

Chapter One

What the hell did you expect?

Siehl didn't look happy. He kept fiddling with a fancy cigarette lighter that sat on his desk. The black plastic base of the lighter had been streaked with cream-colored lines to make it look like a block of marble. He'd flicked it six times, and the sparks left a faint tang of ozone in the air.

I said, "Where did you get that thing?"

"Huh?" He looked at it like he was seeing it for the first time. "This? Hell, I don't know. My secretary gave it to me when I moved here from St. Louis." He flicked it again. "It doesn't work worth shit."

I looked around Siehl's office. He sat at a kidney-shaped desk covered with papers and telephones and dictating equipment. In front of the desk, six chairs formed a semicircle around a glass-topped coffee table. There were pictures of redwoods and sand dunes on the walls. It looked like a room where the Nobel Prize Nominating Committee ought to meet. I wondered what Siehl would think of my office.

I said, "The meter is running."

He looked at me like he'd found a cigar butt in the candy dish. "You didn't park on the street, did you?"

"I get a hundred a day, plus expenses. So far you owe me four dollars and seventeen cents."

He scowled and cleared his throat. "Don't you think the first consult ought to be free?"

"Last year I came to this hospital with a broken finger. I don't remember getting any introductory offers."

He placed the lighter firmly on the desk, like someone who's making a long-deliberated chess move. "How old are you?"

"If that's your idea of a serious question, I can see why you're in trouble."

Siehl bristled, but he didn't say anything. I said, "I imagine that you've got a problem, and you're under some kind of pressure, and you can't trust anybody you know. You probably picked my name out of the phone book. I'll show you my license, but I'll be damned if I'll show you my birth certificate."

Siehl grinned. He wasn't used to being told off, but he didn't mind it. "I thought you'd have steely-gray eyes."

"And?"

"And be at least forty."

"Sounds like you were expecting Nick Charles." I sat perched on the forward edge of the chair seat. Sitting in the middle had been like sinking into a bucket of sawdust. I wondered if Siehl had chosen his low, slouchy furniture with intimidation in mind.

He said, "Have you ever tracked down a poison-pen letter-writer?"

"You're kidding."

"*Bullshit!* What are you grinning at?"

"What are you getting worked up about? Poison-pen letters are sort of quaint. Most people don't get rattled about that kind of crap any more."

He looked sour. "You think this is beneath your dignity?"

"No. I'm just surprised. Have these letters been coming to you?"

"No, not me." He rummaged in the file-drawer of his desk. He stopped and stared into space for a minute, exasperated. He was a youngish thickset man, about thirty-six, with a full neck that was starting to run to fat. He picked up his telephone and dialed a digit. There was a buzz in his outer office, and I heard his secretary say, "Yes?"

"What did I do with that envelope from Ross?"

"You gave it to Barry Alspach, sir."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks." He punched the phone button down with a forefinger and then dialed a three-digit number. "Son of a bitch. I'd lose my nuts if they weren't... Barry! This is Dave. Listen, do you have those letters? Bring them up here, will you. Well, as soon as you can." He hung up and looked at me blankly.

I said, "I can hear your secretary."

"Yeah. Well, it's easier to hear in here than it is out there." He scowled at me. I didn't say anything. He said, "Joanie's really good. She's a Kelly Girl, but I've kept her for three months." I still didn't say anything. Finally he said, "Look. Would it make you feel any better if I closed the door?"

"I'm wondering why you want a confidential investigation of something that isn't very confidential."

"Well, actually it is. Everybody who knows about it is in Administration, and we're kind of like a family. You know?" I thought about nodding an assent, but I didn't. Siehl said, "Dan McCarthy used to tell me that we ought to put Administration in a separate building about a block away. We could fart around and send memos to each other and not interfere with the hospital." He grinned, with a little effort. More silence hung between us.

I said, "What's being brought up here now?"

"The letters."

"Who's bringing them?"

"Barry Alspach. He's the Administrative Intern."

"Come again?"

Siehl said, "When you get a Master's Degree in Hospital Administration, you have to spend a year working in a hospital. That's an Internship."

"You mean wheeling patients around and working in the labs and that sort of thing?"

"No, in *Administration*." Siehl looked pained. He fished a cigarette out of a shirt pocket and lit it with a throwaway lighter from another pocket. I looked at the black plastic cube. I wished I still smoked.

I said, "Why does Barry Alspach have the letters?"

"Because I gave them to him. See, he has a Preceptor..." He paused, waiting for me to ask.

"You mean someone like a faculty advisor here on the hospital staff?"

"Yeah. Except that I always think of it as a master-apprentice arrangement. Anyway, Barry has a shitty Preceptor."

"Who's that?"

"George Gibbs. He's the Assistant Administrator." He leaned on *Assistant* just hard enough to make it stick out.

I said, "And you're the Associate Administrator, and you're an echelon higher in the ranks, and you think that you should have been his Preceptor."

"Hell, yes. George Gibbs has been around here for years, and he'll still be an Assistant Administrator when they tear this place down." He looked out the window. He sounded like he could fulminate about George Gibbs for hours.

I said, "Who chooses the Preceptor?"

"Ross does. Ross the Boss."

A tall kid in a brown polyester suit walked into Siehl's outer office. I could hear him ask the secretary if it was okay to come in. He got as far as the doorway and craned around the corner to try to catch Siehl's eye. He was carrying a brown manila envelope. Siehl was still staring out the window. I said, "You have a visitor."

"Oh. Barry! Yeah. Come in. You've got the letters?" Barry put the envelope on Siehl's desk. He avoided looking at me directly, and he started edging back toward the door. I could hear his sibilant breathing. Siehl said, "Hey, I want you to meet Frank Chandler. He's going to find out who wrote those letters. This is Barry Alspach."

Relieved at being introduced, Barry stepped over and pumped my hand. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Chandler. Are you a policeman?"

"Sham Shpade."

He didn't seem to get it. He looked at Siehl for help. Siehl said, "Thanks for bringing the stuff up. Did you read any of them?"

"Yes. They're creepy." Barry looked like he'd bitten into something putrid.

Siehl said, "Yeah, there are some really fucked-up people in this world," with the tone of closing the discussion. We all looked at each other for a moment, and then Barry said, "Well, if that takes care of everything..."

"Yeah. Thanks, Barry." We both watched while Barry made his exit. Siehl sighed and said, "He's a good kid, but he needs some Dale Carnegie."

"Or some vocational counseling."

Siehl surprised me by getting mad. "I don't need a lot of smartass remarks!"

"It's nothing personal. Barry just looks like a lamb who's wandered into a barbecue pit. What's in the envelope?"

Siehl muttered, "Jesus Christ," but he opened the envelope anyway. He handed me a thin handful of eight-and-a-half-by-eleven sheets of white paper. They were xerox copies. One of the copies had a washed-out letterhead of Riverview Hospital at the top. I said, "Where are the originals?"

"Ross has them."

"Does anyone else have copies?"

Siehl stared out the window again. "George Gibbs."

I wondered how many broken legs and appendectomies and cardiac by-pass operations it took each year to pay Siehl and Gibbs and Ross. I looked at the xerox copies. They were neatly typed, without many mistakes or x'ed-out words. The type was ordinary typewriter elite. There were no indentations, paragraphs, salutations, or signatures. Molly Bloom. I picked out the one with the Riverview Hospital letterhead and read it.

I suppose you think this is funny, dont you Doctor, you probably think this is a real riot. You think your really putting one over on every body. I think your disgusting,

especially when you make Darlene get down on her knees and take it in her mouth and you come all over her face. Or does she like it that way. Ill bet you do, your so old that you cant get it up unless she sucks on it.

It went on like that for the rest of the page. I glanced through the other letters. They were much the same – mostly oral-sex references, some genital-genital speculations, and a funny three-line digression about pot bellies. There were eight letters in all, including one that rambled on for two pages.

Something in the language kept nibbling at the back of my mind, but it eluded me when I tried to pin it down. I decided to let it swim in the alpha-waves for a while and said, "Who was this addressed to?"

Siehl was lighting another cigarette. "Richard Parker. The Chief of our Medical Staff."

"Who's Darlene?"

Siehl rolled his eyes up to a point about six feet over my head, and then back down. "Darlene Kotecki. She's a Ward Clerk."

"You mean one of those little honeys in a pink smock that all the nurses boss around?"

"Yeah," he said unenthusiastically. "Richard Parker's old enough to be her father. He could damn near be her grandfather." He scowled at me, trying to get into some sort of executive attitude. "You haven't read all of those already, have you?"

"Only enough to wonder why anybody gives a rat's ass about the whole business. Doctors get weird mail every day."

He sulked and said, "It's different in a hospital."

I said, "When I worked in a hospital, people screwed each other the same way they do in insurance companies and police departments and everywhere else. The only difference here is that your Chief of Staff is breaking the code." Siehl was sitting bolt upright, scowling hard, but listening. I said, "It's okay for doctors to screw nurses, because they make enough money to

know which fork to use, and a lot of them went into nursing to hook up with a doctor anyway. But Ward Clerks are too many rungs down the ladder. It's sort of like screwing the girls from Housekeeping down in the mop closet."

"Well..."

"So your Doctor Parker is getting a little on the side from Darlene. I assume he's married..."

Siehl nodded.

"...and he's not only breaking the rules and making an ass of himself, but somebody has the indelicacy to send him letters that say what everybody's thinking, more or less. He gets scared, because it's obviously an unpredictable creep who might call his wife some day. Besides that, his pride is hurt. So he leans on the Administrator to do something about it..."

Siehl nodded again.

"...and the Administrator makes copies of these two-bit attempts at pornography and gives them to his Associate Administrator and his Assistant Administrator. Now it's a horse-race to see who can bring in the doctor's pen pal and teach him how to use apostrophes."

"Or her," Siehl said.

"I wasn't leaving anybody out. *Him* includes *her* in this case."

"I want you to come over some night and explain that to my wife." He grinned. We were getting to be friends again.

I said, "I don't see any extortion here. It's just petty harassment. Why don't you turn the whole mess over to Security?"

Siehl's sunny disposition began to fade. "Our Security Director couldn't find his butt with both hands."

"Who does he work for?"

"George Gibbs."

We sat for a while and listened to the heating system run. Outside it was cloudy. It still had two weeks to snow before Christmas. A wing of the hospital was visible through Siehl's

window. A woman in a lime-green bathrobe stood in one of the rooms. She stood awkwardly, as though her stomach hurt.

Siehl said, "I know who's doing it."

I waited until he looked at me before I said, "Who?"

"Joyce Gruber. She's a Head Nurse, and she used to screw Richard Parker." He stared at me again. I didn't like the fervor in the stare. "Think you could check her out?"

"I'm not going to put anybody's fingerprints on the typewriter."

"Just check her out. I've got a great cover-story for you." I didn't say anything. He said, "I'll introduce you around and tell the staff that you're going to do an attitude survey. Then you can talk to anybody."

"What's an attitude survey?"

"Here, I'll show you." He reached into his credenza and handed me a vinyl binder with some fancy printing on the cover.

RIVERVIEW HOSPITAL
EMPLOYEE ATTITUDE SURVEY
T. A. CARNEY, MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS

Inside there was a table of contents – *Management, Policies, Facilities*, and other headings. After the first few pages, everything was in quotation marks. "*I feel that there's a real communications problem with the Administration.*" And so forth.

I said, "Your employees said this?" Siehl nodded. I said, "You paid somebody to listen to all of this stuff and write it down?"

"It wasn't just somebody. T. A. Carney's one of the biggest consulting firms in the country."

"And this is supposed to reflect everybody's unvarnished opinion?"

"All the surveys were confidential." He said it a little too fast, like an over-rehearsed actor.

"If I worked here, I'd have a hell of a hard time believing that."

He squirmed for a minute, but it was because he was itching to tell me something. He said, "I guess if you're going to play the role, you ought to know. You're right. For an extra three thousand dollars, we got a copy of the survey with all of the people identified."

I said, "I'll be a son of a bitch," and I stood up and walked over to the window. The woman in the green bathrobe had gone. Back to bed, I hoped.

Siehl stood up. He didn't know what to do. I walked back over to the chair and sat down, and so did he. I said, "I don't use cover stories, but I'm going to remember that one."

"Why?"

"I'm going to keep it in mind the next time somebody accuses me of making a dirty dollar."

We sat there for a while. The secretary typed in the outer office. I wondered how many days I could poke around Riverview Hospital before somebody threw a fit. Not many. I said, "I'll look for your letter writer. I'll need a five hundred dollar retainer."

Siehl said Jesus softly, but he pulled a checkbook out of his suitcoat pocket. He wrote out a check and handed it to me.

I said, "This is a personal check."

He bristled again. "Yeah, it's personal. It's good."

"That's not the point. If I'm working for you and not for the hospital, then I've got no right to be here unless I've got a sick friend. If I start asking questions and somebody gets irritated, they can have me thrown out with every justification in the book. Does Ross know about this?"

"Ross," said Siehl, "doesn't know shit from apple-butter. I'll take care of him. And I'll take care of anybody else who complains. For Christ's sake, I've already told you who to check out. What the hell more do you want?"

"Just a reasonable chance at finding the truth. But you're paying the freight." He glowered at me, but he kept quiet. I

said, "I'll need to see some Personnel files. Darlene Kotecki's, Joyce Gruber's, and Richard Parker's."

"We don't keep Personnel files on the doctors." He dialled his phone, and we stared at each other with blank expressions while it rang somewhere. I could hear and half-see his secretary putting a vinyl cover over her typewriter. Siehl finally hung up. He said, "Those bastards down in Personnel all go home at five o'clock," and he reached for another cigarette.

"I imagine that's what they're getting paid for. I can see the files tomorrow. Is there any place where I can get a look at these people tonight?"

"Parker takes Darlene over to the bar at the Vickers Hotel pretty often."

Siehl was winding down. He looked tired and miserable. I put the xeroxed letters back in the brown envelope, picked up my coat, and stood up. I didn't want to leave him looking like he'd lost his last friend. I said, "Who was the guy who told you to move your office out into the cow pasture?"

"You mean Dan McCarthy? He used to work here. He was a Systems Analyst, and he was the only one who ever got the payroll to run right. Really a bright guy."

"Isn't he here any more?"

"No. Ross fired him. He wanted him to work up a computerized index for all of our memos and correspondence and shit. Dan told him that it'd be a waste of time, and Ross fired him for insubordination. Dumb bastard."

"Where is he now?"

Siehl grinned and shook his head. "He wangled a grant from some university to study superstitions. He's down in the Virgin Islands or someplace." He looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time. "Funny you should ask."

"Why?"

"You remind me of him."

I said, "Here's my card. Do you have an extension here that doesn't go through the switchboard?"

Siehl dug a business card out of his desk and scribbled a number on the back. I was on my way out the door when he said, "Hey! Who's Nick Charles?"

"Don't you ever go to the movies?"

"Christ, I don't have time to do anything any more." He was reaching for the phone again when I left.

In the outer office Siehl's secretary was putting on a winter coat. I stepped behind her and helped her slip her arm through the sleeve. She smiled a gorgeous smile and said, "Thank you."

"If you smile like that again, I'll help you put on most anything."

"You ought to come around here more often. You just made my day." She was wearing a white turtleneck sweater and skirt, and she carried her head high. She looked smashing. She also had a wedding ring on her finger.

From inside his office Siehl hollered, "Joanie?" She shrugged and turned toward his door. I said, "I'll be seeing you," and stepped out into the hall.

I walked past doors labelled *Assistant Administrator*, *Communications*, and *Security*. The hall carpet was a yellow-orange indoor-outdoor type that flowed into all of the offices. The walls were covered with a rough textured twine-colored material, and there were more Sierra Club photographs hanging between the doors. It looked like a model home that nobody would ever live in.

Barry Alspach stepped out of a stairwell doorway at the end of the hall. He was carrying the kind of briefcase that studious kids carry, a fat vinyl-covered thing that was big enough to hold a car battery. He stood crookedly, as though he was lugging half a set of encyclopedias. I said, "Hello, Barry."

"Hello, Mr. Chandler." He looked like he didn't know whether to wait for me to pass or to fall into step with me. I stopped and watched while he shifted the briefcase from one hand to the other.

I said, "You stealing the sash weights?"

He blinked uncertainly. "What's a sash weight?"

"Barry, you make me feel like I'm a hundred years old. What do you have in that thing?"

"Oh, just some of the projects that I've been working on." He lowered the briefcase to the floor and wheezed.

"Do you always take that much work home?"

He grinned, half -pleased and half-embarrassed. "I guess so. Yes, I do. I don't know how people keep up if they don't."

"I think the trick is not worrying about keeping up. But you look to me like the kind of guy who works hard and carries the load for six other people."

"You know, I feel that way sometimes." He looked at the brown manila envelope I was carrying. "How are you going to look for..." I didn't say anything. He looked at me and tried again. "How can you tell who wrote something like that?"

I liked him. He wasn't too sure of himself, but he wasn't afraid, either. I said, "I don't know. If it's a crazy person, it could be anybody. If it's somebody who's doing it maliciously, then there's a reason involved. I don't know enough about the people or circumstances yet to make any guesses about the reasons. You could probably figure it out faster than I can right now."

Barry said, "You know, that sounds like *A Challenge to the Reader*. I never could get those."

"You were being flim-flammed there. In real life you have to figure out why anybody would bother to pull a lot of the crap that goes on. Their motives are usually so petty that it's surprising."

"You mean like Watergate?"

"Exactly."

Barry looked ruefully at his overloaded briefcase. "I'm going to have a hard time concentrating tonight."

I said, "Let's make a deal. If you can figure this out before I do, I'll split my fee with you."

"Really?"

"Hell, yes. This is a penny-ante job. You already know everybody who's involved. And you look like you could stand a change from reading floor plans, or whatever it is that you're doing. Why don't you think about it?"

He was beaming. "Okay, Mr. Chandler. Thanks." He picked up his briefcase. "I just wish I knew where to start."

"Drink a few beers and free-think it. *Malt does more than Milton can...*"

He got that insecure expression again. "You know, I don't understand what you're saying half the time."

"It's partly intentional. See you around, Barry."

He headed down the hall in the direction that I'd come from. I stepped through a set of double doors and into the lobby. The place was filling with people who had come to visit the sick ones upstairs. There was a low hubbub of conversation and occasional giddy laughter, but the undertone was anxious. A hospital was no place where anyone wanted to be. Two women in gray uniforms dispensed visitors' passes from behind a desk covered with file-boxes. A sign behind them said *Children Under 14 Are Not Permitted Beyond the Lobby*. The rest of us weren't that lucky.