CHAPTER 1

# Studio B

Studio B was the snakebite studio at WLT, the tomb of the radio mummy, and bad things happened to people who went in there. It was a big triangular room on the second floor of the Hotel Ogden, where WLT was located, at 12th and LaSalle in downtown Minneapolis. Dad Benson said it felt like a vacuum chamber—once, he gasped for breath during *Friendly Neighbor* and two huge flies dove into his throat and almost choked him. The Rev. Irving James Knox claimed he couldn't hear himself talk in there when he did *Hope for Tomorrow*. He was used to sanctuaries where his words rolled off the walls like ocean surf; in Studio B, the waves hit a big sponge. Reed Seymour once got the hiccups so bad in there his partial plate came off and he had to gum the news. And a week later, three of the Shepherd Boys, a gospel quartet, slipped in and quietly de-pantsed him during a long account of a tragic house fire leaving 6 Persons Dead in St. Paul. He kept reading but he yipped twice when they pulled off his shorts. Every other day or so, the Shepherds snuck in

during *The Noontime News* to play their little tricks: they put spit in his water glass and pelted him with food and poured mucilage in his shoes and one day they lit the script on fire and he had to read very *fast*—it was an obituary and he never got to the *Survived by* part—so the next day, Reed locked the studio door. Then, after the newscast was safely delivered, *the door wouldn't unlock*, and they kept him in there, frantic, whanging on the walls, until the pee ran down his legs. That was the sort of thing that happened in Studio B.

So none of the announcers liked to use B, they would rather go in A, the big studio, even with the musicians lounging around and smirking and smoking, or sit in C, a room covered with green acoustic tile and known as the Gas Chamber because Leo LaValley did *Reflections* in there and left it full of sour green farts. Once he had to go in B to record a couple dozen Minnesota Dairy Council commercials and he ducked out to see a man about a dog and when he returned, the remaining scripts were for Murray's Meats in Minneapolis. "Oh well," he thought, and recorded them, including a line that the copywriter swore wasn't his, "Yes, folks, nobody beats Murray's meat," a line that almost got Leo fired. "How could you read that and not see what it says?" said his boss Ray Soderbjerg. Leo hadn't spotted it because he was busy trying not to laugh at an announcer named Phil Sax standing in the door with his finger poking out of his fly, waggling. A typical Studio B story.

A red and green neon WLT sign hung over the hotel marquee, flashing, "W . . . L . . . T . . . WLT . . . WLT . . . The. . . . Friendly. . . . Neighbor. . . . Station. . . ." Then the "Friendly" turned bright red, and a cartoon man's face appeared, in blue, with a red derby hat, and his mouth line suddenly flashed a big toothsome grin and his eyes became sparkly white and the hat tipped,

and when the eyes sparkled, the lights in Studio B dimmed. Only in B. Nowhere else. Gene the Chief Engineer checked the wiring. Nothing. It was a snakepit, that was all.

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The curse of Studio B began in 1936, during a January blizzard, when a young disc jockey named Price Waterman, who emceed *Afternoon Ballroom* in Studio B, had to read school closings and road reports for two hours and ran out of water. His mouth got dry and his big meaty voice became a whisper and he couldn't get his breath. He talked without breathing for as long as possible and blacked out and when he came to, his voice was gone. He gargled and rinsed, he tried hot packs and cold, he rubbed his throat with goose grease, he dosed himself with hot gin and Moxie, with chili peppers, with birchbark tea, but his voice didn't come back. He could only hum or make a soft strangling sound like a pigeon. So he had to get a job. Through an uncle in the potato business, he found employment as a sorter in a warehouse in Minot, culling wounded spuds from a conveyor chute, and was killed in August, crushed in a massive potato slide when a truck gate opened and he was unable to cry out and warn the driver.

It was felt by his old colleagues that the ghost of Price stood behind the drapes of Studio B, restless, shifting from foot to foot, clearing its ghostly throat, waiting for The Last Sign-off. Shadows moved in the velvet folds when Price was stirring. Newscasts troubled him, so did drama shows, but he seemed calmer when musicians were around. On Saturday nights, the *Old WLT Barn Dance* broadcast from the Star of the North Ballroom one floor below, on a stage festooned with pine log posts and a big

red barn backdrop anchored with hay bales, and the *Barn Dance* announcer, George Akers (Old Iron Pants), liked to slip up to B with a couple of the Buckle Busters and enjoy a bump of bourbon and a few hands of Between the Sheets during the gospel portion of the program.

He and the boys would play for ten minutes, jump up and leave the cards on the table and run down for a station break ("Thank you so much, Shepherd Boys! More Barn Dance coming up—this is WLT, your Friendly Neighbor Station, seven-seventy ay-em, studios at the Hotel Ogden, Minneapolis") and then return to the game upstairs.

One Saturday night, George returned to find his handful of aces gone—disappeared!—and in its place a variety of less meaningful cards. "Boys," he said, "the days of radio are numbered. Old Price is trying to tell us."

The boys laughed. Radio? In decline? This was 1937. When you were in radio, you owned the world. Men moved aside for you, beautiful women smiled up at you, doors opened, and as you slipped through, you heard people whisper your name.

"We're on the way out," said George. "We're going to go the way of the Ubangis. We're going to walk in the moccasins of the Sioux Indians. It's the last roundup, boys. We're sitting pretty now but it'll soon be over."

The boys gathered up the cards and redealt. Old Iron Pants got a pair of twos, a jack, a six, and a three.

"Yes, the handwriting is on the wall, boys. Fate has us in its cross-hairs. The iceberg is dead ahead. It won't be long now. The little bastard has our name in his hand."

"What's gonna take the place of radio, you figure?" asked Doc, the banjo player, playing his royal flush.

Old Iron Pants laid down his cards. "They will invent something," he said. "It'll have the same effect as bourbon

but it won't give you headaches or upset the stomach, so it'll be used even by the kiddos. It'll earn gazillions. And boys, they are not going to deal us in on that hand."

Doc picked up the dimes. "Where'd you ever get such a load of B.S.?"

"Doc, I got it from old Price himself, and it's the level truth. Ain't that right, Price?" The boys looked up, and the drapes trembled.