

CHAPTER 1

KNWS Radio

Tuesday, February 7

Jim Fate bounced on the toes of his black Salvatore Ferragamo loafers. He liked to work on his feet. Listeners could hear it in your voice if you were sitting down, could detect the lack of energy. He leaned forward, his lips nearly touching the silver mesh of the mike.

“Can massive federal spending and a huge new layer of government bureaucracy really make the United States a better, safer place? Or is it a matter of simply enforcing the food safety laws the states already have on the books? For more than a century, our food safety system has been built on the policy that food companies—not government—have the primary responsibility for the safety and integrity of the foods they produce.”

“So what are you suggesting, Jim?” Victoria Hanawa, his cohost, asked. “Are you saying we just let more Americans die when they buy food a company couldn’t bother to keep clean?”

She sat on a high stool on the other side of the U-shaped table, her back to the glass wall that separated the radio studio from the screener’s booth. To Jim’s right was the control room, sometimes called the news tank, where the board operator worked his bank of equipment and where one or more local reporters joined him at the top and the bottom of the hour.

“What I’m saying, Hanawa, is that activists are seizing the latest salmonella scare to further their own goals of increasing the power of the federal government. They don’t really care about these people. They only care about their own agenda, which is to create a nanny state full of burdensome, unworkable, and costly regulation. And of course the federal government, being the federal government, believes that the only solution to any problem is adding another layer—or ten—of federal government.”

While he spoke, Jim eyed the two screens in front of him. One displayed the show schedule. It was also hooked up to the Internet so he could look up points on the fly. The other screen showed the listeners holding for their chance to talk. On it, Chris had listed the name, town, and point of view of each caller. Three people were still on the list, meaning they would hold over the upcoming break. Now a fourth caller and a fifth joined the queue.

“What about the Tenth Amendment? There are state laws already in place to address these issues! We don’t need to add a whole new layer of government bureaucracy that could end up doubling or even tripling food prices! I mean, that would be stuck on stupid.”

“But the food industry in this country is putting profits before safety,” Victoria protested.

“With all due respect, Hanawa, if we let the federal government handle it, they will insist that everyone who buys anything at a grocery store sign a release form and be issued their very own government-approved barf bag. Just another example of disenfranchisement.”

Victoria’s mouth started to form an answer, but it was time for the top-of-the-hour break. Chris pointed at the clock and then made a motion with his hands like he was snapping a stick.

Jim said, “And you’ve been listening to *The Hand of Fate*. We’re going to take a quick break for a news, traffic, and weather update. But

before we go, I want to read you the e-mail from the Nut of the Day: ‘Jim, you are a fat, ugly liar who resembles the hind end of a poodle. Signed, Mickey Mouse.’”

He laughed, shielding himself from the sting. In this business, you knew that words *could* hurt you. Even if you were only forty-one and in good shape, with the kind of traditional broody Irish looks that made most women look twice.

“Fat? Maybe. Ugly? Well, I can’t help that. I can’t even help the hind-end-of-a-poodle business, although I think that’s going a bit far. But a liar? No, my friend, that’s one thing I am not. While I’ll give this a pass today, you’ll need to get a little more creative than that if you want to win the NOD award. And America’s Truth Detector will be right back in a moment to hear from you.” He pushed back the mike on its black telescoping arm.

As the first notes of the newscast jingle sounded in his ears, Jim pulled the padded black headphones down around his neck. He and Victoria now had six minutes to themselves before the third and final hour of the broadcast.

“I’m going to get some tea,” she said, without meeting his eyes. Jim nodded. In the last week, there had been a strained civility between them when they were off mike. On air, though, they still had chemistry. Even if now it was the kind of chemistry you got from mixing together the wrong chemicals in your junior scientist kit.

On air, everything was different. Jim was more indignant and mocking than he ever was in real life. Victoria made vaguely dirty jokes that she wouldn’t tolerate hearing off mike. And on air, they still mostly got along, bantering and feeding each other lines.

Victoria grabbed her mug and stood up. Even though she was half Japanese, she was five foot ten, with legs that went on forever. Handing

him a padded envelope from a publisher, she said, “This was in my box this morning, but it’s really yours.”

When she pushed open the heavy door to the screening room, the weather strip on the bottom made a sucking sound. For a minute, Jim could hear Chris in the screener’s booth talking to Willow, the intern, and Aaron, the program director. Then the door closed with a snick—there were magnets on the door and frame—and Jim was left in the silent bubble of the studio. In addition to the magnets and the weather stripping, the walls and ceiling were covered with blue, textured soundproofing material that resembled the loop side of Velcro.

Jim grabbed the first piece of mail from his in-box and slit it with a letter opener. He scanned the note inside. “Dad’s seventy-fifth birthday . . . love to have a signed photo,” yada yada.

“Happy Birthday, Larry!” he scrawled on a black-and-white headshot he pulled from dozens kept in a file folder. “Your friend, Jim Fate.” Paper-clipping the envelope and letter to the photo, he put them off to the side for Willow to handle. Three more photo requests, each of which took about twenty seconds to deal with. Jim had signed his name so many times in the last ten years that it was routine, but he still got a secret thrill each time he did it.

There were still about three minutes left, so he decided to open the package from the publisher. He liked books about true crime, politics, or culture—with authors he could book on the show.

Jim pulled the red string tab on the envelope. It got stuck halfway through, and he had to give it an extra hard tug. There was an odd hissing sound as a paperback—*Talk Radio*—fell onto his lap. A book of a play turned into a movie—both based on the true-life killing of talk show host Alan Berg, gunned down in his own driveway.

What the—?

Jim never finished the thought. The red string had been connected

to a small canister of gas hidden in the envelope. Now it sprayed directly into his face.

He gasped. With just that first breath, Jim knew something was terribly wrong. He couldn't see the gas, couldn't smell it, but he could feel its damp fog coat the inside of his nose and throat.

He swept the package away. It landed behind him, in the far corner of the studio. Whatever it was, it was in the air. So he shouldn't breathe. Jim clamped his lips together and scrambled to his feet, yanking off the headphones.

It was just like what had happened in Seattle three weeks earlier. Fifty-eight people had died from sarin gas in what seemed to be a botched terrorist attack.

His chest already starting to ache, Jim looked out through the thick, glass wall into the control room on his right. Greg, the board operator, was half-turned away, gobbling a PayDay bar. He was watching his banks of equipment, ready to press the buttons for commercials and national feeds. In the call screener's booth directly in front of Jim, Aaron was still talking to Chris and Willow, waving his hands for emphasis. Jim was unnoticed, sealed away in his bubble.

He forced himself to concentrate. He had to get some air, some fresh air. If he staggered out, would the air there be enough to dilute what he had already breathed in? Would it be enough to clear the sarin from his lungs, from his body?

Would it be enough to save him?

But if he opened the door, what would happen to the people out there? Chris, Willow, Aaron, and the rest? He thought of the firefighters who had died in Seattle. Would invisible tendrils of poison snake out to the dozens of people who worked at the station, the hundreds who worked in the building? Greg in the control room, with its own soundproofing, might be safe if he kept his door closed. For a while,

anyway. Until it got into the air ducts. Some of the people who died in Seattle had been nowhere near the original release of the gas. If Jim tried to escape, everyone out there might die too.

Die too. The words echoed in his head. Jim realized that he *was* dying, that he had been dying from the moment he first sucked in his breath in surprise. It had been, he thought, somewhere between fifteen and twenty seconds since the gas sprayed into his face.

Every morning, Jim swam two miles at the MAC club. He could hold his breath for two minutes. How long had that magician done it on *Oprah*? Seventeen minutes, wasn't that it? Jim couldn't hold his breath for that long, but he was sure he could hold it longer than two minutes. Maybe a lot longer. The first responders could surely get him some oxygen. The line might be thin enough to snake under the closed door.

Jim pressed the Talk button and spoke in a slurred, breathy voice. "Sarin gas! Call 911 and go! Don't open door!"

They all swung around to look at him in surprise. Without getting any closer, he pointed to the package in the corner.

Chris sprang into action with the catlike reflexes of someone who worked in live radio—someone used to dealing with crazies and obscenity spouters before their words got out on the airwaves and brought down a big fine from the FCC. He punched numbers into the phone and began shouting their address to the 911 operator. He'd pressed the Talk button, so Jim heard every word.

"It's sarin gas. Yes, sarin! In the KNWS studio! Hurry! It's killing him! It's killing Jim Fate!"

Behind Chris, Willow took one look at Jim, her eyes wide, and turned and ran out of the studio.

In the news tank, Greg backed away from the window. But in the screener's booth, Aaron moved toward the door with an outstretched

hand. Jim staggered forward and held the door closed with his foot. His gaze met Aaron's through the small rectangle of glass set in the door at eye level.

"Are you sure? Jim, come out of there!"

Jim knew Aaron was yelling, but the door filtered it into a low murmur, stripped of all urgency.

He couldn't afford the breath it would take to speak, couldn't afford to open his mouth in case he accidentally sucked in air again. His body was already demanding that he stop this nonsense and breathe. All he could do was shake his head, his lips clamped together.

Chris pressed the Talk button again. "They're sending a hazmat team. They should be here any second. They said they're bringing oxygen."

Jim made a sweeping motion with his hands, wordlessly ordering his coworkers to leave. His chest was aching. Greg grabbed a board and a couple of microphones and left the news tank at a run. Aaron took one last look at Jim, shook his head, and then left. A second later, the fire alarm began to sound, a low pulse muffled to near nothingness by the soundproof door.

Chris stayed where he was, staring at Jim through the glass. The two of them had been together for years. Every morning, Chris and Jim—and more recently Victoria—got in early and put the show together, scouring the newspaper, the Internet, and TV clips for stories that would light up the lines.

"I'm praying for you, man," Chris said, then released the Talk button. He gave Jim one more anguished look, then hurried out.

Jim wished he could follow. But he couldn't run away from what the poison had already done to him. His vision blurred. Time was slowing down. He was so tired. Why did he have to hold his breath, again? Oh yes, sarin.

When he looked back up, he saw that Victoria was still in the screener's room. She moved close to the glass, her dark eyes seeking out Jim's. Angrily, he shook his head and motioned for her to go.

Victoria pressed the Talk button. "I don't smell anything out here. The booth is practically airtight, anyway."

Jim wanted to tell her that "practically" wasn't the same as really and truly. It was the kind of argument they might have on air during a slow time, bantering to keep things moving along. But he didn't have the breath for it.

A part of Jim's brain remained coldly rational even as his body sent more and more messages that something was badly wrong. He hadn't breathed since that first fateful gulp of air when he opened the package. A vacuum was building up in his head and chest, a sucking hollowness, his body screaming at him, demanding that he give in.

But Jim Fate hadn't made it this far by giving in when things were tough. It had only been a minute, a minute-ten maybe, since he'd pulled the red string. But then he did give in to another hunger—the hunger for connection. He was all alone and he might be dying, and he couldn't stand that thought. He moved to the glass and put his hand up against it, fingers spread, a lonely starfish. And then Victoria mirrored it with her own hand, the anger between them forgotten, their matching hands pressed against the glass.

There was a band around Jim's chest, and it was tightening. An iron band. It was crushing him, crushing his lungs. His vision was dimming, but he kept his eyes open, his gaze never leaving Victoria.

With her free hand, Victoria groped blindly for the Talk button. "Jim, you've got to hold on," she yelled.

Jim's heart contracted when he heard how hoarse she sounded. She had to leave!

He lifted his hand from the glass and made a shooing gesture,

again wordlessly ordering her to leave. Instead she pushed the Talk button again and said, "I hear sirens. They're almost here!"

But his body was ready to break with his will. He had to breathe. Had to. But maybe he could filter it, minimize it.

Without taking his eyes from Victoria, Jim pulled up the edge of his shirt with his free hand and pressed his nose and mouth against the fine Egyptian cotton cloth. He meant to take a shallow breath, but when he started, the hunger for air was too great. He sucked it in greedily, the cloth touching his tongue as he inhaled.

He sensed the shoots of poison winding themselves deeper within him, reaching out to wrap around all his organs. His head felt like it was going to explode.

No longer thinking clearly, Jim let his shirttail fall away. It didn't matter, did it? It was too late. Too late. He tried to take another breath, but his lungs refused to move.

He staggered backward. Grabbed at his chair and missed. Fell over.

Horrified, Victoria started screaming. A shiver ran through Jim's body, his arms and legs twitching. And then Jim Fate was still. His eyes, still open, stared up at the soft, fuzzy blue ceiling.

Two minutes later the first hazmat responders, suited up in white, burst through the studio door.