KORESH

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STEPHAN TALTY

KORESH

THE TRUE STORY OF DAVID KORESH AND THE TRAGEDY AT WACO

An Apollo Book

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For Delphine,
my darling girl

"Immense sadness everywhere; immense power."

—JOHN JAY CHAPMAN

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of nonfiction, based on interviews, FBI and 911 transcripts, television and radio transcripts, taped sermons, and published sources. No characters or scenes have been invented. All the dialogue is as recorded or reported to me by people who heard it directly firsthand.

This book contains scenes of sexual assault and other forms of violence.

PROLOGUE

On Sunday afternoon, March 28, 1993, David Koresh was in a bitter mood. Dressed in a white wifebeater and jeans, he lay on the second floor of the Branch Davidian compound, his back propped against a wall, on the phone with the FBI. They had cut off the electricity, so the dark interior of the building was lit by candles, and quite cold.

The phone line snaked out of the compound, across land where FBI snipers studied the compound windows, and connected to a phone at a temporary headquarters a few miles away. There, a team of five negotiators—primary, secondary, technical adviser; note taker; and team leader—sat in a minimally furnished room, listening and talking.

It was exactly one month into the siege at Waco, and Koresh felt the FBI was messing with his manhood. They'd invaded his home, scoffed at his Bible teachings, and rutted the land around his home with their tanks. Agents had given him the finger and even pulled down their pants to moon his followers. He was fed up.

"You boys are murderers," he said. "You boys are killers. My country has dealt with me and people I love in a way that's not right . . . What you've done about it is you've disrespected my personage . . . You've disrespected my religion."

The primary tried to calm him. David's mood could turn easily, the FBI had found. At times, he seemed to want to befriend the negotiators, guys mostly in their thirties and forties. In his drawling voice, he even told them he loved them. David had an old-boy charm about him that could work on your mind. He wished he could meet up one day with the

FBI agents, he said, have a beer or two. Maybe they'd ride their motorcycles around Lake Waco.

There were times when their talks seemed more like therapy than negotiations. David's mind roamed back to his childhood in the small towns of North Texas, his family life, schooldays. He talked about what things might have been like if he'd done something differently here or there. Maybe he could have been a true-blue American hero, like the FBI's own Eliot Ness.

DAVID: "If the president of the United States had come to me one day and says, you know, 'Mr. Howell, I want you to work with the United States of America, you've been a good citizen. I've seen your report cards . . . You've been a good citizen and I want you to work on a tactical force with the FBI and I want you to help deal with, with bad guys and everything and I'd like to give you this position . . .'"

Across the staticky phone line, his voice was warm.

"I would have been so honored and so proud . . . ," he went on, "that somebody would have overlooked my apparent bad English and bad history. You know what I mean?"

It was moving, in a way. The negotiators knew that David lied about things and made up stories about himself, but there were times when he seemed to lose his defenses and then he was remarkably human.

The negotiators encouraged him. *Who knows,* they said, *you might beat the charges. Stranger things have happened. Just come on out, David, and you'll see your life isn't over.* More than thirty Davidians and their children had left the compound during the siege, with the last departing five days before. Loud music blared day and night, high-powered spotlights lit up the building's façade, and the engines of Bradley vehicles growled and rumbled through the night.

Inevitably, the conversation would turn. Sometimes, the old memories called back old resentments. "Let me explain something to you," David railed one night. "You are taking me as a fool."

"Absolutely untrue," the negotiator replied. But David went on in the same vein. He was certain the agents were lying to him. They were like IBM computers, each repeating the same words from the same script in remarkably similar voices. Inhuman men. David hinted that he'd dealt with a long line of older dudes just like them that stretched back to his infancy. It was as if the voices of all the hard-asses that had tried to whip

him into submission for three decades had been put on a tape that was being played back to him on a loop, over and over and over again.

"You know, you're gonna be punished," he said to the agent. "Your reasoning, your controlled oration, you know, your . . . unconcernment for the situation. You're a cold heart. You're just a freezer, you know what I'm saying? Like I said, you know, you remind me of, like my dad, my stepdad . . ."

"You didn't say he was such a bad guy, though," the negotiator replied.

"Oh, I told you," David said. "I said we never really knew him . . . Oh, yeah, he was bad. He was a gangster."

Part I

CHILD OF THE LONE STAR

1

BONNIE

EARLY IN THE morning of August 17, 1959, Bonnie Clark got out of bed and hurried down to the bathroom of her parents' house in Houston. Her stomach was giving her trouble.

She was just fourteen years old and nine months pregnant, her swollen belly on her slim frame noticeable enough to draw stares on the street. A pregnant teenager was still a topic of gossip in small-town Texas in the late fifties. Throughout her pregnancy, Bonnie had felt the judging eyes of others.

That night, the pain wouldn't let up. Bonnie went back and forth between her bed and the bathroom. Her mother called out to her from her bedroom.

"Let me see what's wrong," she said.

Bonnie told her it was just a stomachache.

Her mother spoke from the dark room. "You're going to have that baby."

The two of them tried to wake Bonnie's daddy, Vernon, to drive them to the hospital, but he was half-drunk from the night before and didn't want to go. Finally, they dragged him outside to the truck and got on the road to the hospital.

It might have been Vernon Clark's hangover that made him reluctant to leave his bed, but it might have been the baby, too. Bonnie's family had been deeply hurt when she turned up pregnant. An already fractious relationship with her father had turned to acid.

For as long as she'd been alive, Bonnie's father had been a menacing presence in her life. The family never learned the origins of Clark's rage, but they had their suspicions. He'd endured a rough childhood. His father had passed away when he was eight, and his mother had taken up with a series of boyfriends, none of which seemed to have made any emotional connection with the young boy.

Clark had made it through high school and, in the wake of Pearl Harbor, joined the Army. After the war, he married Erline, who came from a more well-off family than his own, then led his growing clan through years of wandering East Texas in search of better prospects. He tried his hand at different jobs that rarely lasted long and sent the family shuffling through a series of rented houses all across the state—Atascosa, Houston, Little Elm.

Clark even tried farming. But he battled stiff headwinds as he tried to make a living for his family, which would eventually grow to seven children. In 1949, when Bonnie was just four, a severe drought struck Texas, cutting the amount of rainfall the state received by as much as half. Rivers dried up, topsoil turned to dust, and crop yields plummeted. Fifty percent of the state's farming industry was wiped out, with a ripple effect on the remainder of the economy. Clark struggled to find stable financial footing.

There was, though, always money for alcohol. Over the years Clark turned into a snake-mean blackout drunk who beat Erline and tormented his children. Bonnie's brother Gary ran away when he was twelve, on account of her father whipping on him. Another son joined the Navy at fifteen. For the Clark kids, home was nothing to brag on.

Clark finally did eventually find a decent job—as a carpenter who framed houses—and stuck on that. But they never had any real money. Later on, the Clarks were able to afford a car, but when Bonnie was young, if you wanted to get somewhere, you walked.

For her schooling, Bonnie's parents sent her to a Seventh-day Adventist school in Houston. Both her parents were devoted followers of the church. The Clarks were too poor to pay the tuition, so when lunchtime came, Bonnie had to work in the kitchen, cutting potatoes and doing scut work. After school, she turned into a janitor and cleaned the bathrooms, scrubbing the toilets and replacing the toilet paper. It didn't do much for her self-image.

Bonnie was shy at school and found it hard to make friends. She had red hair that made her feel weird. "What is wrong with me?" she thought to herself. Even her name, Bonnie Sue, seemed to stick in her mouth when she said it.

At school, Bonnie learned about God, the multiplication tables, the correct Sabbath day—Saturday, not Sunday—and about sex. Namely, that it was bad. The Seventh-day Adventists were a socially conservative church, and that was especially true when it came to relations between men and women. Its pastors had long taught that people have a finite amount of "vital force," given to them by God, and that discharging fluids during sex depletes that force. This attitude had withered somewhat by the 1950s, but premarital sex was still considered shameful and wrong.

By the time Bonnie reached her teenage years, she'd overcome her bashfulness. Rebelling against her parents' strict Adventist mores, she grew wild. Her parents tried to keep her home, but Bonnie wanted to wear makeup, meet boys, party, and live her life. If they grounded her, she'd just run away.

When she was thirteen, she met Bobby Wayne Howell. He was eighteen and almost as hot-blooded as she was. Bobby drove fast and did what he wanted. Bonnie thought he was a catch.

One day, Bobby drove her to school in his pickup. Just as she was getting ready to open the door, he leaned over and kissed her right on the mouth. And who spotted him doing it but the school principal. He marched Bonnie into his office and expelled her on the spot. Low morals and all.

Much to her parent's chagrin, Bonnie was forced to enroll in public school. But that didn't turn her off Bobby. A relationship—tumultuous and marked by frequent blowups—began.

When she reached eighth grade, Bonnie asked her mother and father if she could marry Bobby. In Texas, there was no minimum age when it came to marriage; if a judge approved, a child of any age could wed. But the Clarks said no. A thirteen-year-old bride might be technically legal, and it wasn't that uncommon in their part of East Texas, especially in poor and working-class families. But her Adventist parents, spurred on by their faith, wanted no part of it.

A few months later, Bonnie was pregnant.

Vernon and Erline were distraught. The Clarks might be rednecks, but a pregnant young girl was a blot on the family name. Unwed mothers, especially teens, were regarded as "morally corrupt" in Texas in the 1950s. Often, they were forced to leave school and hide away with aunts or uncles in other states until they had their babies. Later, Texas introduced a "homebound" program where teachers visited young mothers in their houses, so they didn't have to appear in public.

Another option was institutions for wayward girls. There, the young mothers' mail was opened and censored, visits were forbidden, and the girls were forced to wear fake wedding rings when they ventured outside. Psychologists of that era even theorized that unwed moms were not only sinful, but unable to raise a well-adjusted child.

Abortion, if Bonnie considered it, was risky. The procedure was illegal in Texas—as it remains today, the moment a fetal heartbeat is detected—and doctors who performed it could go to prison for two to five years. The Adventists were strongly against it, too. Even today, the church considers abortion "out of harmony with God's plan for human life."

Bonnie very much wanted to marry Bobby and dodge the stigma she knew would fall on herself and her family. The couple talked about it, but as Bonnie's belly grew, the ceremony never happened. Bobby's version of things went like this: He and Bonnie went to have their blood tests, which many states had mandated since the 1930s in order to fight syphilis and other STDs. They got those done and headed to the clerk to get a marriage license. But Bonnie hadn't brought her birth certificate, and you needed one to obtain a license. Her parents didn't have a copy, so Bonnie sent away for one.

While they were waiting, Bonnie's friend told her about this nightclub in downtown Houston and they went one night without Bobby. They were there until nearly the break of dawn. When Bonnie got home, Bobby was waiting for her, spitting mad. They got into it right there on the sidewalk. It was a bad fight, and they both said things that wounded the other. The marriage was called off.

Bonnie told it differently. In her version, the couple did get the marriage license and even set a date for the wedding. But on the day of,

Bobby got cold feet and left her at the altar. Bonnie could have written a whole diary on the bad influences of men in her life, and Bobby would have been Exhibit #2, after her dad. Bobby even had a girlfriend the whole time she was pregnant, one he would marry soon after Bonnie gave birth.

Bonnie dropped out of school and waited out her term at home. As she grew more visibly pregnant, her shame was there for everyone to see. Bobby never even came to the hospital.

On August 17, at 8:49 a.m., Bonnie had the baby. The nurses laid the infant on her lap while they got ready to cut the cord. He was crying and making a fuss. Bonnie looked at the squirming little boy and realized that she, Bonnie Sue Clark, had a child now. It was a big, warm feeling; she felt close to the little thing, and hopeful for better things to come.

Bonnie decided to christen the baby Vernon Wayne Howell. The first name came from his grandfather, who had never come to terms with Bonnie having a child. The middle and last name came from Bobby, who would play almost no part in his life. It was an inauspicious start.