

IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING

This novel is a creative work of fiction imparting spiritual truth in a symbolic manner, and not an emphatic statement of religious doctrine.

As usual, while I *am* dealing with real ideas, I'm not writing about any real persons, places or institutions.

—the author

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JOHN Barrett heard God speak when he was ten years old. Years later all he would clearly remember about that Sunday night meeting at the Rainier Gospel Tabernacle was that it was close and sweaty, in the dead center of summer's heat. Noisy, too. It was altar time at the front of the church, the saints were praying and praising, and it was not the quiet, introspective kind of worship but the hollering kind, the throw-back-your-head-and-cry-to-Heaven kind as the women wept, the men shouted, and the piano kept playing over and over the strains of "I surrender all, I surrender all . . ."

Pastor Thompson, young and fiery, had preached a sermon that caught John by the heart. And when the altar call came and Pastor Thompson said, "If this word is for you, if God is speaking to your heart, I want you to come forward, lay your all on the altar . . ." John knew God was speaking to him, and he went forward, almost running, to kneel at that long mahogany prayer rail, his face flushed and his eyes streaming tears.

"Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world!" Pastor Thompson quoted the Scripture. "Will you receive that Lamb tonight? Will you find Jesus?"

John was ready to receive the Lamb, he was ready to find Jesus, and as he called on the name of the Lord, he could even see a lamb, small, gentle, spotless and white, right there in front of him, right on the other side of the prayer rail, so close he could have reached out and touched its nose. He was later told he'd had a vision, but at that moment he thought there really was a lamb in the church, as real as anything. The Lamb of God, like Pastor Thompson said. It was so real then, so long ago. It was a moment that truly stirred his soul.

But that moment, with all its feelings, its meanings, its transcendent, eternal words, even its little vision, would fade with time, and John would eventually tuck it away in a lost and forgotten corner of his memory.

He would not remember that he had done business with

God, that he had made a covenant with the Creator when only a young boy—“Jesus, come into my heart and take away my sins. God, I give You my life. Use me, Lord. I’m Yours.”

The memory of his father’s hand on his shoulder would fade with time and adult ambitions, as would his father’s words, spoken loudly and prophetically in the child’s ear, as if from God Himself: “Ye are called, My son, ye are called. Before I formed thee in the womb, I knew thee, and before thou wert born I consecrated thee to My service. Walk in My Word, listen for My voice, for I will speak to thee and guide thee in all the paths you may take. Behold, I am with thee always . . .”

He would choose not to remember. “. . . in all thy ways acknowledge Me, and I shall direct thy paths . . .” Good words, useful words. Forgotten words. “And lo, I am with thee always, even unto the end of the age . . .” He would not remember.

But God remembered.

TWO

GOVERNOR, I plead with you, search your heart and change your course, for if you do not, God will change it for you. Though you have said to yourself, 'No one sees, and no one hears,' surely, the Lord sees, and He hears all that you think in your heart, all that you whisper, all that you speak in your private chambers. There is nothing hidden from the eyes of Him with whom we have to do!"

It was the Friday after Labor Day, still sunny, still summer, the early-evening shadows just beginning to stretch. Crowds of giddy party supporters were coming from their homes, jobs, early dinners, and schools to converge on The City's Flag Plaza for Governor Hiram Slater's big campaign kickoff rally. The Hi-Yo, Hiram! straw hats were already blooming in profusion and floating along on hundreds of heads like leaves on a river. Before the backdrop of the plaza's fifty state flags, a platform had been set up, draped in blue, festooned with red, white, and blue balloons and American flags, neatly arranged with rows of folding chairs and garnished with a full nursery's worth of potted chrysanthemums. Soon the rally would begin, and Governor Slater would make his campaign kickoff speech.

But as people entered the plaza, a stocky, gray-haired man in blue warehouse coveralls was already making a speech, standing on the edge of a concrete planter box, primroses at his feet, his head well above the crowd. The governor may or may not have been within earshot, but this man was going to shout to the governor anyway, his voice tinged with pain, with desperation.

"Like Nebuchadnezzar of old, you have set up an image of yourself for all men to follow, a towering image, a mighty image, an image far greater than yourself. But please take heed: the Lord would remind you, you are not that image. Though you may say, 'I am strong and invincible, I tower over the masses, I cannot be touched or harmed,' yet in truth you

are as weak as any man, about to be harmed, about to be toppled!"

"Why don't you just shut up, big mouth!" yelled a beer-bellied contractor passing by.

"The Truth must be heard though the lie be a tumult," the man replied.

"Not him again," griped a mother with four children in tow.

"Get off that planter!" ordered a realtor in a business suit.

"You don't belong up there."

A radical feminist publisher responded with the slogan "Hi-yo, Hiram!"

Those nearby picked up the slogan, louder and louder, and threw it at the man for pure spite. "Ho-yo, Hiram! Hi-yo, Hiram! Hi-yo, Hiram!"

They had stung him. He looked into their faces as pain filled his eyes, then pleaded, "The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him!"

Through the chanting a few voices could be heard responding in mock horror, "Ooooooooooooo!"

"Our God is there, ever present, and touched with our infirmities. He is speaking. We must be silent and listen!"

"Hi-yo, Hiram! Hi-yo, Hiram!"

Behind the platform, screened from visibility by blue curtains, Governor Slater, small, balding, with an unimpressively high-pitched voice, went over final details with the rally's organizers.

"Thirty minutes," he said. "I want thirty minutes even if you have to cut something."

Wilma Benthoff, the governor's campaign manager—and presently his harried rally organizer—pushed her wildly curled blonde hair away from her face so she could see her clipboard. "Okay, we'll do the 'National Anthem,' then Marv will introduce the dignitaries. Marv!" Marv didn't hear her; he was busy directing photographer traffic while tying balloons to the platform stairs. "MARV!"

He looked up. "The governor wants more time, so keep the introductions brief!"

He nodded and said something they couldn't hear. Benthoff went on, "Then the band will play . . . uh . . . Joyce, how many songs is the band going to play?" Joyce didn't hear her; she was standing too close to the trombone player practicing his scales. "Oh, forget it. We'll cut a tune out. I'll tell her."

The governor felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Martin Devin, one of the governor's staff members and would-be chief of staff. The tall, former college linebacker had an amused sneer on his face. "Our old friend the prophet is here."

The governor chuckled and shook his head. "As sure as the sun rises." He sneaked a peek through the curtain and could just see the old man's head above the crowd. "I wonder what his son must be thinking right now?"

"Especially when he sees the ruckus on his own newscast! I called a friend at Channel 6 and they're moving their camera. They want it."

The governor's face brightened. "Always thinking, Martin, always thinking!"

Devin nodded, acknowledging the compliment. "So we just might have an opportunity coming up here . . ."

Leslie Albright, Channel 6 news reporter, carefully placed a molded earpiece in her ear and then found one square foot of ground to call her own as Mel the long-haired cameraman brought her face into clear focus. There were better places to shoot this story, better views of the plaza, better backgrounds, but orders were orders. Someday she was going to shoot Tina Lewis.

"John, this is where it all begins for Governor Hiram Slater . . ." she rehearsed in her professional news voice. "Undaunted by challenger Bob Wilson's showing in the polls . . ."

With one hand she held her NewsSix microphone and with the other her quickly jotted notes, which were trying to elude the grasp of the three fingers holding them. She tried to straighten her breeze-tousled blonde hair as she examined her

reflection in the camera's lens. Gawkers were already waving to Mom behind Leslie's back.

"Undaunted by how well his challenger is doing in the polls . . . Even though Bob Wilson . . . Even though the polls show Bob Wilson coming on strong . . . uh . . . show Bob Wilson gaining support . . ."

"We've got about ten minutes," her earpiece crackled.

"Okay," she replied, and went back to rehearsing. "The governor has proven he has supporters too, as you can see by the vast crowd behind me . . ." And then she waxed sarcastic just to vent herself. "—which you could have seen better if we'd stayed up on the stairs instead of moving down here."

She adjusted her red suit jacket and tried to think her report through again. That guy standing on the planter behind her wasn't helping much.

"The Word of God says, 'Before you were formed in the womb, I knew you!'" he cried.

Oh brother. Now he's going to bring up that subject!

"I like it," said Tina Lewis, executive news producer. She was in the Channel 6 control room for this one; she knew it was going to be interesting.

Above the console where the show producer, director, and video switcher sat, the monitors on the wall flickered a visual three-ring circus with different things happening everywhere all at once so fast you could hardly keep up with it. Monitors One, Two, and Three showed the views from the three studio cameras on the news set below; the Preview Monitor framed whatever view would be next; the On Air Monitor showed what people at home were seeing; the news anchors were still in the middle of NewsSix at Five Thirty, pushing news stories through like cars on a speeding train.

"Camera Three, head-on to John," said Susan the director.

Camera Three moved in. Monitor Three and the Preview Monitor showed a tight head-and-shoulders shot of handsome, fortyish anchorman John Barrett looking into the camera.

"Pan for box." The camera moved to the right. "Box." The

video switcher hit a button, and a nicely drawn beer can in a frame appeared in the upper-right corner of the screen.

"More trouble brewing for Bayley's Beer," said John Barrett. "Ever since the Bayley Brewery in Tobias contracted its aluminum can recycling to Northwest Materials . . ."

"Stand by Cassette Two." Cassette Two appeared freeze-framed on the Preview Monitor.

". . . environmentalists have been hopping mad and foaming up a real storm . . ."

"Roll Cassette Two." Button pressed. Cassette Two began to roll.

". . . that could be coming to a head . . ."

Cassette Two counted down—Three, two, one . . .

". . . Ken Davenport has the story."

On Air, Cassette Two: a shot of the brewery. Bayley Brewery title across bottom of screen. Ken Davenport's voice over the picture.

"Board Members of the Bayley Brewery met today in a closed meeting to determine what action, if any, they will take . . ."

"Stand by Camera Two, head-on to Ali."

In Monitor Two, Ali Downs, co-anchor, a former model with jet black hair and almond eyes, sat ready to begin the next story.

In a black-and-white monitor near the ceiling, Leslie Albright stood before the remote camera, microphone, earpiece, and hair in place, waiting her turn to report. Behind her a fracas was growing.

"Look at that!" said Tina Lewis, almost awestruck. "Will you look at that!"

"You have turned your eyes from the slaughter you have championed! You have robbed the innocent of their lives!" said the man on the planter. "The Lord formed our inward parts. He wove us in our mother's womb, and we are fearfully and wonderfully made!"

That was all some of the crowd needed to hear. Hiram Slater

was a pro-choice governor, and this was a pro-choice crowd. Things started getting quite vocal.

"You're at the wrong rally, bub!"

"Keep your bigoted views away from my body!"

"Would somebody pull him down from there?"

And through all the shouts and threats "Hi-yo, Hiram!" never missed a beat.

Leslie thought she heard a question through her earpiece. She held her hand over her other ear. "Say again please."

It was Rush Torrance, producer of the 5:30 newscast. "John still needs a scripted question to close your package."

"Um . . ." Leslie looked behind her at the crowd coming to a rapid boil. "Things are changing kind of fast around here. He might want to ask me about the abortion issue . . . you know, how that might be affecting the climate of the rally."

"So . . . how do you want it phrased? You want him to—" The man on the planter was shouting something, the crowd was hollering louder than he was, and all of them were louder than Rush's voice in the earpiece.

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you!"

"I'll have him ask you about the hot issues, all right? He'll ask you how it looks from where you stand. What's your outcue?"

"Um . . . I'll end with, 'This campaign could be an exciting roller coaster ride for both candidates, and the whole thing begins in just a few minutes.'

"All right. Got it."

Leslie was getting nervous, anticipating an elbow in her ribs or a projectile on her head any moment. She asked Mel the cameraman, "You think we ought to move back a bit?"

"No," said Tina Lewis. In the studio they could hear everything Leslie was saying. "Stay right there. We're seeing everything. It looks great."

Rush Torrance passed the message along through his headset.

In the monitor Leslie cringed a little but stayed where she

was while the crowd behind her became more dense and noisy. Fists were waving in the air.

The man on the planter was clearly visible above the crowd, gesturing and shouting, "Hear me! Volume and chanting and numbers and repetition and television coverage will not make a lie true!"

Then some coat hangers appeared, waving in the air above the crowd.

Tina chuckled. "They know they're on-camera."

Rush informed Leslie, "You're on after the break. Stand by."

On television screens all over the city and beyond, Ali Downs finished up a story. "Legislators hope the move will help displaced timber workers in time, but the timber workers say they'll believe it when they see it."

Two-shot: John Barrett and Ali Downs seated at the expansive, black-and-chrome news desk. In the upper background NewsSix in large blue letters. Center background: false TV monitor screens with faces, places, titles frozen in photographs. In the left background, through a false window, a false city skyline.

John Barrett started the tease: "Coming up next, Governor Hiram Slater's campaign for re-election starts with a citywide rally tonight. We'll go to the Flag Plaza live for an update."

Ali finished the tease. "And iguana lizards running for your health? See it for yourself!"

The screen cut to the teaser video: lizards pawing and licking at the camera lens.

Commercials.

"All right, Leslie," said Rush. "We're coming to you in two minutes."

The governor scanned his notes. If things kept going the way they were, he might have to change his text a little. "Sounds like things are heating up out there," he hinted to Martin Devin.

Devin had just returned from a reconnaissance peek. "Mr.

Governor, you've got the crowd, you've got the camera. I think we ought to take advantage."

"You have something in mind?"

Devin lowered his voice. "I think we can get things a little rowdier. It could stir up some emotions, really get the crowd on your side, and it'll get the attention of the TV viewers."

The governor looked at his watch. "It's close to 6. When is Channel 6 going to carry us?"

Devin looked at his own watch. "Any minute. I think they want to close the 5:30 show with a live teaser and then come back at 7 to pick us up again."

The governor mulled it over, then smiled. "Okay. I'll be ready."

Devin smiled and hurried away.

In a tight little area behind some trees, out of sight, he dialed a number on his cellular phone. "Yeah, Willy, he went for it." He looked at his watch. "Keep your eye on that blonde reporter down there. Go when she goes."

"Fifteen seconds," said Mardell, the attractive, black floor director standing behind the cameras. "Leslie will be to your right."

John Barrett looked to the right unconsciously. At home viewers would see the anchors looking at a large screen with Leslie Albright on it. In the studio John and Ali would be looking at blank space, pretending a screen was there.

Mardell counted down with her fingers silently. Five, four, three, two, one . . .

In the control room Leslie had jumped from the black-and-white monitor to the large, color Preview Monitor, and the picture was impressive. There she was, her tension showing and her hair tousled despite her best efforts, holding her ground as a sea of enraged humanity boiled and bubbled behind her and one lone man continued his struggle to be heard above the tumult.

On Air, John Barrett intro'd the story, looking into Camera Three and reading the teleprompter script mirrored on the glass

over the camera's lens. "Well, today is Day One of Governor Hiram Slater's campaign for re-election, and Leslie Albright is at the Flag Plaza right now for the big kickoff rally." Both he and Ali Downs turned and looked toward the wall. "Leslie?"

On televisions at home, there she was on what looked like a three by four foot screen propped on the end of the news desk.

Leslie looked right into the camera and started her report as rehearsed. "John, this is where it all begins for Governor Hiram Slater. Even though the polls show Bob Wilson gaining support, the governor has proven he has supporters too, as you can see by the vast crowd behind me."

As viewers at home saw the shot of Leslie jump from the screen that wasn't there to the full television screen, it wasn't clear just what that vast crowd was indicating, other than an impending riot.

But as John glanced sideways at his own monitor hidden in the top of the news desk, his attention was drawn to that one lone character sticking up above the crowd, his mouth moving, his hands gesturing. It seemed he was leading this mob.

"Roll Cassette One," said Susan the director, and Leslie's prepared video report began to play on the screen with Leslie's prerecorded voice narrating.

Video: the governor meeting folks, shaking hands, waving to the crowds.

Leslie's voice: "Governor Slater admits it will be a tough campaign, but insists he is ready for the battle and will pull no punches."

Video of the governor being interviewed. Sound up. The governor: "I think we have a head start, really. The past four years are a clear record of our accomplishments, and I stand on that record. We've moved ahead on education, employment opportunities, and women's rights, and we're going to keep after those issues."

John's face was getting redder, and it showed, even through the makeup. As he watched the live camera monitor showing

what Mel's camera was seeing at that very moment, he could still see that rabble-rouser standing above the crowd. The monitor had no sound, but he could easily imagine what the old man was shouting. He dared not curse—he might be on the air. At least Leslie's video was still running on the air and people weren't seeing what he was seeing right now.

Leslie was ducking her head and looking behind her, at least while the video report was running. She kept trying to hear her next cue through her earpiece.

The crowd was starting to chant, "Pro-life, that's a lie—you don't care if women die!"

John grabbed his desk phone to talk to Rush Torrance. "Can't we get that kook off the screen? Rush? You there?"

No answer. Leslie was coming back on.

Mel the cameraman nodded furiously. "Yes! You're on, you're on!"

Leslie straightened, held the mike in a trembling hand, and almost shouted her cue line. "So, John and Ali, this campaign could be an exciting roller coaster ride for both candidates, and the whole thing—" Someone screamed. "—the whole thing begins in just a few minutes!"

The old man on the planter couldn't believe it. Suddenly two characters he'd never seen before, one with stringy hair and a bald spot on the back of his head, the other black-haired, hulking and tattooed, came from nowhere and started throwing punches at his audience, hitting men, women, anybody—on his behalf!

"Dirty baby killers!" shouted one.

"Hallelujah!" shouted the other.

"No . . . no! Don't do that!"

Too late. Some of the audience were switching from shouting to slugging.

"No! This won't solve anything!" *Oof!* Something—it sounded like a can—bounced off the man's head. Hands

were grabbing at his legs. He started pulling away, dancing on the planter.

John could see it all on his news desk monitor, as could every viewer watching the news at that moment. He'd been given his cue, but his mind went blank. He searched his script and found the question he was supposed to ask, scribbled in at the last minute. "Uh . . . Leslie . . . this . . . uh . . . campaign seems to be loaded with a lot of hot issues . . . how does it look from where you stand?"

Leslie just about said, "How do you think it looks?" but simply replied, "I guess you can see for yourself, John and Ali. And if you don't mind, I think we'll move a little further away so we can keep covering it from a safe distance."

"No!" shouted Tina Lewis. "Don't lose it!"

"Stay on it," Rush instructed through his headset.

Leslie ducked sideways out of the picture. If she heard the instruction she wasn't indicating so. The picture wiggled, tilted, jostled. Mel was moving the camera.

"Stay on it!" Tina ordered. "Mel, stay there!"

The camera came down solid again. Mel had planted the tripod.

No Leslie on-camera—only the crowd, the scuffle.

Producer Rush Torrance barked the order into his headset as he yanked pages from the show's script and dropped them on the floor. "We're bumping 480, Boy Pilot, and 490, the Running Lizards. We'll stay with this!"

"Oh terrific!" John moaned.

From beside the planter a big black man, his eyes full of fire, leaped into the crowd. "You wanna fight, I'll teach you to fight!"

He was after those two intruders who'd started the fight in the first place. He found the first one, the weasel with the stringy hair and bald spot, and put him out of commission

with one well-placed haymaker to the jaw. The big guy with the tattooed arms was a little more of a match, and they both went down to the pavement, taking several other bodies with them.

Three big college jocks finally got their paws on the old man and wrestled him from the planter, locking him in a painful hold with his arms behind his back. "Come on, old man! Party's over!"

His face was etched with pain and fear as they began forcing him along, almost carrying him from the plaza, two holding him from behind, one pulling him by his hair, the prophet's body bent forward, off balance, tripping, stumbling. He cried out.

Suddenly—it looked like a violent, tumbling play from a football game—the black man burst through the crowd, pushing bodies aside until he could reach the old man. With his tremendous weight and powerful arms he grabbed the first two men by their necks and smacked their heads together like melons. They went limp, falling backward, releasing their hold. The third let go of the old man's hair right away and only wanted to defend himself, holding his arms in front of him.

"No, Max, don't—" cried the old man.

But Max did, grabbing the young man by his hair. "See how it feels, sucker!" He flung him into the crowd, where several people fell like bowling pins.

Mel kept his camera on the whole scene, capturing the grappling bodies, the flying KEEP ABORTION LEGAL signs, and the whipping American flags. There was no telling who was on which side or who was winning, but it was exciting footage, no question about that.

John couldn't say a word, so Ali jumped in. "Leslie? Leslie, are you still with us?"

Leslie's voice came from off-camera somewhere as the camera captured the first police arriving on the scene. "Yes, Ali and John, we're a safe distance away now and as you can

see, the police are intervening, so this should clear up quite soon."

"Do you have any idea what started this?" Ali asked.

John knew; he never would have asked that question.

Leslie answered, "Well, uh . . . you may have seen that man in the background, the one yelling at the crowd . . ."

"Yes, and I think our viewers did."

"Well, he was obviously anti-abortion, and as we all know, that's one of the hot issues in this campaign, and I think there was a pretty strong disagreement back there."

"Thirty seconds. Close it," came Rush's voice in their earpieces.

Ali closed with, "Well, hang in there, Leslie, and we'll get more from you tonight at 7. Be careful."

"Oh, I'll be here, on the scene."

John was happy enough to tell Camera Two, "And that's NewsSix at Five Thirty. Stay tuned for the 'CBS Evening News,' and we'll see you again at 7 o'clock."

"Good night," said Ali.

Theme music. Wide shot of studio. Credits. The anchors engage in unheard small talk with the weather and sports announcers, gathering and shuffling their scripts. Commercials.

"Mel," said Tina Lewis, "you hear me?"

"Yeah, you're coming in," Mel's voice came back. It sounded a little high with excitement.

"Keep the picture steady now. Keep rolling. We'll use some of this at 7."

"Okay."

Tina and Rush watched the live camera monitor as Mel zoomed in on the police grabbing the old man and his black friend and muscling them out of the crowd. The old man's feet weren't even touching the ground.

The old man was scolding his friend even as the police dragged them along. "Max, you shouldn't have done that!"

Max was fuming, sweating, too angry to speak. He could

only curse the old man, curse the crowd, struggle against the four cops it took to contain him.

"All right, take it easy," said a cop, brandishing his nightstick.

The old man chided his friend. "Max, now you cooperate! You can't afford to make things worse!"

Max came to his senses and calmed down with unnatural quickness. "Sorry, officer. Didn't mean no trouble."

"You're gonna clear out of here now or we'll haul you in, got it?"

"Oh, we'll leave, right away," said the old man.

"Yeah, we outa here."

On the outskirts of the plaza the police let them go, and they hurried away, thankful for freedom.

As for the two strangers who'd thrown those first punches, they were nowhere to be seen.

Martin Devin was all smiles when he reported back to the governor. "You should have seen it!"

"Did it get on the air?"

"We'll know in a minute. But that cameraman was really scrambling to cover it."

"Okay, we'll play on that."

The studio cameras were off, the show was over. Ali and John removed their earpieces and lapel mikes. The news set was cut off from the outside now, a small, empty, plywood box of a place.

"Poor Leslie," said Ali. "That was supposed to be an easy assignment."

John didn't even hear her as he grabbed the desk phone. "Rush? Rush? Could you get me Rush please?" He slammed the phone down. Apparently Rush wasn't available.

Ali looked him over for just a moment. "What's the matter?"

John glared at her, not meaning to. But right now glaring was all he could do. "Aw . . . that . . . stupid story . . ." He grabbed his script and left the desk, muttering to himself

more than answering her question. "Of all the things we could've put on the air we had to put that on . . . and now we're gonna see it over and over 'til they wear it out . . ."

John circled behind the stud-and-plywood backdrop of the news set and immediately into the newsroom, a large, gray-carpeted, open floor partitioned into small cubicles, each with a desk, a telephone, and a computer monitor, where reporters, producers, editors, and anchors worked at gathering, sifting, condensing, cutting, and pasting together each day's news.

So where was Rush? Where was anybody responsible for this?

The room was relatively quiet at just a little after 6 o'clock. The Five Thirty was finished, and half the personnel had gone home. The Seven O'clock producer, Pete Woodman, had already chosen the material that would run, and now his five people, sitting here and there around the room, were putting the finishing touches on the show, updating the script, tailoring the videos, reslotting and prioritizing the stories.

Oh, there was Rush, at his desk in the corner, having a hurried, impromptu script conference with Pete Woodman. It had to be about this latest development. Brother. This thing had so much momentum it was going to be unstoppable.

"Leslie's there right now," Rush was saying, "and Mel got footage of the scuffle if you want it. It's great stuff . . . looks really good."

Pete was perusing his script for the Seven O'clock, scanning it with the point of his pen. "Now I take it she's getting the governor's speech. I've got that slotted near the top."

Rush checked his watch. "He was scheduled to start about a quarter after. He wanted to get on the Seven O'clock, I know that." He looked up. "Hi, John. Good show."

"Hello . . ."

Rush went right back to his discussion with Pete. "So Leslie ought to be feeding that in any minute."

"Good. Bill's expecting it." So the Seven O'clock would feature highlights from the governor's speech. No doubt

Leslie and Mel were feeding it back via microwave to Bill in the editing room. Bill, the fastest editor around, was recording it on tape this very moment and would then work with one of the newswriters to find the most poignant eye- and ear-catching clips to paste together for a feature on the Seven O'clock. And if he really wanted to catch the eyes and ears of the viewers, what better footage than—

"So let Bill have that scuffle footage," Pete said. "That would really give a sense of the . . ."

"Yeah," Rush completed the thought, "the heat of the issues, the feistiness of the campaign. That'll fit right in with the governor's kickoff."

"And that's what I'd like to talk to you about," John cut in.

"Yeah?"

"That footage, Rush. I . . . I just don't know about that."

Rush, not much more than a kid with a floppy blond forelock, had great strengths as a producer. He could put together a tight, gripping newscast, he could draw a story out of a vacuum, he could inventively defy time in making deadlines. But one thing he could not do was fathom, much less endure, the petty misgivings and foot-draggings of the station's "talent."

"What's the problem with it?" Rush was being polite, not interested.

John stumbled trying to come up with an answer. "Well . . . it's violent, it's . . . well, I think it's tasteless."

"I think it happened," Rush answered curtly. "It happened, and we were there, and that makes it news. You tell me any other station in this market that had an opportunity like that fall right into its lap."

Okay, John thought. My spine's as stiff as the next guy's. "I would say the brawl was an opportunity, yes. But that religious nut in the background, you went after him, didn't you? You wanted him in the background."

Rush threw up his barrier right then and there, his hands raised. "Okay, okay . . . Discussion ended . . . No comment. If you have a problem with it, talk to Tina. I took my orders

from her. I liked the whole idea. I still do, and I'd do it again, but for this one, talk to Tina. Your problem's with her."

And with that, Rush went back to consulting with Pete as if John weren't even standing there.

Tina Lewis, a sharply dressed professional, removed her designer glasses as her gold bracelets jingled, then gawked at John with incredulous eyes. "John, come on, we've got forty minutes until the Seven O'clock and you're telling me you want the lead story changed?"

"Well . . ." John was frustrated and angry. Time, only a few minutes, had degraded his original concerns from possibly legitimate to silly and outlandish. "I had no idea what Leslie was going to be shooting. Had I known I would have said something earlier, and now . . . of course, it's too late and my concerns no longer have merit and . . ." He threw up his hands in surrender and turned to leave her office. "I've got a promo to do."

"John . . ." She sank into her chair and leaned her elbows on her desk. "I'm sorry if the situation is awkward for you. But when news happens, it's our job to report it. You know that."

John turned toward her and took a purposeful breath to control himself. He spoke slowly and carefully. "Tina, I have worked in the news business for twenty-four years. Please don't use that line with me. I've used it all too often myself. I know that line."

Now came the contest to see which of them could remain a collected and controlled professional the longest.

Lewis spoke slowly, in carefully measured tones. "I wouldn't think of using a line with you, Mr. Barrett. And I'm a little disappointed that someone with twenty-four years experience still can't separate his profession from his personal concerns."

"You chose to put him in the background," John said flatly. "You could have shot the platform, the banners, the flags on the plaza, any number of backgrounds, but you chose to show him. Isn't that right?"

She grimaced and wagged her head as if she'd never before

encountered such idiocy. "John, I wasn't there, and as far as I'm aware, he never called us and said, 'Hey, I'm going to be preaching to the crowds over by the 4th Street entrance, come and get me on television!'"

John pointed his finger at her, a sign he was losing his temper. "You were in the control room. You were calling the shots. You made the decision."

She let out a disgusted sigh and said, "Okay. You're embarrassed. Is that my problem? Is that even any concern of the business we're in?"

John saw the clock on the wall. Time, the boss of all bosses, was ordering him out of the room. "I've got to do that promo."

The last word was hers. "I'm sorry we can't resolve this for you. But really, it's your problem, you're the only one in a position to do something about it, and if I were you I would."

He just turned his back on her and walked out.

He went into the makeup room to check his face in the big, illuminated mirror. The makeup was still good from the Five Thirty. It was the expression on his face that needed some work. *Come on, guy, loosen up. Nobody wants to look at that.*

Back in the newsroom he took off his suit jacket and hung it on a hook just as Pete Woodman handed him the script for the promo. He glanced over it as he sat in the stool in front of the flashcam, a small television camera set up just behind the rear wall of the news set. This was where all the live-from-the-newsroom shots were done. It was a handy arrangement, almost a one-man television studio: a remote-controlled camera, some lights, a remote-controlled teleprompter.

John checked the monitor and tilted the camera up slightly with the remote control. Now he was centered in the screen. The teleprompter in front of the camera was cued and ready. He planted the flashcam earpiece in his ear so he could hear his cue from the control room.

Okay. An on-the-air monitor showed the "CBS Evening News" just ending. Then two CBS news promos.

"Five seconds," came Pete Woodman's voice.

Network identification: "This is CBS."

"Two, one . . ." Theme music.

John appeared on The City's television screens in shirt sleeves and loosened tie, looking like he'd been hard at work in the newsroom visible behind him. Title across the bottom of the screen: John Barrett, NewsSix.

John went right into it, his eyes smoothly scanning the teleprompter script. "This is John Barrett. Coming up in a half hour on NewsSix at Seven, Governor Slater's campaign kick-off rally . . ."

Video rolled. A jerky, groping camera scene of grappling bodies. The old man fighting off his assailants and then being yanked off the planter and into the crowd.

"The governor came out fighting . . . and some fights broke out. We'll have a live update at 7."

John on the screen again. "We'll also have more on those two high schoolers lost in the mountains. They've been missing for twenty-four hours now, they were not dressed for weather, and in the mountains there is *weather*. Those stories and an update on the rest of the day's news ahead on NewsSix at Seven tonight."

Commercial.

Well, that was that. Twenty-five seconds. Now to proofread the script for the Seven O'clock and hope the governor had something interesting to say, something that would draw attention back to him and his campaign.

"The governor came out fighting, and some fights broke out," John repeated mockingly, settling at his desk and calling up the script on the computer. "I'm gonna kill him!"