

Chapter 1

Jim had gone to bed late the night before after fighting an anxious insomnia, which filled his mind with incessant what-ifs, and though he would never have said that he felt regret, he wondered what his life would have been like had he been born to different parents, chosen different friends and placed his trust in different people. He pondered all the decisions that he had made, which had led inextricably to his present circumstances, and which left him indifferent to all the mundane details of his life.

When he stopped caring, he could not have said, but the evidence of his apathy lay all around him. His apartment resembled Troy after battle, with books and newspapers slaughtered across his floor and soiled clothing tossed wherever he removed them as if from an army in hasty retreat. There were half-eaten meals, which he had abandoned in mid-digestion and which in their concealment he had forgotten to toss out, and on his walls hung artless posters, some newspaper clippings, and several weird prints, all unbalanced and misaligned.

In the midst of this chaos stood only one refuge of coherency: In the corner of the room sat a small walnut chest, polished and spotless. Inside its rigid walls, Jim protected his treasures, an unfinished novel, several college papers he seemed satisfied to keep, and a small locket he had worn as a baby. The locket occupied the place of honor in this shrine; it sat in its own case atop his novel. Years before he had locked the chest, and the key he misplaced somewhere in the clutter. He would have to dig through weeks of neglect in order to find it.

The alarm rang at eight o'clock and he struggled against waking. He growled as his arm searched aimlessly to turn off the earsplitting buzzer. In the shower he growled again as the hot water pulsated against his back. He preferred the water almost unbearably hot and steam filled the stall making it difficult to breathe. After thirty-five minutes, he emerged from the shower, war-weary and purified for another round of battle. As he shaved, he read the

words of a poster of Murphy's Law which hung on the bathroom wall. The words from the poster echoed like a mantra in his head, "Whatever can go wrong will go wrong."

He had learned the tough road of a struggling journalist. Moving from smaller papers to larger ones, he had been settling and unsettling in a spider's web across the northeast. Finally, he had accepted a permanent position as a staff reporter for a small daily paper. In this city of 200,000, true journalism seemed an impossible fantasy. He covered small town news when once he dreamed of being a network commentator.

Jim spent ten minutes searching for his shoes beneath clothing and newspapers before he remembered he had left them in the kitchen sink. "I should clean this up," he said to himself. But he was rushed this morning with a story to cover. He pinned a press badge on his collar and combed his hair. This day he would cover his first real story: Nigel was coming to Hadleyburg.

The city was a furor of activity this humid morning. From children waiting impatiently for ever-tardy buses, to the cacophony of traffic noises as people hurried to work at factories, Hadleyburg was filled to overflowing with Americana, with its specialty shops, its variety stores, and fast food franchises, all strung as pearls along the main drag. At the end of the drag was a town square around which Carver Avenue was wrapped as a comforter. Nelson Carver had been mayor in Hadleyburg for twenty-two years until his untimely death at sixty-seven from cancer. In Hadleyburg, four streets and six buildings bore his name.

In the center of the square sat City Hall, a monument to the kind of Romanesque architecture in vogue at the turn of the century. The town founders had built it in red brick with a gaudy dome on top. Atop its dome waved an American flag and beneath it dangled the state flag, fold upon fold. Both were worn from twenty years continuous use. Across from City Hall stood the post office and behind it was the Carver Civic Center built as a memorial on the tenth anniversary of the mayor's death, and behind it was the newspaper, "The Hadleyburg Times," which boasted on its marquis "Circulation of 100,000. Serving best as the town deserves." Here Jim eked out his meager existence writing whatever his editor dictated. He had covered everything from city elections and the town's annual strawberry festival, to a referendum to fluoridate the town's drinking water. This day Reynolds dictated that he covered Nigel, who would be speaking at the civic center at 11:00 that morning. A crowd was expected to meet him.

At eight thirty, people had already begun to gather around the ticket booths

to purchase fifteen-dollar tickets to hear him speak. Others had come to speak before, but no one like Nigel. Hours before, the network news had arrived with their vans. A legion of journalists armed with cameras and microphones loitered impatiently, hoping to ambush him as soon as he arrived. Mayor McGovern had requested assistance from the state police and they were dispersed in key positions around the square. Thousands were expected to fill the square, some in protest, others pledging complete loyalty to the enigmatic little man, and others who for only curiosity's sake sought to discover what the commotion was about. They came for a multitude of reasons. Rumors of his healing a small child in Cleveland and of his gift of foresight in helping a young widow find her son were told and retold among his admirers, no matter how much he tried to dismiss them. At a time when technology seemed more god than servant, many longed for something to believe in, and Nigel inspired profound hope in them. Sociologists and psychologists tried to explain it, but all their speculation proved unconvincing.

In Baltimore, three months before, a young woman was overtaken by police as she struggled to reach him. Screaming, "Let me touch him or I'll die," she kicked and twisted against overwhelming opposition and jumped on stage into Nigel's arms. Trembling in surprise, Nigel held her while she cried uncontrollably. Because of incidents such as this, the sponsors of Nigel's appearances instituted stringent security procedures wherever he spoke.

By ten o'clock the crowds were beginning to grow around the square; they looked like patches of wild flowers in bloom. Those near the doors resembled a high school football team in forward formation. The goal line became the double doors at the front of the auditorium. Jim arrived at 10:15 as a second string running back trying to fight his way through the defensive line. He made it as far as the ticket booths before being pulled out of bounds.

"Jim," a voice called to him. "Over here."

Burgess Kingman, holding a camera in his hand, pulled him behind the ticket booths.

"I tried calling you last night. Don't you answer your phone any more?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Reynolds gave me a list of a few points he wanted you to emphasize in your copy."

"I know how to write a news story."

"He's not telling you what to write. He just wants you to understand the paper's position on this?"

"Alright, let me see it."

Burgess handed him a small piece of paper which he glanced at a moment then folded and put in his pocket.

“Maybe I’m missing something, Burg. There must be four thousand people here. What’s the attraction?”

“People want to believe in something.”

“Hell, I’d like to believe in something, but you have to grow up and face reality someday. You’re born, you suffer, you die. That’s the cycle of life.”

“How long have you been in this mood?”

“I stay in this mood.” He paused. “I hate this town. I hate everything about it, from the courthouse to that gazebo over there. (He pointed to the town square.) God, I want out of here.”

“Calm down, Jim.”

“Calm down? Hell, I haven’t even started yet. What’s wrong with these people? This is the twentieth century. You can’t be chasing after everyone who sets himself up as a prophet. People like this Nigel just raise people’s expectations only to destroy them. It makes me sick.”

His friend began to snicker nervously and shake his head.

“We’ve got a little time,” Burgess acknowledged, looking at his watch. “Would you like to get a bite to eat?”

“Yeah, I could use a cup of coffee.”

The two men forced their way through the wall of people until they found sanctuary in a small coffee shop at the corner of the square. Once inside Jim groaned in relief as they both sat down in a small booth near the front windows. A waitress approached them to take their order, but before she could speak, they could see through the windows that a fight had broken out between Nigel’s detractors and his supporters and the state police were attempting to disperse and separate them. Two men were exchanging punches a few feet from the storefront and the patrons had arisen from their seats to watch them through the windows. Jim also approached the windows.

“Sometimes I think the whole world’s gone mad,” he turned to Burgess and told him. “I pray that I’ll wake up some morning and this will all be some horrible dream and I’ll be someone else.”

“I thought you weren’t a praying man,” Burgess rebutted.

The waitress returned to their table to take their orders.

“What can I get you both?” she asked them.

“I just want a cup of coffee,” Jim responded.

“I’ll take a couple of eggs scrambled and some toast.” He paused. “You know you shouldn’t report on an empty stomach.”

The waitress returned a few minutes later with Jim's cup of coffee and Burgess's plate. Jim downed the coffee in three huge gulps, while Burgess meticulously cut his eggs and toast with a fork and knife.

"Everything important in life is in the details," he said as he put the first bite into his mouth. Jim watched him as he cut each piece with a surgeon's precision and methodically chewed and swallowed them.

The waitress brought the check, which Burgess graciously agreed to pay. Then both of them left the coffee shop to fight their way back across the square.

"We should probably start making our way into the auditorium," Burgess said while looking at his watch. "You write a few words and I take a few pix and it will all be over before we know it."

After making adjustments to his camera, Burgess disappeared into the crowd. Then Jim stood motionless as he stared into the square. It was saturated with humanity. Before his eyes was Hadleyburg in microcosm, and a perplexing uneasiness came over him when he looked across the crowd. Soon the doors opened, and parents with children, the affluent and the poor, pulsed through the doors into the auditorium. They came to see what others had seen and heard—Nigel. Jim walked in formation with the rest of them, though he told himself that he was not one of them. Despising extremists of any persuasion, he found Nigel's critics as nauseating as his fans were maudlin. He wished to walk a tightrope of moderation against what he saw as the strong winds of public caprice. He was determined not to be affected by anything that he might experience inside.

When he entered the huge double doors to the auditorium, he was almost deafened by the noise of the audience. He put his fingers in his ears to make it more bearable. Leaning his shoulder against a metal support beam, he could feel it vibrate from the noise of the crowd. Even with his finger in his ears the sound was unnerving and made it difficult for him to concentrate.

"A little loud isn't it?" Burgess shouted in Jim's ear.

"A little. This must be what hell is like."

"I've got some news for you. Guess who's here."

"I don't know."

"Julie. She's standing on the other side of the auditorium."

"Then I've gotta go."

"Come on, Guy. It took me fifteen minutes to find you and I was looking. She'll never in a million years spot you in this crowd."

"Where's she sitting?"

“On the left side three rows from the end.”

“Let me see your camera a second.”

Burgess handed him the camera and said, “Be careful with it. It’s brand new.”

Jim scanned the auditorium through its lens until he found her sitting where Burgess had seen her. She sat quietly with her hands folded across her lap and with her brunette hair pinned back behind her head. She turned her head to look around the room and Jim dropped the camera to his side.

“You’re right. She’s here. I can’t let her see me here.”

“You can’t keep running from this girl forever. Worse comes to worst you can wear a paper bag over your head.”

“I’m not running away from her. But she’s the last person I want to see right now.”

“Hey, it’s not my life. But if I thought I had to confront her sooner or later, I’d rather get it over with now.”

“It’s not your life.”

Burgess took the camera back and disappeared into the crowd as suddenly as he had appeared. Jim retreated and hid himself behind a pillar.

The houselights began to dim and the curtain at the front of the auditorium slowly opened. Two tables sat on stage, one near the front and the other a few feet behind it. On each of the tables sat a vase with a single red rose. A microphone stood at the center of the stage with a dim light above it. Nigel sat at the rear table with his hands cupped on his face, hiding his nose and mouth. Jim couldn’t keep from staring at him.

“Is this the man they’re making such a fuss about?” he asked himself. “He looks so sad.”

Dressed in a white shirt and gray slacks, Nigel carried his eighty years well. Yet he hardly looked the part of prophet or seer. There seemed something strangely familiar about this aging little man.

James Jamison and Governor Michael Wilson were sitting at the front table. They looked like what they were: businessman and politician. Jamison got up and moved toward the microphone.

“I think it’s about time we began,” he said. “Nigel isn’t feeling well, but he’s agreed to talk for a little while.”

He turned to Nigel and nodded. With an expression of what seemed like pain, Nigel pushed himself up from the table and limped slightly on the left leg as he walked toward the microphone.

“They tell me there’s four thousand of you here, and even more outside.”

His voice was hoarse. "I can't for the life of me figure out why you're here. Go home. You must have other things to do."

"What's he doing?" Jamison said, as though taken by surprise.

"I've been all over this fair land of ours on these talks and everywhere I go people come to me for solace. I'm not God."

Jim noticed that Jamison and Wilson were leaning over to each other and whispering as Nigel was speaking. He couldn't stop watching their lips that he might catch what they were saying. But the lights were too dim and they were too far away from him. He could only make out a word or two.

"I think there are some things you ought to know," Nigel began to speak more forcefully. At this moment the chatter between Wilson and Jamison seemed more frenetic, and if not for what followed, they both shuffled hesitantly and seemed intent upon interrupting him. But then in mid-sentence, as Nigel was asking the crowd why they came, his legs grew weak; he grabbed the back of his neck and he collapsed in a resounding thud on the wooden platform.

This scene was not what Jim expected, and like the others he stood motionless with his gaze fixed on the stage. Wilson had jumped up from his seat and was checking Nigel for a pulse.

"Is there a doctor here?" he shouted through the microphone with a profound sense of urgency. Taking off his jacket, Wilson rolled it up into a ball and placed it under Nigel's head. He loosened Nigel's shirt and took his shoes off his feet. Burgess stood next to the stage and took one picture after another of the drama as it unfolded.

"Damn," Jim could hear him say. "What a story."

For what seemed almost an eternity the crowd gasped silently until a doctor emerged from the audience and began to examine Nigel. After a few seconds of examination, he said, "It's not a heart attack."

"What is it then?" Michael Wilson asked him.

"I don't know yet. Has someone called an ambulance?"

Jamison left the stage to get a phone.

"Is he a diabetic?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Wilson answered him.

In the heat of the moment, without even realizing it, Jim had moved from behind the pillar and was standing near the front of the auditorium. Julie, who was standing only a few yards away, discovered him. A smile covered her face and the skin around her brown eyes wrinkled. But she forced a more serious demeanor and tried not to betray that she noticed him. An ambulance

arrived a few minutes later and two paramedics carried Nigel away on a stretcher. The whine of the siren had ended what had been anticipated as a “media event.”

When the excitement subsided, Julie began to look expectantly for Jim, but he had disappeared as suddenly as she had discovered him.

“Julie,” Burgess startled her as he spoke. “It’s good to see a familiar face in this hole in the wall town.”

“Oh, Burgess. You’re here too.”

She hugged him.

“Yeah. Me and Jimmy boy, we’re both trapped in historic Hadleyburg.”

“I saw him. How is he?”

“A real mess. Dumbest thing he ever did was push you out of his life.”

Her lips turned down into a frown, but she forced a smile.

“You look well, Burgess.”

“I’m surviving. But how about you?”

“Jim would be proud of me. I’m working as an editor at Newsmaker magazine.” She paused. “So much has changed, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’m losing my hair. “He rubbed his hands through his thinning scalp.” But I guess everything changes. But what brings you here?”

“I came to see my father.” (Julie’s father was James Jamison, one of the men who sponsored Nigel’s talks.)

“I’m going to the hospital in a second. Why don’t you come with me?”

“Won’t Jim get upset?”

“Probably. But he’s in a real rut right now. It wouldn’t hurt him to get a little upset.”

“No, Burgess. It’s not the right time. But you can tell him I said ‘hello.’”

She hugged him again and then she too disappeared into the crowd.

