

GRIEVANCES

Chapter One

There's something about a newsroom that attracts people with grievances. After five years in the business, I've seen my share of people convinced that the government is bugging their house, that aliens are controlling their brains, that a partner has cheated them out of a fortune, or that an ex-spouse is illegally denying them contact with their kids.

Because I work nights with no regular beat, I'm often assigned to talk to these nut cases and I've developed a talent for quickly identifying them. Reams of documents or long chronologies written in capital letters are dead giveaways. But I also think I have a genetic gift, passed on by my journalism family. My father, Lucas Harper Jr., was the beloved editor at *The Detroit Free Press* and his father was the crusading publisher of *The New York Sun*. They must have been good at spotting nut cases. In this business, you don't get far unless you can.

But snap decisions can be wrong. Everyone in the business remembers the city editor who dismissed anonymous accusations about sexual escapades and the theft of millions by a TV evangelist. The tipster contacted another newspaper, which won the Pulitzer Prize for the Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker scandal. And my father's newspaper had won a Pulitzer Prize after it pursued a crazy, anonymous tip that a 1972 vice presidential candidate had received electroshock therapy and kept it hidden. No one wanted to be the editor or reporter who failed to take the next PTL club or Thomas Eagleton call.

I was running late when I reached my cubicle in the *Charlotte Times* newsroom. Walker Burns, my boss and the managing editor, sprawled

in my chair, his feet on my desk. The sight stopped me short and sank my stomach like a blue light in the rearview mirror.

“Matt, what a dang treat!” he said, springing up to pump my hand like I was a long-lost friend. “Thank you sooooo much for coming in today.” At six foot four to my five foot ten, Walker towered over me. I felt like Romper Room’s youngest, smallest student being welcomed by Miss Francis.

“Sorry, Walker.”

“No problem, pardner. But a bunch of us have gotten together and decided we’re gonna try to put out a newspaper.” His smile loomed over the silver and turquoise slide of his Texas string tie. “I was beginnin’ to worry we were gonna have to saddle up and ride off without you.”

“Sorry, Walker.”

“Well, now that we’re all ready to go, there’s some ol’ boy at the reception desk who’s showed up with a yarn to spin. Spend some time with him. See if he’s got anything.”

“That’s the only thing we got going?”

“I could always round you up an obit . . .”

Obituaries were Walker’s ultimate bad assignment threat. “That’s okay,” I said. “Has he been drinking?”

“Doesn’t appear so.”

“Is he wacky?”

“Well, pardner, your job is to figure that out,” he said as he headed back to the city desk. “But I don’t think we’re lookin’ at another Colonel Sanders.”

Colonel Sanders was a deranged but harmless man who had visited the newsroom regularly for several years. He told anyone who would listen that he’d been a colonel in Korea and that he’d been captured by the Communists who had inserted a transmitter in his brain. The VA, he said, had turned down his disability claims because they were all part of the same conspiracy, as were a number of Congressmen to whom he had also written without result. Reporters new to the story were shown the correspondence.

When Colonel Sanders died a pauper and with no known relatives,

the newspaper did a story and Walker Burns took up a collection to give him a proper burial. Because a portion of the fund was diverted for election-night pizzas, there was only enough for cremation and a simple urn, which, along with Colonel Sanders's ashes, was delivered back to Walker, whose name was on the forms from the funeral home.

Colonel Sanders still sat on a corner of Walker's cluttered city desk, next to the police scanner. Over the years, a baseball cap had been placed on top of the urn and a cigar stuck out from under the lid. Colonel Sanders no longer talked, but in the heat of deadline, he was talked to a lot.

I draped my blue blazer over the back of my chair, loosened my tie, and motioned to the receptionist to send the man over.

He wore a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, open-at-the-collar Oxford blue shirt, gray slacks, and brown walking shoes. He was narrow-shouldered, trim, and a little pale. He moved delicately through the newsroom. He could have passed as a teacher at a boarding school. I judged him to be in his mid-thirties, just a bit older than me.

He reached the cubicle and extended his hand. "I'm Bradford Hall."

"Matt Harper." We shook hands.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"It's what I get paid for." I didn't say it in a mean way, but it was important to establish distance. I was there to collect information, not become an advocate. There's usually a point where you have to tell people like Hall that the paper won't be covering their story.

"Oh, thank you," he said, reaching inside his coat pocket for his wallet. "I wasn't sure how it worked. How much?"

"No. No. No. It's not like that. The newspaper pays me. You don't have to pay me unless you're buying an ad or a subscription in which case you've come to the wrong guy. What brings you to the *Times*?" I was thinking I might be done with Mr. Hall in a hurry. Obits, here we come.

He glanced around the newsroom. "Is there a, uh, better place we can talk?"

It was late in the afternoon. The time for planning tomorrow

morning's edition was past and the actual work of writing, editing, and laying out the paper was picking up, the pace marked by the muted machine-gun tapping from several dozen keyboards. The desks were full. The conference rooms were empty. I selected the one with the fewest coffee stains on the carpet and some framed *Charlotte Times* Famous Front Pages (Man Walks on Moon; Billy Graham at White House; Kennedy Shot) on the wall. I slouched into a well-worn brown couch; Bradford Hall sat on the edge of a matching easy chair. He wasted no time.

"I am here because your newspaper has a reputation for being concerned about justice. I've read about what the *Charlotte Times* has done in the past. You led the way on civil rights. The *Times* supported the sit-ins and school busing. The *Times* was about the only Southern newspaper to say something nice about Dr. King."

"True," I said with some pride.

"Well, I'm in the middle of something—something that has to do with justice and with civil rights. I think it might be a story."

I looked hard at Bradford Hall. On the surface, there was nothing to identify him as crazy. No impossibly smeared eyeglasses or overcoat in summer or sheaves of clippings and "affidavits" spilling out of a battered briefcase.

"Go on."

"First off, I'm not from here."

"I could tell."

He laughed. "I'm told I haven't lost my Yankee accent. But, these days I live mostly in South Carolina at our family plantation along the Savannah River, although from the rest of the family's point of view, I've become not very welcome."

"What happened?"

"They feel I ask too many questions."

Something about how he said it got my attention. Nothing gets a journalist going like someone telling him that he's asking too many questions. We get paid to ask the questions, however rude. We will decide, not the people we are questioning, when there are too many of them. I didn't even know Bradford Hall. And he wasn't a journalist. But I knew

I didn't like anyone telling him he was asking too many questions. I sat up straight on the couch.

"About what?"

"A shooting. A murder, really. In Hirtsboro, a tiny little town by our plantation. The victim was a thirteen-year-old black kid named Wallace Sampson."

"When did this happen?"

"Almost twenty years ago." He sat back in his chair. "After some civil unrest."

I took out my reporter's notebook. "What was his name, again?"

"Wallace Sampson. He was shot in the head with a deer rifle shortly after midnight. He was in the black part of town. They took him to the medical school at Charleston but he was already dead. No one was ever charged. I don't know if anybody even investigated."

"But you have been."

"Yes, I guess I have."

"Why?"

Bradford Hall eased back into the brown chair and it seemed to swallow him up. "You know," he said after a while, "my father asks me that. My wife asks me that. Sometimes, *I* even ask me that. The only way I can explain is if I start at the beginning."

For the next two hours I watched through the thin slits of the conference room windows as the sun set, the sky flushed pink, then darkened to deep blue and black. In the newsroom, dayside reporters packed up and went home. Copy carriers shuttled between the news desk and the back shop, carrying the early proofs of the next day's pages. My colleagues on the night shift busied themselves with their assignments, trips to the coffee pot, and the occasional detour to catch a careful nonchalant peek inside the conference room. Reporters are paid to know what's going on. Closed doors make them nervous.

He talked. I mostly listened. Because for Bradford Hall, starting at the beginning meant starting more than three hundred and fifty years ago when his family came over on the Mayflower. In succeeding generations, he said, Bradfords had served as governors and senators and preachers and

philanthropists. His great-great-grandfather had started New England's biggest bank. Another started Bradford College. And, of course, along the way, the family acquired some fabulous property—an estate in Boston; one in Westchester County, New York; a summer compound on Martha's Vineyard; a winter home in Florida; and in South Carolina's Low Country, a plantation known as Windrow.

"I was there several months ago working in the potting shed when I overheard two of the help talking. Mary Pell runs everything and she was talking to Willie Snow, our caretaker, and she said, 'Do you think Mrs. Sampson will ever find peace?' And Willie Snow said, 'Not until there's justice.'

"I don't think they knew I was there until I asked her who Mrs. Sampson was. And she said, 'Just some momma that lost her baby a long time ago. Nothing you need to fret about.' I didn't fret about it but I didn't forget about it. A few days later, I asked her again. She didn't want to discuss it. That got me even more interested."

I sympathized. "I hate it when people tell me something's not my business. I'll be the judge of whether it's my business."

"Me, too. I guess I've always had a curious streak," Bradford continued. "I studied botany at Harvard. I've made it a life goal to identify every plant species at Windrow. It drives me crazy when there's a plant I don't know. I wanted to know more about Mrs. Sampson, so I started poking around."

"So why do you care about this?"

"It bothers me that it was never investigated. It bothers me that no one wants to talk about it. Plus, it's an intellectual challenge. Solving the murder of Wallace Sampson is like trying to find the name of a plant I can't identify. I really can't stop until I do."

Over the years, the building that houses the *Times* had settled and some of the floors had become uneven. The problem was particularly pronounced on the fifth floor, where the newsroom shared space with the library, and it was at its worst in the corner where the conference room was located. As a result, the walls shook and the Famous Front Pages rattled when someone approached. Certain staffers had very distinct

walks and I could tell from the nature of the rattle who was coming before they got there.

Walker Burns was on his way. He knocked, opened the door part way, and stuck his head in.

“Can I borrow you for a moment, Matt?”

Bradford stood. “I’m sorry, I’ve really taken too much time.”

“Sit down,” I told him. “I’ll be right back.” I followed Walker out of the conference room.

“Are we comfy in there?” he whispered. “Can I get you anything? Coffee? A donut?”

“Sorry, Walker.”

“What’s this loco want anyway?”

“I’m finding that out.”

He opened his eyes wide in mock disbelief. “You don’t know yet? In the amount of time you’ve already spent with that guy I could have written *War and Peace!*”

I rolled my eyes.

“Wrap it up and get your hide out here! The publisher just came by with a tip about some fatcat downtown friend of his who died. He wants an obit for tomorrow morning.”

“Why can’t Ronnie Bullock do it? He’s the obit writer.”

“If you’ve got some journalism more worthwhile to do, then *you* ask him to do it.” Walker headed back to the city desk.

I returned to the conference room.

“I hope I didn’t get you in trouble,” said Bradford. He started to stand again. I motioned him back down.

“I’m going to have to wrap it up,” I said. “This investigation of yours is all very interesting, but what is it that you expect us to do?”

Bradford Hall sat so far forward on the edge of his chair that he was practically kneeling. “When it comes to finding out about plants, I know where to look. There are books and periodicals and drawings and texts. When it comes to a killing, I don’t know where to start. I was hoping you or someone here could help me. You could even stay at my place. I once saw a newspaper series about unsolved crimes. Maybe the *Times*

could look into this. Maybe somebody wrote about it at the time. Maybe somebody remembers.”

My job is night general assignment reporter. I come in late in the afternoon. By the time I arrive, the creative stories, the ones where you can really write or really investigate, have already been given to the dayside reporters the big editors favor. Those of us on the nightside get the obits, the stories from the cop shop, and night general assignment. Whatever’s left. That’s generally not going to include any time spent writing about a years-old unsolved killing on the edge of our circulation area.

But before I told Hall that, I wanted to do a little checking. I thanked him for thinking of the *Charlotte Times*, told him I would get back to him, and ushered him out of the newsroom.

On my way back to my cubicle, I passed Bullock. “Ronnie,” I asked, “Any way you can handle this obit for me? I’ve got to get back to the library and pull some clips on this nut case.”

“Sure thing,” he said. “We wouldn’t want to have to burden the progeny of Lucas Harper with the unseemly task of writing obits.”

Bullock could be lazy, not to mention a jerk. I’ve never used being a Harper to get ahead. If I had, would I be a general assignment reporter working nights at a mid-sized daily in North Carolina? The truth of it is, in terms of journalism, neither my father nor grandfather taught me anything. Lucas Sr. was dead before I arrived and Lucas Jr. might as well have been.

“Forget it,” I told Bullock. “I’ll do it myself.”

It was the end of the shift before I could get to the newsroom library. Nancy Atkinson, the librarian, peered at me over her glasses. “Almost twenty years ago? You’re waaaay before newsroom computers, honey. In fact, you’re before microfiche. You’ll be looking for clippings.”

Assassinations, wars, scandals—Miss Nancy had catalogued it all. I couldn’t recall her ever getting excited about much of anything. But Miss Nancy actually hurried past the library’s computers and the film readers and deep into a maze of shoulder-high Army-green filing cabinets. I could sense her delight.

“It’s so nice to retrieve real stories from real newspapers,” she sighed.

“Even microfiche is okay. But computers and these files make news stories seem so artificial. Anyway, there’s no proof anything was really ever printed. No proof at all.”

Miss Nancy bent down in front of one of the cabinets and pulled out a drawer, releasing the unmistakable musty smell of aging newsprint. She fingered through a row of brown envelopes and pulled one labeled *Murders—South Carolina*.

Inside were maybe a hundred clippings, most a paragraph or two long. They were arranged by date so it didn’t take me long to find the one I was looking for. It was yellowed but didn’t look like it had been touched since it had been put in the morgue. The four-paragraph clip had been stamped in red with the date it ran in the *Times*. It read in its entirety:

South Carolina Youth Shot, Dies

Hirtsboro, S.C. (AP) A 13-year-old boy was shot in the head shortly after midnight here Friday night.

Wallace Sampson was taken by Hirtsboro Ambulance to the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston where a spokesman said he was pronounced dead.

Police said they were investigating.

The shooting followed several nights of racial unrest.

I scanned the rest of the clips. There were plenty of other briefs on stabbings and shootings and one longer piece about a Spartanburg preacher who’d been poisoned by his wife. But there had been no follow-up stories about the Sampson incident. I made a copy of the clip and returned the file to Miss Nancy.

“Are you on to something, Matt?”

“I don’t know,” I said, which was true. Most of these things never went anywhere.

I headed back to the newsroom deep in thought. Some of Bradford Hall’s story checked out but that didn’t mean much. I knew nothing about him beyond what he’d told me. But I liked what I saw in him—curiosity,

honesty, a willingness to pursue something, even against opposition, that he could have ignored. And of all the people with grievances I'd ever met, he was one of the most unusual: a Yankee blueblood investigating an unsolved South Carolina civil rights murder of almost twenty years ago.

I slid into my cubicle and lost myself in a photograph I keep on my desk, one my father took of my late brother Luke and me in our swimming suits standing on a platform floating in the middle of a lake. We're tanned, wet, and smiling. Luke, a head taller, has his right arm around my shoulder. Cradled in his left arm is a football, its leather soaked black from a game of catch that quickly escalated to spectacular diving grabs made while leaping into the lake from the platform.

I was still in the picture when a stack of letters, held together with rubber bands, hit my desk with a thud. The top letter was addressed to "The Racist Reporter" with the name and address of the *Charlotte Times*. I thumbed through the others. More of the same.

I looked up at the receptionist, who had known exactly for whom the letters were intended. "It's such a shame, Matt. They've got you all wrong."

I shrugged. "I understand where they're coming from."

"At least the demonstrators in front of the building are gone," she said hopefully. "Did they ever find out where you lived?"

Walker Burns has a saying: "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." This seemed like a very good weekend to spend some time checking out Hirtsboro and Bradford Hall.