in a blur at two hundred miles-per-hour trailed long tails behind them, and Johnny realized the twister was on him. There was no time to wonder what this magic funnel ride might feel like as it lifted Johnny off the ground, and swept him away.

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The next day . . .

Lisa had not been to confession in over fifteen years. She had the option of doing it face-to-face with the priest. No thank-you. Just the thought of that made her wince. When your face has been on the cover of Time magazine, anonymity is a good thing. It would be hard enough this way. She stepped up to the confessional and waited before the red curtain, heart pounding in her chest. The air felt too heavy to breathe. Running was still a viable option. No. She stepped inside. A screen separated her from Father Thomas as she knelt down and crossed herself. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," she

said, her voice crackly and barely audible. “It has been fifteen years since my last confession.” And then nothing.

Having detected the obvious, that this parishioner had forgotten what to say next, Father Thomas helped her, something he did on occasion. “Fifteen years since my last confession, and I accuse myself of the following sins’ is what we usually say next.”

“And I accuse myself of the following sins,” she said then stopped again. This was worse than she imagined. The priest waited. Lisa tried to swallow, but there was nothing. Despite her best efforts to maintain composure, she started to cry. She, Lisa Johnson, unflappable attorney, mistress of control, was coming unhinged.

“There is nothing so bad that you cannot be forgiven. You are safe here. You can tell me anything, no matter how difficult it seems. If you can confess what you need to, then you’re going to feel better. God will forgive you.”

She took in deep breath and regrouped. “I accuse myself of the following sin.” The priest waited for her to continue. She needed to say it out loud, words she had never spoken, words held captive inside of her for fourteen years. She didn’t know if she could. It seemed to take forever, and then, without permission, as if by a will of their own, the words left her mouth. She tried to pull them back but was too late. Her secret had escaped. The voice—her voice—was clear and strong and seemed totally foreign. “Father,” she said, “I threw away my baby.”