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CHAPTER TWENTY: The Idiot Safari

Austin nodded. "Well, I've got some contacts. I'll get on the phone and start –" He interrupted himself, and a look of alarm came over his face as he peered over Felix's shoulder at the television monitors in the back of the room.

"What's the matter?" Felix asked, whirling around.

"What the hell is happening to the noon show?"

Upstairs in B-Control, Carla, again filling in for Gladys, was asking the same thing. The kicker package Delbert had just introduced had played for only about five seconds before the picture began to flip and roll.

The director, Rufus Atkins, reached forward and pressed an intercom button. "Master, what's the deal?"

"Sorry," came a muffled voice over the speaker. "The cart machine just crapped out." The video cart carousel in Master Control was the playback unit for network newsfeed material; its failure meant the taped report Delbert had just introduced was dead. The malfunction also put the next commercial break in jeopardy, since the same unit was used to play back the spots.

"F*!k," Carla swore, glancing at the clock. "We're way short. Fade to black and stand by on Camera One." She reached forward and flipped open the IFB channel. "Okay, Delbert, listen up. The kicker package just got eaten. We'll be coming out, and we've still got more than a minute to fill. We'll take a two-shot of you and Freddie. Apologize for the problem, then yuck it up with Freddie for a minute. Got it?"

Carla looked up at the Camera One monitor and saw Delbert nod. "Okay, Rufus," she said, but director was already fading up from black.

"Sorry 'bout that, folks," Delbert said, grinning idiotically. "Technical problem – the machine just ate the tape. Happens all the time. So that about wraps it up for us!"

"Son of a *bitch!*" Carla glanced at the clock. They were still 65 seconds short. "Stretch him!" She opened the IFB again. "*Fill*, Delbert!" she shouted so loudly that Delbert visibly flinched. He then reached up and yanked the IFB plug out of his ear.

"We'll see you tomorrow," he said, still grinning. "Good afternoon."

"Roll the close cart!" Atkins barked urgently into the headset. "Give me a wide shot on Two! Hold it!" The shot steadied up; he took it.

Carla sat back, shaking her head in awed disbelief. The TBC soap opera scheduled to air at 12:30 PM would not begin for another minute. But there were only 30 seconds of music on the closing audio cart, which Atkins had just rolled early. When it ran out, they'd be left with a 30 second hole, and they had no immediate way to fill it other than with Dead Air. Dead Air – defined as a segment of transmitter signal time devoid of audio and meaningful video – was widely considered to be one of the worst possible mortal sins in broadcasting.

"Better have Master Control cue up a commercial, Rufus," she said.

Atkins leaned forward and opened a switch on the intercom. "Master, we may need to throw it to you early. Can you give me a 30-second spot?"

After a brief delay, a hesitant voice answered. "Uh, the cart machine's jammed solid. We're workin' on it."

"Well, how about the spot reel?" The engineers normally kept a daily videotape reel of commercials on stand-by just for emergencies like this one. The problem is, the reel usually wasn't up to date, and had to be manually cued to the right spot, which is why the control room staff was now working desperately to get the cart machine back on line.

"Rufus, we're kind of up to our asses right now," the engineer said plaintively. "I can have it for you in a couple of minutes."

"Well, hell," Carla said. "That won't help. Better have 'em get an ID or trouble slide ready. Something. Anything." She leaned forward. "No. Wait a minute. *Would you look at that asshole?*"

Delbert, having signed them off prematurely and now having nothing further to do except sit there on camera while the closing theme music played, again was using his "air pencil" to look busy. Because the front panel of the news desk rose about four inches above the desktop, the actual surface of the desk could not be seen from the vantage point of Camera Two, which was taking the wide shot. To the home viewer, who could see only the tops of Delbert's hands and the end of his pencil bobbing in the air, it appeared that he was scribbling away, writing notes to himself about the newscast or possibly jotting down ideas for follow-up coverage. Only the floor crew and those in B-Control knew different.

Carla turned to Atkins with a gleam in her eye. "Rufus! Reckon Camera Three can swing around and get us a down-the-desk shot?"

Atkins looked up at the Camera Three monitor; Eugene had overheard Carla's question over the headset and was already in motion. Ten seconds later, the shot was ready.

Atkins turned to Carla, grinning. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Carla gave him an evil grin. "Absolutely."

Atkins nodded. "Ready Camera Three. Take."

The home viewers were now treated to a shot that was completely different from what they'd been seeing before. Now they were observing Delbert from a vantage point to his left, about two feet above the level of the desktop and looking down its length. It was now quite plain to everyone that Delbert had no notepad nor any document of any kind on the desk in front of him, and in fact was tracing little circles in the air with his pencil, the tip of which danced about an inch above the bare, red-painted surface of the news desk. Oblivious to what was happening, Delbert "scribbled" furiously onward.

Freddy Ferguson, sitting to Delbert's right, noticed this revelation first. He did a double-take of the floor monitor and then turned around to look at Eugene, who was standing next to Camera Three with a big grin on his face. At that point, Freddy fell out, laughing and hooting.

This caused Delbert to look up. He glanced quizzically at Freddy, who was now positively howling with laughter.

Then Delbert caught sight of himself in the floor monitor. His reaction was immediate. Delbert got up and exited stage right, stumbling briefly as he navigated the tight space behind the mirth-filled weatherman, which caused the latter to laugh even harder. Delbert left so fast he forgot to unclip his microphone; it tore loose, leaving a ragged hole in his 30-dollar silk tie.

By now, the floor crew and those in B-Control were in a state similar to that of their weatherman. Wiping the tears from his eyes, Atkins punched up a Camera One close-up of Freddy, who was now slapping and pounding the desk in absolute glee.

As predicted, the music cart ran out with 30 seconds left before the start of the upcoming soap opera; the network was still in black. "Give me Freddy's mike up full," Atkins ordered.

Freddy, an otherwise bland and unassuming elderly weather anchor, thus had the starring role in the final 30 seconds of the program, as the home audience was treated to the full force of his bellowing laughter.

In the newsroom, total pandemonium had erupted. The humiliation of Delbert had turned out to be a cathartic experience; most people were doubled over laughing. Even among the less demonstrative, no one was keeping a straight face. The exception, of course, was Boyd, who was storming about in full outrage. But even Felix, who had just lost his job and thus would not have seemed to be a prime candidate for either mirth or merriment, had tears streaming down both cheeks.

Delbert walked into the newsroom, smiling nervously. "Pretty funny, huh?" he asked, looking around uncertainly, eagerly seeking acceptance. "That was pretty good, wasn't it?"

Gordon Gates happened to be walking by; he clapped Delbert on the shoulder hard enough to nearly bowl the man over. "It was – how should I put this? – a true golden, timeless, classic moment in television, one that will no doubt stand the test of time."

"That's good, then, huh?"

Gates smiled. "It's gonna make one hell of an addition to someone's blooper reel."

Delbert, not realizing the implications of what Gates had said, laughed.

Boyd was standing in the doorway to his office, his hands hovering at his blue-jeaned hips, looking like nothing so much as a gunfighter poised at the ready. "Delbert!" he shouted. "Get your ass in here!"

"Take your KY, Delbert!" came a voice from the other end of the room.

Boyd whirled around. "Goddammit, who said that!" he demanded. But a new round of roaring laughter drowned him out.

Boyd started to shout his demand again, but thought better of it. He motioned Delbert into his office and shut the door.

For the next few minutes, the sounds of muffled shouting punctuated by the occasional thump of a fist on a desk blotter could be heard emanating from the closed office, and Boyd could be seen through the window wildly gesticulating and repeatedly jabbing his finger in Delbert's direction. Delbert apparently was saying nothing as he sat before Boyd's desk with his back to the inner window, hanging his head in shame.

"I'd say it sucks to be him right now," Felix observed.

"Let's wait a few minutes," Austin said phlegmatically, "and then we'll see."

"I'll be right back." Felix stepped over to Booth Five. As he suspected, a regular assembly line was in progress; Steinberg was dubbing off the final part of the noon aircheck for anyone who wanted a copy. Demand was high.

"Hey, Steinberg, let me have one of those, will ya?" Felix asked.

"Sure," Steinberg said, smiling. "Twenty bucks."

"Blow me blue for twenty bucks," Felix objected. "Come on. Be a pal...."

"No problem." Steinberg popped the tape that had been rewinding in the record machine and tossed it to him. "Compliments of the house."

"Thanks."

Felix returned to his desk with the tape in hand. Austin was still standing there, unobtrusively keeping an eye on the activity in Boyd's office while pretending to scan a long sheet of wire copy he was holding. Just then Boyd's door opened, and Delbert emerged, now looking smug as he headed for the newsroom exit.

"Uh, oh," Austin said, observing Delbert's expression. "That can't be good."

Felix raised his eyebrows. "He doesn't exactly present the properly admonished and contrite appearance of a child just back from a trip to the woodshed, does he?"

Boyd stepped out into the newsroom. "Regina! Austin!" he bellowed. "Get in here!"

Austin rolled his eyes and blew out his cheeks. "Here it comes...."

"Don't leave yet," Austin said. "I'll be right back."

Austin walked off toward Boyd's office.... Within minutes, Austin had returned. "How did it go?" Felix asked.

"Bad," Austin said with a look of chagrin. "Boyd is sending me and Regina on an idiot safari."

"'Idiot safari?' What do you mean by that?"

"An idiot hunt." Seeing Felix's still-puzzled expression, Austin continued. "Let me see if I can summarize." He began ticking off his fingers. "Boyd wants to know what idiot or idiots took that final camera shot live on air, or ordered it taken, and whether they did it on purpose. If it wasn't deliberate, he wants to know why none of the idiots in B-Control noticed what was happening on camera before they took the shot. He wants to know what idiot of a cameraman would frame such a shot in the first place. He wants to know why, having taken the shot, the idiots in B-Control left it up, and the idiots in Master Control didn't say anything. Let's see, what else –" Austin paused, and then ticked off another finger. "He wants to know what idiot failed to properly time the newscast, causing it to come up so short. He wants to know what idiot failed to properly supervise the idiot who failed to properly time the newscast. And he wants to know what idiot failed to properly train, mentor, and coach the idiot who failed to properly supervise the idiot who failed to properly time the newscast." Austin looked up, silently moving his lips and rubbing the tips of his fingers together as if scanning a mental checklist. "Oh," he said, snapping his fingers, "and he wants to know what idiot put only 30 seconds of music on the closing audio cart, and what idiot in Master Control failed to keep the backup reel cued." He looked at the ceiling again, then nodded and returned his gaze to Felix. "Yeah, I think that about covers it. Regina and I are supposed to go out on safari and have the idiot meat bagged, tagged, and laid out by name in a report due on Boyd's desk at 3:00 PM – *today*."

"I see," Felix said, pulling his chin and looking thoughtful. "But conspicuously absent from Boyd's list is any inquiry into what idiot on the anchor desk signed off the newscast a full minute early, and then sat there playing with himself on camera."

"You are correct, astute sir. Your powers of observation do you credit."

Felix nodded, keeping a straight face. "You are too kind. So let me make sure I've got this straight. The well-known idiot who predictably acted like an idiot is not the idiot. The idiot who hired the idiot is not the idiot. Instead, the idiots who witnessed the idiot being an idiot are the idiots."

Austin laughed. "I believe that summarizes the situation quite succinctly."

Felix gave a low whistle. "'The Idiot Safari,'" he said in awed tones. "That is some kind of deal."

"Ain't it grand? Under the ground rules of The Idiot Safari, everybody's an idiot except the idiot and the Idiot-in-Chief who hired him. It takes The Blame Game to a whole new level."

"*New level?*" Felix shook his head. "That's like saying the atomic bomb took the firecracker to a new level. Nay, my friend. This is an entirely new *concept* – a bold, innovative, visionary leap forward in the evolution of managerial science." Felix cast an admiring glance in the direction of Boyd's office. "Most people live their entire lives without contributing anything of lasting value to the human endeavor. The Idiot Safari may well be Boyd's lasting legacy."

"Yeah," Austin said ruefully. "The thing is, though, he may actually have a point. There is just no way in the world Carla and Rufus took that camera shot by accident. Clearly they were trying to stick it up Delbert's butt. I don't know how in the world I'm going to dance around that in the report."

"Good luck with that." Felix patted Austin's shoulder. "Austin, I've just got to tell you, I haven't been at this place long enough to say that I'll miss it. But I *have* been here long enough to say that I won't."

Austin laughed. "Somehow, I know exactly what you mean."

Felix snapped the locks shut on his briefcase, picked it up, and tucked the video tape Steinberg had given him under his arm.

"Look," Austin said, "let's get together tonight and drink our troubles away."

Felix smiled and shook his head. "I've got to be with Anita tonight. Maybe this weekend?"

"Okay," Austin said. "This weekend for sure, then."

Felix nodded. He was about to turn and walk toward the back door when he caught Boyd's eye through his office window. "Hey, Dick!" Felix said in a loud voice, holding up the dub Steinberg had just given him. "I want to thank you for this! I find it to be a fascinating demonstration of the quality and credibility of your recruitment, retention, and promotion practices here at Channel Six. And I think a jury will agree, don't you?"

A stunned silence fell over the newsroom. Scowling, Boyd began to get up from his desk. But Felix did not wait for a response. He was already gone.

Arrow missed the excitement, having left the station to take a lunch break. He made use of the opportunity to place a call to the police department. With a fine sense of synchronicity, he placed the call from a pay phone at The Box, the hamburger joint where he and Lipscombe had held their first meeting. Arrow was calling from a pay phone rather than from the newsroom for one simple reason: he did not want any of his fellow employees to overhear the story he was working on, a lesson he had learned the hard way his first year in Knoxville. He was calling from The Box rather than from someplace else because he'd developed a powerful craving for one of its greasy cheeseburgers. Once again, he'd thoroughly enjoyed his lunch even though, in the back of his mind, he knew each bite probably took a day off his life.

"I'm sorry," came the voice of the secretary. "Chief Hoffman is not available. You need to contact the PIO office."

"Look –" Arrow started to say, but the phone clicked dead. Angrily, Arrow redialed. "Chief Hoffman's office," the secretary answered.

"Look, you –" Arrow stopped himself from saying something he knew he'd regret. "Read my lips. This is Ar-row Hen-ley. I'm sure the chief has mentioned my name; not only do I want to talk to him, he wants to talk to me. I suggest you connect me immediately."

There was no response, but there came that familiar sound on the line that was neither existence nor non-existence; he'd been put on hold.

Moments later, Hoffman clicked on. "Henley, what the hell did you say to my secretary?" he demanded.

"Certainly not what I *wanted* to say. She cut me off and hung up on me; I had to call back."

"*Hummph*. Carlene does tend to be rather overprotective at times."

"Forget it. What have you got for me?"

"Nothing yet. I need some more time."

Arrow was not surprised; he'd anticipated a stall. "Let's talk about it. What have you done so far?"

"Mr. Henley, at this point I'm really not at liberty to say. But I assure you, I'm working on it."

"Chief, if you want me to hold off on this story another day, you're going to have to give me more than that."

Hoffman hesitated.

"Throw me some tidbits," Arrow prodded. "What's in those police reports you're sitting on?"

"Okay. I will share something with you off the record, as long as you promise me you won't tell a soul until I give the okay."

"I can promise I'll sit on it unless I also get it from some other source. How's that?"

"Not good enough. If you release this information prematurely, it could hobble the investigation. I'm only offering to tell you because you have a gun to my head. But if you agree to keep it to yourself for now, then you can have it on the record as an exclusive later."

"You'll agree to an exclusive on camera interview?"

"When we make an arrest. Yeah."

Arrow decided to take the leap. "Okay. Deal. What is it?"

"Someone planted condoms on five of the bodies, apparently as some kind of message or calling card."

"Really?" Arrow said, pretending that he hadn't already heard this. "That definitely points to a serial killer or killers. Why have you kept this from the public?"

"Mr. Henley, I'll be happy to give you a lecture on police procedures and investigative techniques and protocols some day if you really want to hear it. For now, suffice it to say, a bit of secrecy helps us catch criminals – and, more importantly, to convict them. So I'm going to hold you to your promise to keep quiet about this until we make an arrest."

"I'll make a note to debate you about the public's right to know at a later date. Meanwhile, you have my word. What else can you tell me?"

"We think he was stealing vehicles and using them to commit the crimes. We recovered a van and a pickup that matched witness descriptions of vehicles seen at two of the crime scenes. In both cases, scratches on the window wells and on the lock linkages inside the door point to use of a slim jim or something like it to get in. The thief then broke out the ignition locks."

"So are we dealing with a professional car thief here?"

"Not necessarily. Slim jims aren't that hard to come by. And anyone with a screwdriver, hammer, and pry bar can defeat an ignition lock. Especially on GM cars. Your grandmother could probably do it."

"Okay," Arrow continued. "Any prints?"

"Plenty, but not of the thief. Two witnesses saw the gunman wearing latex gloves, which would explain that."

"Did anyone get a description?"

"Yeah, but useless. The witnesses only got brief glimpses. White or Hispanic male. Medium build. Maybe five ten, maybe six. Maybe mid 20's. Maybe mid 30's. One thought he saw a mustache. The other thought he didn't."

"Ballistics?"

"We got matches in three of the murders, .38 Specials fired from the same handgun."

"What about the other cases?"

"One other murder also involved a .38, but the bullet was too mangled to test. Two involved two different types of handguns. No bullet or casing was recovered in the Blue case or the Griggs case, but judging from the damage, it could have been a .38."

"Okay. What else?"

"Five of the victims – Meeks, Jones, Griggs, Hall, and Smith – had sex offenses on their rap sheets."

"That's interesting. What about Bryan Blue?"

"Plenty of priors, but no sex offenses."

Arrow paused, writing down the information on his notepad. "Let's talk about Newman. Was he connected to any of the victims by way of prior arrests or court cases, or in any other fashion that I don't already know about?"

Hoffman hesitated. "Not directly."

"But?" Arrow prompted.

"But he and his friend Larry Roberts pal around with patrolman Augey Balas."

Arrow's brow furrowed with concentration. "The name rings a bell, but I can't place it."

"Balas is the officer who improperly lifted that little black book, which led to Melvin Smith's release on a technicality."

"I see," Arrow said, now remembering the name from one of the newspaper articles. "The noose tightens."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Cops tend to hang out with cops. Nothing surprising about that. But _"

"Go on," Arrow prodded.

"I confronted Newman at the hospital. He denied everything, of course. But I think he knows something. If he does, knowing him like I do, I think he may crack. But I need a couple more days to work on him."

"When's he due to be released?"

"He got out this morning."

"Chief, I'll give you that couple of days if you'll do two things for me."

"We'll see. What?"

"One. You let me know as soon as something breaks. Two. You keep a real close eye on this character. I don't want him coming after me with the idea of adding another notch to his gun belt."

"You can rest assured of that. We'll have him staked out. It's part of the investigation."

"Okay. I'll be in touch." Arrow clicked off.

Arrow was to think back later, if only he'd really listened to the chief's final statement. He completely missed its implication.

Around 4:00 that afternoon, Austin was developing a massive, splitting headache, the kind that would get progressively worse and not go away with anything less than a good night's sleep. *At least*, he thought, *the day is almost over and I can go home*. He was walking to the newsroom door with the intention of heading down the hall and liberating another packet of Pain-Aids from the First Aid box mounted on the wall in engineering when Earl intercepted him, wearing a large frown.

"I thought you were outta here," Austin said. "What's the problem?"

"As a matter of fact, I was halfway to the door. The reason I didn't make it is sitting in my office."

Austin looked over his shoulder; Delbert was seated at the assignments desk with his coat on, listening to the scanners.

He turned back to Earl. "All right, I give up. What's going on?"

"You won't believe me if I tell you," Earl said, looking disgusted. "He wants a shooter and a live operator to go cover the chicken story."

Austin laughed outright, and then immediately put his hand to his head. "Oh, that hurt." He rubbed his forehead momentarily, and then looked back up at Earl. "So you're kidding, right?"

Earl just looked at him.

Austin's smile vanished. "You're *not* kidding."

Earl slowly shook his head.

Austin shrugged. "All right, so we've proved once and for all that Delbert is the world's biggest goober. Why don't you just go explain to him that you're the assignment editor, that he is not, and that his proposed story – which he's stealing from another reporter, by the way – is a joke?"

"That's the problem," Earl said, looking unhappy. "Apparently it's not *his* story at this point, *or* Elliot's. It's Boyd's."

Austin's temples throbbed with renewed vigor. "Oh, s*!t," he said, rubbing the sides of his head. "I really don't want to deal with this."

"Yeah, but that's why you get paid the huge, hairy bucks."

"They're more like the medium, peach-fuzzy bucks." Still rubbing his head, Austin walked into the assignments office.

Delbert beamed at him. "Hey, dude!" he greeted him. "What's up?"

"What's this deal about needing a live crew to go cover the chicken story, Delbert?" Austin asked wearily.

"Oh," Delbert shrugged. "Nothing, really. I showed the boss the sheriff's report. I thought he'd get a yuk out of it. But wants me to do a story on it."

Austin stared at him disbelievingly. "He wants *you* to do it."

"Yeah. Well, I kinda mentioned that I wouldn't mind."

Austin turned to Earl, who'd followed him into the office. "Earl, who do we have available in the way of photogs?"

"Austin, we don't have *anybody* available. Everyone's out. They've all got stories for the Five and Six."

"Okay." Austin closed his eyes, continuing to rub his temples. "I don't know what I did in a prior life to deserve this day, but it must have been massive." He walked out in the direction of Boyd's office.

"Boss?" he said, sticking his head through the doorway. "We've got a problem."

Looking irritated, Boyd glanced up from the document on his desk. "No, *you* have a problem." He tapped the memo on the desk in front of him. "This report I asked you and Regina to write was turned in late and incomplete."

Austin closed his eyes and took a long, slow breath, idly wondering what it would cost to have someone's kneecaps broken, and how one would go about finding the right person to do the job.

"Are you okay?" Boyd asked. "You look like hell."

"I'm okay," Austin said. "Headache. But thanks for asking." He pointed to Boyd's desk. "Boss, if you don't mind, can we deal with that memo a little later? Something urgent has come up."

"What is it?"

"Well, this story Delbert wants to do. We've already made all of our assignments for the evening shows, and everyone's out. Besides, we discussed this story in the morning meeting, and we all agreed that –"

"Wait a minute. You knew about this story this *morning*?"

"Well, yes, and we decided –"

Boyd cast Austin a look of extreme annoyance. "Then why the hell didn't you get off your dead asses and do something about it *then*?"

Austin's head now felt so close to exploding that he had to resist an urge to warn Boyd to stand back, lest he be covered with gore. Momentarily, he pictured what Boyd might look like with bits of shredded flesh, clumps of blood-matted hair, tiny fragments of skull, and small grey globs of brain matter sliding down his face, marking Boyd's irritating holier-than-thou expression with glistening crimson snail trails. The image was so vivid, and the imagined look of utter astonishment on Boyd's bespattered face was so comical, that Austin had to summon a mighty effort of will to keep from giggling. "Sorry, Dick," he said, one cheek slightly trembling as he struggled to keep a straight face and maintain an even tone, "but we all thought it would be rank sensationalism to cover such a story."

Boyd's face was now turning a deep shade of red. Austin braced himself for a verbal assault. But instead, Boyd took a deep breath, leaned back in his chair, and propped his boots up on the desk. "All right," he said. "I suppose it's my fault. I haven't had a chance yet to sit down and talk with you, Earl, and Regina, and explain the facts of TV life to you."

Oh, joy and rapture, Austin thought, his head pounding. *A Boyd lecture. Just what I was hoping for right now.* Still, he had to admit it was better than a reaming. He relaxed against the doorframe.

"The problem with this station's editorial team," Boyd was saying, "is that you don't really assess your daily assignments from the standpoint of ratings. Instead, you tend to plan the coverage according to what stories you think are most 'important' to the audience. Journalistically, that's commendable. But we're in television. That kind of strategy won't work for us. We have to learn to think differently."

Austin nodded. "*Just say no to journalism*," he thought. *What a crock.*

"The fact is," Boyd explained, "the TV news audience doesn't always care about what's important. It does, however, care about what's *interesting*. Austin, do you have any idea what makes an audience watch television news?"

Austin did have his own theories, of course, about the various drivers of TV news viewership – not the least of which was the news consumer's simple desire to find out what's going on in the neighborhood, city, state, nation, hemisphere, world, galaxy, and universe. But obviously, the question was rhetorical, and no answer was required or wanted. Austin shook his head – gently, to keep his nitroglycerin brain from sloshing around in his throbbing skull.

"Well, it boils down to three factors: weather, sex, and violence. We do an okay job with the weather, although we're going to get better. But my observation over the last few days is that the stories this team puts on the air just aren't *vaginal* enough."

Austin looked at him blankly.

"Every newscast recipe needs its daily tidbit of titillation," Boyd continued. "A sprinkle of scandal. A dash of danger. A pinch of the prurient. If you don't sex it up at least a little, people won't watch."

"But if you do," Austin pointed out, "they complain."

"That's only if you throw it in their faces. The key is in the *packaging*. Take this chicken story – if you were to lead your newscast with it, obviously that would be rank sensationalism just as you said, and the switchboard would light up. But if you put it lower down, say the B-block, it doesn't look like you're taking it so seriously. Meanwhile, you tease the hell out of it in advance. That's the ticket. We get the story on, the ratings pop, and it doesn't look like we're salivating all over ourselves in the process. Understand what I'm saying?"

Austin nodded. "Okay," he said dubiously. "That still leaves us with a practical problem, though. All of our crews have been assigned, and they're out on stories."

Boyd took his feet off the desktop and sat up. "Don't bother me with the details. Just get the story." He turned his attention back to the paperwork on his desk.

Obviously, Austin had been dismissed. "Yes, sir," he said.

Austin went straight to Regina's office. He knocked on the open door and went in.

"What the hell do you want?" she demanded, scowling up at him from her desk.

"Regina, I need your help." He laid out the issues with the story Delbert wanted to cover.

"And you explained all this to Dick?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And what did he say?"

Austin locked eyes with her. "He said our stories need more vagina."

Regina recoiled as if Austin had poked her with a sharp stick. "He said *what*?"

Austin held his hand up. "As God is my judge. That was the word he used. Boyd told me that we need to spice up our coverage – 'sex it up,' he said. He told me to get the story on the air and not to bother him with the details."

Regina shook her head. "For the love of *God*."

"Well, what do we do now?" Austin prodded.

She shook her head as if to clear it. "What do you mean *we*? *You* have a story to assign. *I* have work to do." She began shuffling the papers atop her blotter.

Austin put his hands on his hips, incredulous. "I can't believe you're going to sit there and do nothing!"

"I'm *not* doing nothing," she objected. "I have someone's annual evaluation to prepare, which I'm late with thanks to that idiotic report we had to drop everything and write this afternoon." She picked up her pen. But, catching the look in Austin's eye, she paused and leaned back slightly. "Look," she continued in a softer tone, "I pulled my saber and drew a line in the sand with this lout two days ago over Delbert's incompetence. The result was that Boyd took my sword away, broke it over his knee, and then let Delbert walk while others took the fall. And I need not remind you about what happened today."

"No," Austin said sullenly. "You need not. And by the way, Boyd's not happy with the report."

She sighed. "Not surprising. Logic and reason do not work with Boyd, not where El Dorko from El Paso is concerned."

Austin threw up hands. "Well, what the hell are we going to do?"

"My advice: do what I'm doing. Sit back. Relax. Be patient. Sooner or later Boyd's little pet will implode or self-immolate. But for now, Delbert is untouchable. We have no choice other than to let the news director be the news director, wherever that takes us."

For a moment Austin glared at her. But then he nodded. "I suppose you're right. But it's one hell of a way to run a newsroom."

"Well?" Earl demanded when Austin rejoined him and Delbert in the assignments office. "So what's the scoop?"

"We cover the story and we like it," Austin said morosely. "That's what the scoop is."

"Damn it!" Earl grumbled, scowling. "How the hell am I supposed to do that with no crews?"

Austin peered up at the assignments board. "What if a jetliner were to crash into the First National Bank building downtown right this very minute. What would you do? Who's got a live unit?"

Earl stared at the board. "Well, I suppose I'd pull Colleen and Ezra off of the jail overcrowding live shot and send 'em to it. But—"

"No 'buts.' Just do it." Austin turned to Delbert. "This had better be the best f*!king story in the history of mankind."

Delbert grinned. "It will be."

"You know, Elliot is going to be really pissed," Earl said. "This was *his* tip."

"Earl, you let me worry about Elliot," Austin said. "Just make the call."

Earl glanced at his watch. "I'm off the clock." Earl stood and grabbed his jacket from off the back of his chair where he'd draped it.

"Earl, come on!" Austin objected, but he found himself talking to Earl's back as the man walked out the door.

"F*!k." Austin tried raising Steinberg on the radio but got no response. He dialed Steinberg's pager number and waited for the return call. It only took a moment. Austin told him to blow off the story he and Colleen were on and drive back to the station.

"Damn it, Austin," Colleen growled, taking the phone from Steinberg. "We've been working on this story all day. We were just about to wrap it up."

"Can't be helped," Austin said. "Something else has come up."

"What is it?"

"I'd rather not say over the phone," Austin said, knowing full well that if he did, chances were excellent that she'd point-blank refuse to come back. "Just come on in."

He hung up the phone. "Delbert, be waiting by the back door when Steinberg pulls up. We're getting a very late start on this story, so you're going to have to give it a quick turnaround if we're gonna get it on the Six. And, Delbert?"

"Yes?"

"Don't ball this one up, huh?"

Delbert obviously didn't know when to appear insulted. "Hey," he said cheerfully, grinning. "You're talking to The Kid!"

"No, Arrow's The Kid." Austin mumbled. "You're El Dorko."

"I beg your pardon?" Delbert asked, not having understood him.

"Never mind. Get out of here." At that, Austin went off to seek refuge in the break room.

It turned out not to be much of a refuge. Within five or six minutes, Colleen had tracked him down. She burst into the canteen, breathing fire. "Austin, goddamn you!" she shouted. "You've got a lot of f*!king nerve!"

Austin was not the only one in the room; a couple of sales assistants were taking a late coffee break, as was a small gaggle from the production crew. But all conversation stopped as everyone turned to stare at Colleen and Austin.

"Now, Colleen," he said, holding up a hand, "calm down –"

"Don't you tell me to calm me down, you asshole! We're the ones who broke this damned jail overcrowding story, and we've been following it for weeks! And now that something big finally develops, you pull me off because some guy *bangs a chicken*? I can't f*!king believe it!"

Austin, struggling to keep his cool, glanced meaningfully around the room. "Colleen, I don't think this is the place –"

"What, you don't want everyone else to hear *what a buffoon you are*?" she demanded, raising her voice for the last five words to a near-shout. "I can't say I blame you! But I'll tell you one damned thing –"

Austin's temper finally snapped. "Look, goddammit!" he snarled. "Back the f*!k off! It was not my f*!king decision!"

At that exact moment, a troop of Brownies who were in the station for a tour began filing past the canteen door on their way to the newsroom. Their leader, a prim housewife, turned to stare at Austin with eyes blazing behind sky blue horned-rim glasses. "I beg your pardon, sir!"

"Oh, my God," Austin said, clapping his hands to his face, which he could feel growing hot with embarrassment. "I am *so* sorry."

"Hmm," she sniffed, turning her head. "Not as sorry as you *will* be when your superiors hear of this. Mr. Sturges is a personal friend of mine." She turned to her troop. "Come along, girls. I think we've heard quite enough."

The sales assistants began talking to one another in excited whispers, but the reaction of the floor crew members was more to the point; they collapsed over the tabletops, heaving with silent laughter.

Austin looked at Colleen. "Thank you, Colleen," he said quietly, "so very f*!king much."

One hour and four Pain-Aids later, Austin could not feel his toes, but his headache was as bad as ever. He was silently languishing in the assignments office when Gordon walked in.

"Hey, Austin, where's Regina?"

"Last I saw," he said wearily, "she had torn her office curtains into strips and was trying to tie a noose. Why?"

Gordon looked concerned. "Are you serious?"

Austin laughed, then immediately regretted it as the top of his head came off and fell in his lap, bloody side up. "Oh, God," he said, propping his elbows on the assignments desk and holding his head.

"Headache?" Gates asked. "Me too. Need some aspirin?"

"I prefer chloroform," Austin said, not looking up. "Got any of that on ya?"

Gordon laughed. "Not today. But I can get it for you."

Rubbing his temples, Austin's face twitched into the faintest of smiles. "How about a heavy club?" he said. "That will do."

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse," Austin said ruefully, still not looking up. "By the way, I've been meaning to ask you. Did you ever see Boyd about the weekends? Did that get straightened out?"

"I think so. We're going to split it. I'll do Sundays, Delbert will do Saturdays and cover the noon four days a week. I'll anchor the noon on Mondays."

"Are you okay with that? I know that wasn't your deal with Durand."

Gordon shrugged. "It's the biz. I'll get to do more reporting, I get paid the same, and I get Saturdays off with my kids. Plus, Sundays is the better gig. Bigger audience, more exposure."

Austin nodded slowly. "Very true. That's the way to be about it. Although it would have been nice if Boyd had told me, since I'm responsible for posting the schedule."

"While we're on the subject of anchoring, I have a question. It's why I was looking for Regina. Maybe you can explain this to me." He shoved a piece of paper at Austin's face.

Austin had trouble focusing on it. "Oh, that. That's Dick's update memo. I thought you knew all about it."

Gordon shook his head. "Not really."

"Well. Dick wanted to do the afternoon and evening updates from the newsroom, the same way we do reporter pieces during the newscasts. He likes the look. But the newsroom cam doesn't have a prompter. Gary and Audrey refused to do the updates without one. So Boyd agreed to let them continue to anchor the updates in the studio, with the newsroom keyed behind them. I guess you weren't consulted, huh?"

Gordon frowned. "No, as a matter of fact, I was. I agreed with Gary and Audrey's objections to not having a teleprompter. But I thought that was the end of it. There was no mention of keying in the newsroom background."

Austin shrugged. "Well, now you know."

"But don't you think that's going to look a little silly?"

"Of *course* it will look silly. But it doesn't rank nearly as high on the Ridicu-Meter as some of the other crap we've been pulling lately."

Gordon looked stubborn, but before he could argue the point further, the radio squawked. "Unit Nine to base."

Wearily, Austin reached forward and keyed the base station mike. "Joe's Bar and Grill. Joe speaking. Whadduya want?"

"Hi, Joe," came Delbert's cheerful voice. "We've finished up at the sheriff's office and now we're headed to the suspect's house."

"Wait a minute. I thought we'd agreed on a live shot from the sheriff's office?"

"Well, yeah. But Steinberg and I got to thinking; we ought to give the suspect a chance to tell his side of the story."

"*His side*? What the hell is his side? 'She told me she was eighteen?'"

There was a slight pause. "Well, maybe we can get video of the guy."

Austin glanced at his watch. It was ten after five. It was just within the realm of theoretical possibility that the two might make it to the suspect's house, get a quick shot of him turning Delbert away at the door, and then set up a live shot in time for the Six. "Okay. Whatever. It's your story. Just be careful. Don't let the equipment get shot up. Base clear."

"Hey, thanks!" came Steinberg's sarcastic voice over the radio. "We appreciate your concern for our well being!"

Austin put down the microphone, managing a faint smile despite his pounding headache.

"What was that all about?" Gordon asked.

Austin turned to him, his smile transforming into a malevolent grin. "You'll see."

Frowning, Gordon walked out.

Twenty minutes later, Audrey was standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips. "Mr. Eddie," she demanded in a shrill voice. "Would you please explain to me why we're airing a story about a *sexually abused chicken*!" Her voice rose continually in pitch so that at the end of the sentence, it was a full octave higher than it had been at the beginning.

Austin sighed. "Audrey, I know you're an anchor and an important person and all that," he said in a weary monotone. "And I know that if I were possessed of the patience, professionalism, and people skills befitting the role of executive producer, I would be able to sit down with you and explain person to person, in a calm, logical, well-reasoned manner, exactly why this story is in our newscast – and at the end of that conversation, we would be able to move forward in a spirit of mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation. But since none of the aforementioned attributes are part of my skill set, I'll just tell you straight out: I haven't got time for your bulls*!t, Audrey. So f*!k off and die."

Audrey's mouth dropped to her not-inconsiderable chest. "Well, I never!" she gasped. She set her mouth in her famous 'you're about to get yours' expression. "I'll just have to take this to higher authority." She then whirled around and headed off to Boyd's office.

"You just do that," Austin mumbled, "and may God go with you."

The air was still swirling in her wake when the radio squawked. "Unit Nine to base!" came Steinberg's frantic voice. "The guy's shooting at us!"

"Oh, Christ," Austin moaned. He keyed the microphone. "What's the address?"

"602 Maple Court!" As Steinberg spoke, there was a sharp crash and a sound of breaking glass. "Hurry!"

Austin made a quick phone call to alert the sheriff's dispatcher. Then he sat back, closed his eyes, rubbed his temples, and wondered idly whether others could see what he felt – his head dramatically expanding and contracting like a balloon with each beat of his heart.

"Good evening," Gordon read a little while later at the top of the 6 PM newscast. "For the vacationing Gary Gaylord, I'm Gordon Gates."

"And I'm Audrey Ellis," Audrey picked it up. "Our top story: an armed standoff in South Pulaski County!"

"The drama erupted about 45 minutes ago," Gordon continued. "Let's go right to Eyewitness News Reporter Delbert Coleman, live on the scene."

A dimly-lighted picture appeared on the screen; dark shapes could be seen moving about the front and side of an even darker house, but little detail could be made out. "What you're looking at," Delbert said, "is a house in the 600 block of Maple Court Road. We apologize for the quality, but police have asked us not to turn on our television lights, for obvious reasons. Inside the house is an armed suspect identified as 43 year old Victor Palritz. So far he has not responded to police demands to give himself up. The story behind this story is incredible, almost impossible to believe. Palritz began firing about 45 minutes ago, when I knocked on his door to ask him about an alleged incident of sexual abuse that occurred early this morning. What's incredible is that the victim is a chicken."

This was the cue for the director to roll the videotape, which he did, and the audience was now treated to pictures of an unhappy brown chicken sitting motionless in a plain brown box.

"That's right," Delbert continued. "A common barnyard hen. You're seeing pictures of it now. The chicken is alive, but just barely. Last night, deputies caught Palritz having sex with the chicken on the side of Interstate 40 in east Pulaski County. Without going into the graphic details, according to the specifics in the offense report, the evidence against Palritz was incontrovertible. As a result of the incident, the chicken suffered severe injuries, and now there's a dispute underway between the sheriff's office and the ASPCA over what to do with it. The sheriff wants to kill the chicken and freeze it for evidence, but ASPCA wants the chicken turned over to them for medical care.

"In this midst of all this, I and Eyewitness News Photographer Ezra Steinberg attempted to contact Palritz for comment late this afternoon. We captured the resulting confrontation on videotape; you can see for yourself what happened."

The picture cut up to a cameraman's-eye view of Delbert and Steinberg heading up the walkway to the Palritz home. But they hadn't even gotten halfway to the front step when the door opened and a figure armed with a rifle stepped out.

"Look out!" Steinberg's voice could be heard, "he's got a gun!"

The video showed Delbert diving toward the bushes at the side of the walk. Steinberg was hard on his heels. The picture tilted and panned wildly, treating the viewers at home to quick shots of the sky, ground, and upside-down hedgerows as rifle shots sounded in the background.

"I'll blow yer heads off!" Palritz could be heard shouting between the shots. "Git the hell off my lan!"

The picture cut back to the dark live shot of the house. "We made it back to the cover of our live truck," Delbert's voice continued. "Palritz kept taking shots at us until police arrived. No

shots have been fired since. Negotiations are underway now to get him out. Back to you, Gordon and Audrey."

"Delbert," Audrey asked, looking concerned, "is Palritz holding a hostage?"

"Unknown at this time, Audrey. We do know he's married, and right now no one seems to know where his wife is. So it's possible he might be holding her inside. But we don't know for sure. We'll keep you updated."

"Thanks, Delbert. "In other news —"

In the newsroom, Boyd stepped outside his office. "All right!" he said loudly to the newsroom at large. "Now *that* is the way to kick ass!"

Austin, sitting with the others at the conference table in front of the newsroom monitors, put his hand to face. "Jesus," he mumbled.

Beneath the table, Regina kicked Austin in the shin.

"Ow, f*!k," he said in a hushed voice, rubbing his leg.

"Austin, just one thing," Boyd continued.

Austin turned around. "Yes, sir?"

"None of the other stations had the story, but we didn't mention that it was an Eyewitness News Exclusive. Please get an update on by the end of the Six and fix that. And don't forget to tease a full report for the Ten."

"Yes, sir."

Boyd went back into his office; Austin got up to head for a typewriter.

As he was typing, with each *clack* of the keys going off in his ear like a firecracker, Colleen breezed by his desk. "By the way, Austin," she said sweetly, "I thought you might want to know that while we were airing our exclusive story on the freaky friggin' fowl fornicator, both of the other stations had live reports from the jail on the overcrowding lawsuit, which was filed this morning."

Austin looked at her. "Well, we've got that in the show, right? I mean, you *did* write up at least v.o. bite for Chips, didn't you?"

Colleen looked surprised. "Why, no. You told Steinberg to blow off the story, and then you put him on another assignment. We both assumed you weren't interested. Chips dropped it from the rundown."

Austin nodded. "Uh huh. I'll tell you, Colleen. It's like this: I don't make the decisions around here. So I'm not *personally* upset that you're letting us get scooped. Boyd, on the other hand, might be. And if that possibility concerns you at all, then I suggest you sit down at your desk, bang out a reader, and get it on the news before the show ends."

"Hmph," was the only response Colleen gave as she walked off. She returned to her desk and sat down, but not to begin typing. Instead, she picked up the phone and called Elliot Harris.

Having turned in his package for the Five, Elliot had already left for the day and had not seen the Six. Elliot was Colleen's usual partner in commiserating about all the various ways in which Eyewitness News had fallen short on any given day. She knew he'd be interested in what had just happened, especially since it involved a news tip Elliot himself had brought in to the newsroom. Colleen left a message loaded with bright, colorful adjectives and forceful action-oriented verbs on his answering machine.

The message had its intended effect. Elliot stormed through the back door of the newsroom at 6:45 with murder in his eye. Colleen got up to meet him.

By this point, Austin had retreated to the assignments office, where he could observe the newsroom through the large inner window. The double dose of Pain-Aids Austin had ingested had taken their full effect. He watched with bemused detachment as Elliot and Colleen disappeared into Edit Bay Five, where the airchecks were recorded on large U-matic three-quarter inch tape cassettes. Obviously, the two of them were reviewing the recording of the 6 PM newscast.

Moments later, Elliot emerged from the edit bay and marched to the assignments office, with Colleen following close behind wearing a self-satisfied "boy-is-someone-gonna-get-it-now" smirk.

"Who gave that simple-minded f*!k my story?" Elliot demanded without preamble as he burst through the door.

"Look," Austin said thickly. "I had nothing to do with it."

"Well, then who did?"

Austin moaned, then bent forward over the desk and plopped his forehead down onto his folded arms.

During the exchange, Chips had stepped up to the assignments office door. "You may want to direct your concerns to the news director," he said.

"Fine," Elliot spat. "Where is he?"

"You missed him by about five minutes."

"Oh, really? Well, where's Regina?"

"Are you kidding?" Chips laughed. "You know Regina. She was a cloud of dust on the horizon at six thirty zero one."

"Well, f*!k!" Elliot stormed off down the hall toward the administrative offices. Colleen went with him.

They were back in about a minute.

"I could have told you Sturges would be gone by this time of day, too," Chips said helpfully.

Elliot crossed his arms. "This is ridiculous. Either that asshole goes, or I do."

"Which asshole? Boyd? Or Coleman?" Chips asked. "By the way, they come as a set, you know."

"Well, then, *both* if necessary. Austin, do you have Boyd's home number?"

Without looking up, Austin, who still had his face buried in his arms, elbowed the Rolodex rotary file sitting on the desktop next to him.

Elliot sat down, pulled it over, and began thumbing through it. "I want you to hear this," he said as he began dialing the phone. But within a few moments, he put the receiver back down.

"No answer. *Shit.*"

The two-way radio squawked. "Unit Nine to base," came Delbert's voice.

"Is that Delbert?" Elliot asked, reaching for the microphone. "Let me talk to him."

A mental warning bell sounded through the haze that had enveloped Austin's brain; he sat up and moved the microphone out of Elliot's reach. "No way, Elliot. If you've got a personal problem with Delbert, you deal with it person to person, not over the FCC-regulated airwaves."

"You may want to wait for him to get back," Colleen agreed.

"Okay," Elliot nodded, thinking better of it. "I'll just do that."

Austin keyed the microphone. "Base here. Go ahead, Delbert."

"Hi. Well, it's over. Deputies stormed the place, found the guy dead. Apparently he shot himself."

Elliot opened his mouth as if to speak, but then stopped. His jaws were bulging as he slowly ground his teeth, glaring at the two-way base station with a look that should have melted it.

"Perfect," Colleen said. "Of course he did." She turned to Austin with eyes blazing. "Now are you happy?"

Austin ignored her. "Any hostages?" he said into the microphone.

"No, none. Nobody here but us chickens. Ha! Get it?"

Elliot was smoldering.

Colleen stared at the radio disbelievingly. "What *is* it with this guy?"

"All right, Delbert," Austin said, keying the microphone. "Boyd wants you to package it up and do a newsroom piece for the Ten. Bring it on home."

"Roger and out."

"Do you realize," Elliot demanded, "that a man is *dead* because of us?" Elliot was more than livid; his entire body was shaking.

"Now, I don't know about that, Elliot. Obviously, Paltritz was kind of unstable —"

"Cut the crap, Austin," Colleen snapped. "You know as well as I do that if we hadn't gone out there and precipitated this event, the man would still be alive."

"Hell, it's my f*!king fault," Elliot said. "*I'm* the one who brought in that damned sheriff's report." He clapped his hand to his forehead and plopped down into a chair. "I let him make *copies*, for Chrissake!"

Chips, who was still standing in the doorway, spoke up. "Look, it's not your fault, Elliot —"

"The hell it isn't." Elliot glared at him. "I just had to yuk it up with you guys, at the expense of that poor S.O.B. We had a good laugh, though, didn't we?"

Austin sighed. "Elliot, don't you think you and Colleen are being just a tad melodramatic?"

"Are we?" Elliot's bitter glare hinted that his reservoir of melodrama was far from exhausted.

Austin waved his hand impatiently. "Enough already. What's done is done. There's no point crying about it now."

Colleen regarded him with a look of utter contempt. "Austin, listen to yourself! Precisely when did you sell your journalistic soul?" She shook her head. "I, for one, am not willing to give up. I've been here long enough to have developed some contacts at Corporate. I think the boys in New York might be very interested to hear what this clown Boyd is up to. It's taken him and Sturges — what, about two weeks? — to destroy credibility this station has been building for years."

"I'll tell ya what," Austin said wearily. "If you think anyone at the corporate level gives a flying f*!k at a rolling doughnut about the finer points of ethics in this or any other of the company's newsrooms, you go right ahead on." He rubbed his temples, noting ruefully that his headache, which had momentarily receded, was now returning despite his best pharmaceutical efforts. "My prediction: You won't accomplish anything other than blowing yourself up with Boyd and Sturges. But if you think that will help Paltritz or anybody else, knock yourself out. Let me know how it goes."

"There's nothing I can do for Paltritz," Elliot said. "But there's something I can do for *me*. He looked down at his hand, which he was flexing, closing into a fist and then opening again. "I'm gonna kill that obsequious little s*!t Delbert." He turned and strode to his desk, where he sat down and began angrily banging away at the typewriter. After a moment, Colleen followed.

As fate would have it, it took deputies quite a while to wrap up the crime scene, and as a consequence Delbert didn't get back to the station until about 9 o'clock. He hadn't taken ten steps into the newsroom before Elliot was on him. Though they couldn't make out exactly what was being said, tens of thousands of people watched as Elliot confronted Delbert.

The reason that tens of thousands of people were able to see this was that the 9:00 PM live update hit at this exact moment. As required under the news director's new policy, though no talent and indeed no camera operator was present in the newsroom, the update director had taken the newsroom camera live and had chromakeyed the picture behind the studio camera shot of Gordon Gates, who was sitting downstairs on the main news set reading the update copy. Had anyone in the newsroom noticed, a little red tally light on the newsroom camera would have warned them the camera was "hot." But no one did notice; all eyes were on Delbert and Elliot.

What the home viewer saw was a head and shoulder shot of Gordon Gates, with the newsroom video electronically inserted behind him in such a way as to give the appearance that Gordon actually was seated in the upstairs newsroom. "Good evening," he said cheerfully while, behind him, two men were plainly visible in the newsroom, standing nearly chest to chest in some kind of obvious confrontation. Elliot was yelling silently at Delbert and jabbing an angry finger

him, while Delbert stood with his hands raised defensively palms out, wearing a look of surprised consternation.

"One man is dead in South Pulaski County tonight after an armed standoff with sheriff's deputies," Gordon read.

Behind Gordon, Elliot shoved his open hand hard against Delbert's chest, pushing Delbert backwards so forcefully that the man's head snapped like a whip. Delbert's lips moved as he obviously protested this; recovering his balance, he planted his feet more firmly and stood with his hands on his hips.

In the assignments office, Austin, who'd stayed late to supervise the Palritz story and who had consumed another four Pain-Aids, gazed upon this scene as if he were watching it unfold from a great height. In the small black and white monitor on the desk before him, Austin could plainly see that the newsroom camera shot was live on the air. And from the intensity of Elliot's rage, Austin suspected the man was about to do Delbert serious bodily harm. Austin knew he should do something to stop it. But he didn't. He couldn't move. It was as if he were having an out-of-body experience.

"The shooting began late this afternoon," Gordon continued as, behind him, Elliot shoved Delbert again, "when an Eyewitness News crew tried to question 43-year-old Victor Palritz about an incident of sexual abuse involving a barnyard chicken."

Behind him, Elliot shoved Delbert for a third time. This time Delbert shoved back.

In the assignments office, a smile spread slowly across Austin's face, but he remained otherwise immobile. Everyone else in the newsroom remained rooted to their spots. No one made any attempt to intervene as Elliot grabbed Delbert's collar with one hand and drew back the other in a haymaker aimed at Delbert's face.

"Eyewitness News Reporter Delbert Coleman is on the scene right now," Gordon was reading, obviously unaware that Delbert had just returned and was now *in extremis*, "and he'll have an exclusive report at Ten."

At that exact moment, Delbert, realizing that Elliot was about to punch his lights out, lunged and threw both arms around him, tackling Elliot hard. The move surprised Elliot. Both went down hard on the floor. For a moment, they rolled around, each vainly trying to punch the other. But neither could get an angle.

Delbert's tackle broke the spell that had been cast over the others in the newsroom, and as one they sprang up and rushed to Delbert's aid.

"Now this," Gordon said, throwing to a commercial break, looking a bit distracted as his eye now caught a glimpse of the floor monitor and the chaotic scene "behind" him.

Austin, sitting in the assignments office wrapped like a mummy in mental gauze, continued to gaze listlessly at the scene as his coworkers scrambled to separate the combatants. Momentarily, they succeeded in pulling the men apart, but Elliot broke free and made a lunge at Delbert, who then scurried on all fours seeking safety beneath a nearby desk.

On the monitor in front of Austin, the ten second commercial break quickly ended, but when the shot of Gordon came back up, the newsroom was no longer keyed behind him; instead, the background was an expanse of blank grey. On a color monitor, no doubt it would have appeared green; the director was taking the studio camera direct, and the viewer was now getting a rare look at the unkeyed studio green screen. Obviously, there had been no time for the director to retract the screen or to choose another shot.

"Uh," Gordon stumbled, searching through his copy, "join us at Ten." There was more copy that Gordon should have read, but he'd lost his place and dumped out. The camera shot lingered on him for another few seconds before finally dipping to black and then coming back up on network programming. It was over.

At that point, the newsroom phones began ringing.

While efforts to subdue Elliot continued, Austin bestirred himself from his torpor. Rising wearily from his chair, he picked up his coat and headed out. After all, he hadn't actually

promised anyone that he'd stay through the Ten PM newscast. He wanted no part of the inevitable fallout from what had just happened. Rather than cross the newsroom to the back door, Austin slipped out through the closer main entrance and made his way to the station's engineering area, where he was able to sneak out a side exit.

He soon found that he'd escaped one set of troubles into the arms of another. In the parking lot, Peggy's red Pinto was parked beside his Corolla.

Austin sighed. "I can see this just isn't your f*!king day," he said out loud to himself. Slung his coat over his shoulder, he walked toward Peggy's car.

Seeing him approaching, Peggy jumped out. Pausing to sling a large purse under her arm, she rushed to him and threw both arms around him. "Oh, Austin!" she breathed, "I've missed you so much!"

Gently, Austin detached her arms and pushed her away. "Peggy, it's not going to work."

She looked up at him, her face bearing a tragic expression as a tear fell out of one eye and coursed down her cheek. "But Austin, we've been through so much together. I need you."

Austin shook his head. "We've been all through this, Peggy. We're done."

"But I don't know how I'll live without you!" she wailed, tears now falling down both cheeks.

"You're gonna have to learn," Austin said coldly.

The tears suddenly evaporated as her expression now transformed into one of cold hatred. "You've found somebody else, haven't you?" she snarled.

He shook his head. "Not exactly. It's just --"

"Then who was that with you last night?" she demanded.

"It's not any of your business, Peggy."

"It was your ex-wife, wasn't it?"

Austin remained silent.

"*Wasn't it?*" she again demanded.

"All right. If you insist. Yes. Yes, it was."

The already unpleasant expression on her face now morphed into one of such intense hatred and fury that it raised the hackles on the back of his neck. It was the same twisted expression he'd seen at the end of their last meeting.

"That's fine!" she hissed. "Well, if I can't have you, then *she* sure as hell can't either!" She unslung her purse, reached into it, and with some difficulty withdrew a huge, gleaming, stainless steel pistol, pulling it out by the barrel, in the process dragging out a makeup compact and lipstick tube, which clattered to the ground. Tossing the purse aside, she adjusted her hold on the gun. Now with both hands clasped around the wood grip, she planted her feet a shoulder's width apart, fully extended her arms, and aimed the perfectly polished piece directly at Austin's face.

"Jesus *Christ!*" Austin gasped in awe, marveling at the sheer enormity of the weapon, which looked more like it belonged on the foredeck of a battleship, swinging out against the horizon to challenge a seaborne enemy. He guessed it to be a .44 magnum. Gazing down the barrel was like looking down a train tunnel; he half expected to hear the horn of a freight locomotive emanating from it. Despite the obvious deadly danger the pistol posed, he was rooted to the spot. Nor could he help the first words that sprang almost involuntarily from his lips: "Where the hell did you get *that!*"

"From my daddy!" she wailed. Squeezing both eyes tightly shut, she ducked her chin and hunched her shoulders.

Austin dove for the ground. He was in mid-plunge when a deafening *bang!* went off in his ears, seeming to knock him sideways. Austin's shoulder slammed the pavement hard; he rolled as sharp shards of shattered glass began raining down all around him from the car window just behind the spot where he'd been standing.

Austin rolled twice then looked to his left; the gun had gone flying from Peggy's grasp, and she was now chasing after it.

Austin jumped to his feet, and for a bare moment he stood there with his ears ringing as he stared in awe at Peggy's handiwork. With just one shot, she had managed to destroy the side windows of not one, but four cars that happened to be parked side by side in a row down her line of fire. But he didn't linger on the thought; seeing Peggy scoop up the monstrous pistol from the pavement where it had landed, Austin turned and sprinted down the parking lot. There was another ear-splitting *bang!* and a bullet whizzed by just over his head as Austin reached the hedgerow that bordered the parking lot. Without pausing, he lunged over the top of it, coming down hard on the grass on the far side, once again taking the impact on his back and shoulder. Rolling to his feet, he dashed across an adjacent parking lot, crossed the street and turned the corner of a small building into a narrow alleyway, desperately looking for cover. The alleyway opened out onto a small parking lot; to the rear of it stood a trash dumpster. Hesitating for only a split second, he leapt inside, squishing right into a slimy, smelly pile of fish heads and assorted trimmings from the restaurant next door. His sudden arrival startled three or four felines who were chowing down on the refuse; hissing, growling, and wailing, they exploded from the dumpster, clawing and scratching him on the way out.

"I'll get you!" he heard Peggy shout. "You're dead meat!" Moments later, he heard the sound of a car engine as she cranked up and drove off.

After a moment, Austin climbed out of the dumpster. Cursing with enough intensity to melt the asphalt he was standing on, he brushed himself off. A quick inspection revealed no bullet holes. There was a bit of blood, however, and his suit was shredded in one or two places where the cats had used him as a human ladder for their ascent from the dumpster. Continuing to curse a blue streak, Austin headed toward the newsroom to call the police.

Even though almost everyone in the newsroom was still on the phone dealing with viewers calling about the newsroom fight they'd just witnessed, Austin's presence was quickly noticed; bits and pieces of fish entrails still clung to him as he walked in.

"Whoooeie," Arrow said, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "Boy, looks like you're having a night."

"Yeah," Austin said, sitting down at the desk opposite Arrow's. "My f*!king ex girl f*!king friend just tried to f*!king kill me."

"Don't tell me; lemme guess. She tried to beat you to death with a herring?"

"She tried to drill me with a f*!king .44 magnum, is what she did. Can you believe it? A five foot four blond armed with a f*!king .44 magnum? I had to hide in a f*!king trash dumpster, for Chrissake!"

"Cosmic," Arrow said, nodding with a serious expression. "It just confirms something I've always known. Have you ever noticed how the themes of life and death are so intricately interwoven with sex?"

Austin was not amused. "Arrow, for once in your life, take something seriously, will you? I almost just got killed."

Arrow took on an exaggerated look of being chastened, grimacing and running his finger underneath his collar.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Austin demanded.

"Just being a good soldier, putting together my story. I finally landed that interview with Miller, but he couldn't see me until after the Six."

"Oh." Austin looked down at the phone on the desk in front of him. Like all the others in the newsroom at the moment, it was ringing. He picked it up. "F*!k off!" he barked into the receiver, and then slammed it down. Immediately he snatched it up again, and was rewarded with a dial tone. He dialed 911.

Arrow nodded in approval. "That's one way to clear a line," he said.

By airtime at 10:00, the atmosphere in the newsroom had not calmed down a bit and was, in fact, worse. Boyd, who had not seen the altercation between Elliot and Delbert on air, had received an outraged phone call from Marvin Sturges, who *had* seen it. Boyd had then come

down to the station with the intention of suspending Elliot on the spot. But Elliot had decamped, thereby depriving Boyd of the instant gratification of sending someone home, and leaving him with nothing to do but rant, rave, and kick trash cans.

It all turned out to be only a prelude to further disaster. The 10 PM newscast started routinely enough. Arrow did a "newsroom piece" on City Director Davis Miller, who had finally followed through on his threat to demand the resignation of Police Chief Curtis Hoffman and to call for an independent investigation of the suspected vigilante killings. Since Arrow was uncertain when he would be able to break the story of an arrest in the case, he was grateful to be able to keep the basic story alive and in the public's mind.

That had gone well enough. The rest of the newscast was far different.

It began with Delbert's piece on the Palritz stand-off, which had been chopped down from a package to a v.o. bite due to the fact that Delbert had been able neither to write nor speak coherently after his dustup with Elliot. On air, Gordon introduced what obviously was intended to be a "nat sound up full" video clip showing police storming the house. He read, "When nothing was heard from Palritz for a full hour, police took action." The tape started correctly enough, showing close-ups of helmeted SWAT officers checking their weapons. But then the picture cut to a wide shot of a bulldozer crashing through the weathered front door of a gray old run-down shotgun style house. Within seconds, the growling machine had reduced the whole front section of the tottering structure to kindling, as various onlookers, including Mayor Cary Humbert, stood by clapping and cheering.

The director immediately dumped out and cut back to a studio shot of an amazed and perplexed-looking Gordon, who said, "Obviously, folks, that's not the action police took. We apologize for the technical problems."

Everyone would later agree that this was the point at which Boyd hurled a typewriter through his inner office window. After smashing through the glass, the meteoric machine smacked into the side of Paula Vorder's desk, bounced off, and then crash landed on the carpet in a spray of key caps and springs, with the bulk of the device bouncing in one direction and its cover flying off in another. Stunned witnesses whipped their heads around to look in open-mouthed astonishment as the main piece of wreckage skidded to a halt in the middle of the floor, where it lay bent and broken, swaddled in the sighless silence of typewriter death, with its carriage knocked askew and its mysterious inner workings rudely exposed for all to see. The sight of its twisted and bent typebars pointing skywards like the fingers of a drowning man making one last reach for the surface was quite moving. But no one dared approach to cover the poor thing with a blanket or to gently lift the pitiful remains and provide for a proper interment.

It was fortunate that Boyd's office was equipped with only one such instrument. Within the next five minutes, viewers were treated to four more such on-air "mistakes." In each case, the offending clip started with a few seconds of the correct video, before cutting to the substituted pictures, which included: (1) video of the smoldering aftermath of a massive jetliner crash, in a story about a local two-car fatality; (2) shots of a hockey brawl, in a story previewing what was expected to be a tough budget fight at the next meeting of the City of Little Rock board of directors; (3) video of a massive field of rubble from an earthquake in Turkey, in a story about Little Rock being nominated as the cleanest city in America; and, the grand finale, (4) a newspaper photo of Dick Boyd, in a story about a neighborhood pedophile being sentenced for molesting a six year old boy.

When Boyd caught sight of himself on screen, his already noteworthy temper tantrum boiled over into a full-on, screaming, frothing, apoplectic fit, lacking only the spectacle of throwing himself down on the floor and beating the carpet with his fists and feet to complete the effect. He charged around his office, maniacally kicking the chairs, his filing cabinets, the front of his desk, and his poor abused waste can, while spewing forth with an impressive stream of creative invective. This volcanic venting of inventive verbiage included general indictments of the moral character, parentage, and social standing of the as yet unknown saboteur or saboteurs;

improbable and unsubstantiated allegations related to the sexual, bathroom, and dietary habits of said individual or individuals; and disturbing threats of retaliatory violence involving the removal and disposition of certain bodily organs, many of them vital, using implements not specifically designed for such a purpose, and the insertion, in such a way as to cause discomfort, of miscellaneous unlikely objects into orifices and cavities ill suited to receive such items. When he finally ran out of steam and imagery, Boyd poked his purple, bulging face out his office doorway. "Austin!" he screamed, spitting saliva, "get your ass in here!"

There was no answer; Austin had gone down to police headquarters to swear out a warrant.

Boyd fixed his crazed eyes on Arrow, who was sitting next to Steinberg at the back table. "Arrow! Where the f*!k is Austin?"

"Dunno, Boss," Arrow lied.

"Goddammit!" Boyd now turned his glare on the newsroom at large. "Well, I'll tell you one thing!" he shouted. "I'm gonna find out who's sabotaging us! And when I do," he raged, hitting on an idea not covered in his recent dissertation, "I'm gonna rip out his heart and flush it down the toilet!" Boyd stepped back into his office, slamming the door so hard that the remaining shards of broken glass in his shattered window blew out and showered onto the newsroom floor.

Arrow turned and cocked an eye at Steinberg. "I don't think a human heart will fit down a toilet," he observed.

"I don't know about a human heart," Steinberg said phlegmatically, stubbing out his cigarette on the garish red-and-white Circle 6 logo displayed at the bottom of a promotional ashtray. "But Boyd's would."

By 10:40 the newsroom had cleared out and the phones at last had quieted. Arrow had just deposited the script for a v.o. bite version of his story into Carla's wire basket for the noon show, and had returned to his desk to pick up his coat, when his phone rang. He lifted the receiver.

"Arrow Henley, Eyewitness News."

"Hi," came a voice on the other end. "It's Charlene."

Arrow hesitated, searching his mental Rolodex for Charlenes.

"Charlene Davis," she continued. "We met the other night, at Gingers?"

"Oh!" he said, remembering. "God, yes. How could I forget? What brings you my way this evening?"

"Well, I may have a bit of information for you. Can we meet?"

It turned out that she was close by. Arrow considered inviting her to his usual haunt, The Halfway Cafe, but on second thought, he decided he didn't want to have to explain anything to anyone who might recognize him and ask questions. She suggested that they meet at the White Water Tavern, a watering hole on 7th Street only a few minutes from the station.

When Arrow arrived, he saw that the bar was a classic dive, stuffed into what appeared to be a former house sitting in a corner lot. The exterior was covered with wooden siding, with the weather-beaten boards placed diagonally across the facade. A plain white sign that hung where a window should have been announced the name of the place in sprawling black and red letters. When Arrow walked inside, the noise hit him like a battering ram. A scruffy-looking spike-haired band was holding forth in front of a small dance floor, where a packed crowd that looked to be a mixture of college kids, bikers, lawyers, and rednecks writhed, swayed, twitched, and jumped. To Arrow, the music had all the soothing tonal qualities of a bag full of cats being beaten to death with hammers.

He looked about for Charlene, and spotted her sitting at the bar next to a young man wearing a doctor's scrub, who appeared to be trying to chat her up. Catching Arrow's eye, she rose and waved to him. He shuffled through the crowd, making his way to her. He had to admit, she was looking lovely. Hot, in fact. She was dressed tastefully enough in dark gray Capri slacks and a simple pink blouse – certainly no one would have guessed she was a stripper. But she

swelled out the blouse just right. And the slacks, while not obscenely tight by any means, did their part in emphasizing her perfect, girlish figure. "Charlene," he not quite shouted, extending his hand. "How are you?"

She took his hand warmly. "I hope I don't come across as a stalker or a groupie," she said, also raising her voice above the din. "But there's something I wanted to share with you."

Arrow laughed. "If you are a stalker, I think I can bear it." He settled onto the bar stool she had saved for him. The guy in the scrub gave him a sour look, and then turned to speak to a bored-looking black-haired woman wearing barbed-wire earrings sitting on the other side of him.

"Nice place you picked!" Arrow shouted.

"I know!" she said. "Sorry about the noise! But at least we're not in danger of having our conversation overheard!"

The band mercifully chose that moment to announce what the lead singer promised would be a very short break.

Arrow dug a finger into his ear. "Man! Do you hear bells ringing?"

She laughed. "No."

He turned his head to her. "Is there any blood coming out?" He turned and showed her the other ear.

"Oh, stop it now! It wasn't that loud."

He looked around. Cigarette smoke hung thickly in the air. Numerous items covered the dark, paneled walls, including mementos of every size and description, illegible signs, miscellaneous photographs, and animal heads. On one small shelf a bowling pin stood next to a boot. A monkey made of coconuts sat behind the bar. Strings of white Christmas lights ran around the tops of the walls.

"I'll hand you this. It's got character."

"It's about the only place in town you can go to hear local music," she said.

"Is that what that noise was?" he asked.

She gave him an "Oh, you," look.

The house music system cranked up with a tune similar to the racket the group had been playing. Fortunately, it wasn't quite so loud.

A youngish-looking woman wearing blue jeans and a dark T-shirt bearing a logo that Arrow couldn't quite make out in the low light made her way to their side of the bar. "What can I get ya, darlin'?" she said, smiling.

"A beer, I suppose. What's good here?"

"That ain't the question to ask," she said.

Arrow laughed. "Okay, what's the question to ask?"

"The question to ask is, 'What sells here?'" she said. "And that would be PBR."

"PBR?" Arrow asked.

"Pabst Blue Ribbon," Charlene explained, raising her glass.

Arrow nodded. "Bring it on."

When the waitress left, Arrow turned to Charlene. "I have to admit, it is good to see you again," he said.

She smiled coyly. "Well, I confess I had sort of hoped you might call me." Her expression sobered. "But I really do have something to tell you. In fact, it has me a little worried."

Arrow frowned. "Go on."

She hesitated. Swallowing nervously, she continued. "Well, a couple of days ago this guy came in with some buddy. He's been in the club before. He wasn't in uniform. But my friend Misty tells me he's a cop. She told me you've done some stories on him."

"It wouldn't have been Cyrus Newman, would it?"

"Misty said his name was Cyrus. His friend called him 'Cy.' I didn't catch the last name."

Arrow nodded. "It's gotta be the same guy. He and his partner, a cop named Larry Roberts, have been beating up on kids in Boyle Park. And there are some other things going on, too."

"Well, I apologize, I haven't actually seen the stories." She smiled. "My schedule doesn't allow for much news watching."

Arrow chuckled. "That's understandable. But please continue. Did this guy bother you?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. But after a few beers, he was talking kind of loud. The place is noisy, what with the music and all. But I've gotten pretty good at hearing snatches of conversation."

Arrow gave her a sly smile. "You aren't the gossipy type, are you?"

She raised an eyebrow and dimpled a chin. "Maybe a little."

"My favorite type. So what did he say?"

The waitress bearing Arrow's beer interrupted their conversation. Arrow paid for both beers. He was surprised to see how little the drinks set him back; it was no wonder the place was crowded.

"Thank you," Charlene said when the waitress had left.

"Don't mention it. Now – you were saying?"

The twinkle in her eye disappeared. "I heard him mention your name a couple of times. I'm pretty sure he's planning to do something to you."

Arrow creased his brow. "What makes you think that?"

"He said he was going to 'f*!k you up,' is how he put it."

"Wow." Arrow's mouth suddenly seemed very dry, and he felt a little faint. He took a sip of his beer. "You're sure that's what he said? You mentioned it was pretty loud in the club."

She nodded. "I'm sure they had no idea I could overhear them. But those were his exact words. He said it to his buddy at least twice. I heard him quite clearly."

"And you're sure it was Newman who said this?"

"Yeah. The guy named Cy. Very sure."

Arrow pulled his chin. "I see." He paused, considering the implications of what she was telling him. "Any idea who the other guy was?"

"Misty didn't recognize him. But I thought I heard Cy refer to him once or twice as Ollie."

"Could it have been Augey?"

"Augey?" she repeated.

"Yeah."

She looked thoughtful. "Yeah, it could. In fact, I think it must have been. I've never heard the name 'Augey' before, which is why I thought he probably said 'Ollie.'"

Arrow nodded. "I know who it is, then."

"What are you going to do?"

He shook his head. "I really don't know. But I sure appreciate the information."

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment. But then she drained the rest of her beer, set the glass down, and picked up her purse. "Well, I'm playing hooky, and I've got to get back," she said, "before they fine me."

"*Fine* you. Really?"

She laughed. "Oh, yeah. They keep us on a short leash."

"Sounds like it. Here, let me walk you out."

As they got up, the band cranked back up again. This tune was a little different from the one that had preceded it, in style if not esthetics. Arrow was pretty sure that its catchy tune, sweet harmonies, and toe-tapping rhythm could be duplicated by revving a jet engine up to full power and then tossing a tire iron into it. He turned to Charlene. "Just in time!" he shouted.

She cupped her hand to her ear. "What?"

He laughed. "My point exactly!"

He walked with her to the parking lot. "Look," he said when they reached her car. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate you bringing me this. So many people, they just don't want to get involved."

She nodded. "But some do." Standing on tiptoe, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "Good night, Arrow," she said, locking eyes with him for a brief moment. Then she opened her car door and climbed inside.

Arrow watched her go. *Damn*, he thought.

Then he turned and went back into the bar to finish his beer and soak in the ambience.

Driving home that night, Arrow reflected on the events of the day, holding them up one at a time for mental review, and wondering what it all meant. In one day, one of his best friends had been fired, and another was completely screwing up his life. His new news director had proved beyond the shadow of a doubt to be a perfect ass. In the short span of two weeks, his employer, previously a perfectly respectable if not particularly competitive television station, had devolved into a public joke. And now, on top of all that, he had to seriously consider whether some rogue cop might be lying in ambush for him. And he'd only been on the job for a month!

But on the other hand, if all went well, tomorrow or the next day he would succeed in blasting out an exposé that would blow the doors right off City Hall and make his reputation for years to come. He'd be able to get out of Little Rock and go to a Top Ten market, or perhaps even to one of the networks.

But how would he feel about leaving Austin and Felix behind? He was still musing to himself as he inserted the key and turned the lock on the front door of his apartment.

In a break with her usual routine, Maude did not greet him at the door.