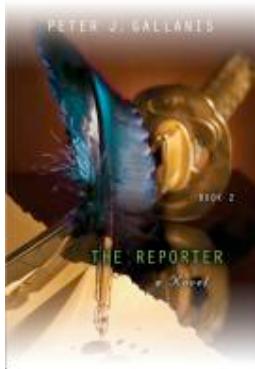


PETER J. GALLANIS

BOOK 2

THE REPORTER

*a Novel*



*Ten years after resigning in shame from the Palatine Star, Nic Pappas is reunited with Mary Jane Santos to once again investigate the case that has become known as The Brown's Chicken Massacre. Through use of the Freedom of Information Act, Santos acquires the Brown's case files. Pappas and Santos assemble one of the largest undercover teams to ever investigate a single case, and launch a nationwide manhunt to find the Brown's murderers.*

# The Reporter

## Part II

## Redemption

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# **The Reporter**

A Novel

## **Part II**

### **Redemption**

Peter J. Gallanis



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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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## **Dedication**

For my beautiful wife, Chriselda Padolina Gallanis, to whom I owe more than any simple words of mine could ever express.



## **Author's Note**

This book is a work of fiction, and like other authors, including but not limited to Stephen King and Mark Twain, I, too, took certain liberties: moving cities and counties or changing state laws to suit the needs of my story. So, I politely ask you to remember that most of what you're going to read never happened; the characters and the world they inhabit only live within the author's (very vivid) imagination.

—PJG



# Chapter 1

*December 31, 2001, 11:59 p.m., CST*

*I want to die.*

*Buddy, you really don't want to do this.*

*Yes, I do. Look, my affairs are in order, and the stage is set. See? I'm in my favorite place: in the middle of a beautiful garden, on a bridge, under an arch, above a bubbling brook with nothing now to bear witness to what I will soon do but the Sun, the Moon, and the stars. It's New Year's Eve, one minute to midnight, and I can see the North Star. I've had enough to drink, and when the New Year dawns, I'll reach in my pocket, uncap the bottle, and do what is necessary. I'll stay here and just fade away.*

*Just like an old soldier? It doesn't have to be this way.*

*This is the only way it can be. I'm tired. Do you understand? I've tried. I've really tried. I've fought the good fight and lost. Look, a good poker player knows when to fold 'em. I'm folding. I'm out, and very soon, I'm checking out.*

*You're throwing your life away.*

*This isn't life. This isn't living. I'm trapped between a past I can't escape and a future that holds no meaning. I don't live I ... I don't even have a word for what I do, but it isn't living. I'm like the victims' families now—neither dead nor alive but trapped somewhere in between.*

*They endure. Why can't you?*

*You know why. At least they have each other.*

*Do you feel so alone? Why? Why is it you can stand in the middle of a room filled with family and friends who love you and feel so—isolated?*

*Yes, I do feel alone because whatever forces are out there fucking with me—Karma, Fate, Destiny—for some damn reason, only I can feel them.*

*Do you feel them now?*

*Yes and no. I mean, I feel their presence, but it's almost as if they're just watching—watching and waiting.*

*Doesn't that tell you something?*

Peter J. Gallanis

*Yes, that they're finally finished with me. I always swore I'd be no man's tool. They've had their way, and now, very soon I'll have mine.*

*But we're not talking about men, are we?*

*It doesn't matter. Whatever use they had for me, they're done, and now they're admiring their work and laughing at me.*

*Do you really believe that?*

*What I believe doesn't matter anymore. I'm tired. Do you understand me? I want peace. I want to sleep.*

*Perchance to dream, eh?*

*Don't quote the Bard to me.*

*What you want to do is wrong.*

*It's not; it's the only choice left. I'm agnostic. You know that, so what I'm about to do is no sin in my mind. Very soon it's going to be 2002—the 11 year anniversary and what would have been my fortieth year on this Earth, and I have no desire to see that birthday. I'm finished. Finis. Done, and very soon, I'll be gone.*

*It's morally wrong.*

*Do not speak to me of morals. I had them once, and look what happened.*

*You're a young man.*

*I'm not young. I'm old. I feel old. I feel used and used up. I will not miss anything on this Earth. You know how I feel—we're nothing more than insignificant little creatures on an insignificant little planet in a never-ending universe, and when the final history is written, we won't even rate a footnote.*

*You were born. You were given life, and if you are agnostic, if you truly do not believe in God, the Devil, Heaven, or Hell, then all you have is this one chance, and if you throw that chance away, you'll never get it back. You had a chance once but let it slip away. To deny yourself a second chance is an affront to those forces up there that you acknowledge, but I'm thinking you don't fully understand.*

*I don't want any more chances.*

*Why?*

*Damn you to Hell! You know why! I shamed myself, Ma, my family, my friends, my employers, my colleagues, Friday! And ...*

*And who?*

*Don't. Do not speak her name—do you fucking hear me?*

*There's still a chance.*

*No, there is no chance. It's been nine years, and if it was going to happen, it would have happened by now. I hope she's happy. I really do. I hope she's married. I hope she has children. I hope she's finally found some accordance of peace.*

*You know as long as you're alive, she won't do that.*

*Good, then you've given me the final reason.*

*Buddy, there's always a chance. You can take that chance right now. Get in your car, drive five—do you hear me?—five short miles, knock on her door, and see what happens—you know exactly what she's doing at this moment.*

*No! I can't! I won't!*

*Then, call her. Take out your cell phone, punch seven little numbers, and you can hear her voice again.*

*No!*

*Why not?*

*Why not! How can you ask that! Why! Goddam it! I'll tell you why! I'm insane! That's why! I'm standing here talking to you ... talking to myself! I'm schizophrenic and insane! For 10 years she's all I've thought about! All I've dreamed about! Every time I see a long haired woman, my heart aches for her! I can still smell her hair, her soap, her shampoo, her conditioner, her hand cream! Her spore is everywhere! It oozes out of my apartment's walls! She's haunted me! Do you know what it's like to stand in front of something so beautiful that all you want to do is fall on your knees and weep? Do you know what it's like to look at the greatest beauty you've ever seen but can't touch? Can't have? Can't make your own?*

*You can. Get in your car. Go, please. Go now, before it's too late.*

*It's already too late! Go away! I'm leaving! Now! I'm going to take these pills, open my mouth and scream, and I'm not going to stop until I'm dead! I'm letting out the demons! I have to! I'm insane, and I know it because now I can even smell her perfume! Do you hear me?! I'm standing here. I'm in my favorite place, in the middle of a beautiful garden, on a bridge, under the arch, above a bubbling brook, and it's New Year's Eve, almost midnight, and I can see the North Star. It's almost midnight, and I can smell her!*

*For Christ's sake! You know her favorite perfume!*

*I gave her the first bottle—Obsession!*

\*\*\*

*Okay, Buddy, you're going to do it, and I can't stop you. Do me one last favor, then. Before you leave, please, for me—there's the North Star—make a wish—make a wish for me, and then you can take your medicine and rest in peace.*

*All right, it won't do any good anyway.*

*"I wish I could see Mary Jane just one more time—"*

*"Then turn around," a voice behind me said.*

I spun like a madman, certain I was hearing things as well, but instead, I found myself looking at the diminutive, beautiful, and very angry form of one Mary Jane Santos.

"Happy New Year, Doctor Pappas. What are you thinking about when you look faraway like that?"

"Oy."

I opened my mouth to offer more but vomited instead.

\*\*\*

I bent over the rail and deposited a lot of tequila into the bubbling brook, feeling very sorry for the fish down below. Happy New Year! I immediately felt Mary Jane's hands on me, massaging my stomach. I will not bore you with gory details. I heaved several times, then felt cold water splashing over my head, then going down my gullet, which I quickly spat out. Great. Mary Jane had grabbed a bottle of water out of her backpack and doused me. Now I was a shivering, sputtering, and wet drunk.

"Next time, say it with flowers," she snarked, sounding very annoyed. "Let's go, Doctor. We've got things to talk about."

"Errr, ahhh, ack!"

"Yeah, errr, ahhh, and ack to you, too! Move it!"

She grabbed me around the waist and pulled me through the gardens of The U, through the doors of my building, up the stairs, down the hallway, etc. When we arrived at my apartment, she threw open the door, pulled me inside, and unceremoniously tossed me on the couch. Damn, she was still strong as Hell.

"Do you need the toilet?" she demanded, removing her coat and tossing it aside.

I was half lying on the couch, trying to comprehend what the fuck had just happened.

"Well? Speak up, damn it!"

"No," I croaked. "What are you doing here?"

Instead of answering, she grabbed her backpack, rooted around, produced another bottle of water, opened it ...

"I'm in no mood for another shower."

"You're not downwind!"

I was over the initial shock enough to get angry. I must have looked a horror to her: rail thin, pale, unclean, long hair, wild beard. It was hard to remember, but I think I'd been wearing (and sleeping in) my current ensemble for the past several days. I was not going to be nominated for the best-dressed man in Palatine anytime soon.

Saying nothing, she offered the bottle. All that heaving had given me a case of cottonmouth, so I accepted and took a cautious sip. My stomach complained but kept it down, so I took another and found myself talking to the floor.

"Why did you come here, Mary Jane?" I suddenly felt very ashamed.

"The mail. Keep sipping."

"You're going to have to draw me a map."

"How sober are you?"

I sighed. Actually I wasn't that bad off, well as far as liquor was concerned. I'd drunk what I considered to be "enough" tequila so I was more shocked than inebriated.

"Sober enough to remind you that you're here uninvited," I mumbled, pulling off my coat, trying to sit up straight but not doing a very good job of it.

As I was thus occupied, she was casting her eyes about the living room. It was a shambles.

"Love what you've done with the place."

"Like it? I call it 'Early Salvation Army'." Seeing as how I was about to check out of *Hotel Planet Earth*, bound for destinations unknown, I didn't see much point in cleaning up.

"What I would like is ten minutes of your life—give me ten short minutes and then I'll leave." She turned away, gazing out the balcony doors overlooking The U. "I would like to think my friendship earned me at least that much." Her voice was shaking, the wind coming out of her sails. My eyes began smarting.

"Go."

"I'm here because of this," she said, waving at a largish box teetering on my desk.

“What is it?”

She flounced to the box, enfolded in heavy brown paper, neatly ran a fingernail along an edge and dramatically removed the wrappings.

It was nothing more sinister than a plain white RCC box.

“I will ask one more time. What is it?”

“Your Christmas present, belatedly. Sorry it’s late, but I just got it the other day.”

I drank more water. It actually felt refreshing. “I’m sorry I don’t have one for you, and the clock is ticking.”

“This is what I call Pandora’s Box, and it’s just for you. More to the point, it’s what you’ve always wanted.”

“What?”

“The files: every suspect, every lead, every note, every scrap of evidence.”

I was suddenly on my wobbly legs, caressing the box.

“Would you two like to be alone?”

I let the zinger pass. “You’re kidding. The entire case?”

“No kidding,” she returned, eyeing me shrewdly. “It took three years of lawsuits, because the case is still open and active, and use of the Freedom of Information Act, or as you know it, FOIA, but we did it!” She was exalted.

“I don’t want it. That was a long time ago, and I’ve put it behind me.”

“I’d say not only do you want it, but you need it.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean!” I said, getting hot.

“You’re still lying on that damn beach. That’s what it means!” she spit. “Well, here’s your chance to put your money where your mouth is. I talked to the families, and we’ve decided we want you—Dr. Niccolo Yannis Pappas, associate professor of journalism, Columbia College Chicago and journalist extraordinaire, to conduct an independent investigation into the case that has become known as The Brown’s Chicken Massacre. But this time you’ll only work for one person—*me!* Unless, of course, you have a problem reporting to a woman.”

“Let me see if I understand you correctly,” I said, my voice beginning to crescendo. “You want me, a man who has long since retired from the journalism business, to investigate a case that for *eleven years* has baffled the Palatine Police Department, the

McHenry County Detectives Division, the Illinois State Division of Detectives, the FBI, *Unsolved Mysteries*, and a damn psychic?"

"You're sobering up," she said mildly.

**"Oy! Are you crazy!"**

"Maybe I am, but that's the offer. It's your show to run anyway you want, anyway you see fit. No one will question a single thing you do. We put up our houses paying for lawyers to get these files, took second mortgages, emptied college savings accounts, cashed 401Ks, broke every piggy bank," her lips began quivering, "and I'm betting the farm on you. So, is it a deal, or were you just a blow hard after all?"

"You have no right coming here after all these years, laying this on me, and judging my life! I don't want it! It's over for me, Mary Jane. I'm a college professor now, and I'm—"

"Happy?" she interrupted. "Sorry, but I see evidence to the contrary. I can also see you're not sobered up or in the right frame of mind to listen. My ten minutes are up. I'm leaving."

"And don't forget to take your damn box with you."

"I'm not strong enough to carry it down all those stairs. That's why I mailed it, and you're obviously in no condition either. I'll come back in the morning and pick it up with a dolly. In the meantime, if you get curious, feel free to take a peek, if you still have the balls, you know—"

"Do not quote me the final thing to have sprung from Pandora's Box, Mary Jane."

"Goodbye, Dr. Pappas." Wordlessly, she put on her coat, zipped it, walked to the door, opened it ...

"Mary Jane!"

She turned, one hand on the doorjamb.

I tried to stand straight and pull myself into some semblance of dignity. "It—it was good to see you. You look well."

"You *don't!*" she shot, slamming the door after her.

Wincing, I pinched myself to make sure I wasn't suffering from hallucinations or some other liquor-induced malady. I sat on the couch and hugged myself, rocking.

The entire time she was here, I could only think of one damn thing: her hand—her *left* hand—*her ringless left hand*.

\*\*\*

“I will not fucking open you!” I swore at Pandora’s Box.

The box said nothing.

I paced—back and forth, back and forth, as I always did when I was working out a problem, drinking water and seething.

The New Year’s reveling had already settled down, and things were quiet in The U. Having reveled myself on many a December 31, I knew once midnight rolled around, everyone spent a few minutes cheering in the New Year, and then all the drunks set themselves to throwing up or passing out.

The more water I drank, the more I was coming around, and speaking of it looked like the Fates were back in town, fucking with me yet again. Well, just because they came out of hibernation, didn’t mean I had to listen.

“I’m no man’s tool, Box. Do you hear me?”

All the box did was give me the silent treatment.

I paced—back and forth, back and forth, drinking water and reflecting on the last nine years of my life.

## Chapter 2

Jimmy and Bones, my brothers in everything but name, hauled my ass home that night after Mary Jane left me lying on the beach. Jimmy rode my bike, and Bones poured me into the back seat of Jimmy's car and drove. I was completely out of it. Much of this was explained to me later.

I came around after a time, more or less, and asked Bones where I was.

"We're in Jimmy's car, brother. We're taking you to his house to stash you. There's a warrant out for you. You're a famous man, but don't worry, we're still one step ahead of the posse. In the morning, we'll get you a lawyer, and then we can work this mess out, okay? Look, just rest. We'll take care of you."

I could hear the sympathy in his voice; despite being the class clown, Bones was also the tenderhearted one among us.

"Home, Bones. Take me home," I heard myself say.

"The police might be waiting for you, Nicky."

"Take me home—now, Bones. You're aiding and abetting."

Somewhere in my drunken mind I heard Cap Caputo's voice: "*I have a wife, kids, a mortgage, responsibilities that a little bad boy like you doesn't know anything about!*"

I felt the car pull over, stop, heard the brothers talking quietly, and then I felt a hand on me, followed by Jimmy's voice.

"Nicky, are you sure this is what you want?"

"I won't risk you, too."

\*\*\*

The brothers took me home, parking my bike and Jimmy's car in the underground parking garage of The U, and helped me up and out. I was dead on my feet; I could feel myself between them, replaying *Weekend at Bernie's*. I was seeing double, and it looked like there were four people hauling my drunken ass around.

"Hey, Jimmy, that was easy! Maybe we'll make it after all!"

"Let's just get him inside, Bones. He's really out of it. We'll stay with him and—we—we won't answer the door then in the morning we'll get him a lawyer, okay?"

"Okay, Jimmy."

Just as we arrived on my floor, I heard Bones cuss. I turned my bleary eyes up, and at the end of the hallway, two (four?) uniforms stood in front of my door. I guess Cap was missing me pretty bad.

The brothers half turned, probably thinking of making a run for it, but I set my feet. "No," I babbled. "Take me to them. It's nothing less than I deserve, brothers."

Still holding me up, they escorted me down the hallway, and I suddenly appreciated the saying "Dead man walking."

The uniforms met us halfway. "Niccolo Yannis Pappas?" one asked, as if he didn't know.

Jimmy answered for me. "This is him. Look at him. You can see he's drunk off his ass. You want him? Fine, let him sleep it off. We promise we'll bring him in in the morning."

"We can't do that, sir. Mr. Pappas, we have a warrant for your arrest. The charge is battery. You have to come with us."

"Damn it! Look at him!" I heard Jimmy getting hot. "He's too drunk to understand what you're saying. I'm no lawyer, but if you read him his rights in this condition, is that legal?"

"Not to mention we'll be happy to testify we found him drunk on his ass with an empty bottle of tequila next to him. Sounds like you're in trouble to me, guys," Bones snarked.

"We're going to take him in and throw him in the drunk tank, and he can sleep it off. That's what we're going to do. When he comes around, *then* we'll read him his rights. Sir, we're done talking. Unless you want to see him charged with battery *and* public intoxication, give him up, and go about your business."

The next thing I remembered was lying on a cot—with bars all around me.

\*\*\*

I came to at what I assumed to be morning and immediately regretted it.

I was as hung over as a sonofabitch and smelled something really rank, and then realized it was I. I must have been throwing up. I pulled myself into a sitting position, head throbbing, body shaking, and I was sweating. I guess air conditioning wasn't in the budget.

I was in a small cell. Hell, I'd see these before but never expected to be looking *out* from the bars. There was the cot I sat on, a toilet, a sink, and nothing more. It was a filthy, smelly, depressing

place, and I seriously considered writing my congressman. I must say, it was a low point in my life.

I tried to get up, failed, and then tried again, as my stomach performed an interesting flip. I stood, leaning over the cot, supporting myself with my hands, waiting for the nausea to pass. When it did, I teetered to the sink and wetted down my face and hair. I tried to sip some water. My mouth felt like a sand dune. I rinsed a few times, gargled, spit, then tried to sip a bit more. I wondered if anyone was going to check up on me. That gave me an idea.

I combed my hair back with my fingers, shambled to the front of my new home, and looked around. There, up in the corner of the hallway, I saw a ceiling camera. I stuck my hand out and started waving, hoping I'd get someone's attention, so I could get on with busting out of here. Too bad I didn't have an old tin drinking cup to rattle on the bars.

A few minutes later, a uniform arrived.

"What happened?" I asked, trying to straighten myself.

"You were arrested last night, Mr. Pappas."

"It's just Nic, okay? I don't recall anyone reading me my rights," I said, fishing for a loophole. "I want my phone call and my lawyer."

"You can have both if you want, but you've already been bonded out."

*Mary Jane* was the first thought that ran though my mind. She was the last person I wanted to see. I hung my head; I'd humiliated her, her parents, Ma, my sisters, friends, Madame, *Friday*. I felt my eyes stinging.

*I will not cry. I will not give these people the satisfaction of seeing me break down.*

"Well? Do you want out, or do you want to stand there all day, kid? I've got work to do."

What a slob. "Out," I said.

He opened the cell, took me by the arm, and escorted me into the police station proper. My head was down. Eyes were on me, a lot of eyes; people I knew, had worked with, had shared food and drink with—whispering to each other, shaking their heads. Just standing there, I bit my lower lip to stop it from trembling. What was that old joke? *Here stands the fool.*

*Don't let them see you break down.*

I felt the copper's hand release me, and I heard a voice, my chin on my chest.

"Nicky."

Ma. I heard a few steps coming closer.

"Are you looking for cracks in the floor, boy?" Her voice was stern, reproachful. I said nothing.

Switching to Greek, she said: "Niccolo Yannis, look at me."

I lifted my head and looked into the eyes of the woman who was my mother; while her voice was harsh, I could see the sympathy in her expression—and pity. I'd never felt so ashamed.

"We're leaving—now. The press is all over outside. We're going to walk to my car, get in, and I'm going to drive you home. Are you going to walk out of here with your little head down? Is that the way I raised my son? Answer me!"

I answered in Greek. "No, Ma. I ..." My eyes were wet. I was still shaking.

"Let's go, boy. Are you still enough of a gentleman to offer an old lady your arm?"

I stepped next to her, offered, and Ma slipped her arm through mine. Then, she lifted her chin, harrumphed, and cast her gaze about—proud, defiant, daring anyone to challenge her.

We walked outside, and the press set upon us. They yelled their stupid questions, stuck microphones in my face, took my picture. I said nothing. I kept my face a stoic mask. I would not let these vultures see me cry—ever.

We got into Ma's car, and she drove me home, where more press waited. I guess they finally discovered where I lived. But Ma drove into the garage where the press couldn't follow—private property—and stopped.

"I'll take it from here," I said in Greek.

"Let me take you upstairs."

"No, I want to be alone. Thanks for bailing me out; I'll pay you back."

"Nicky—"

"Goodbye, Ma." I kissed her, got out of the car, and walked away.

When I got to my apartment, I found the current issue of *the Herald Tribune* sitting in front of the door. Someone wanted me to see it.

As expected, it was on the front page, a color pic of Mary Jane and I on the beach, the Sun setting in profile to us, her arms coiled around my neck, our faces filled with passion, mouths just ready to meet, my hand inside her top, cupping her left breast.

The headline ran the entire length of the page:

***The Playboy of Palatine strikes again!***

Then the subhead that ran under:

***Palatine Star reporter Nic Pappas forces himself  
on Santos neighbor***

By Jazz Crooning  
*Reporter*

It was over, and I knew it.  
*I will not fucking open you, Box!*

\*\*\*

I entered my apartment, sat at my desk, took out paper and pen—the very silver pen Mary Jane had given me for Christmas—and wrote my letter of resignation. I called a messenger service and had them pick up the letter with instructions to deliver it to Madame Publisher.

Today's fiction was another masterpiece by one Mr. Jazz Crooning. This is a little story I left out of my recordings. Again, to me, it wasn't a big deal—to me anyway—but I had scorned a woman, and she was paying me back—with interest.

About a week before what has become known as "HugGate" occurred, Mary Jane's neighbor, Jennifer, flagged me down near her house. Jennifer and her 19-year-old son lived in the house directly behind Mary Jane's. Now, I am, above all things, a gentleman. That said, I call them as I see them. As soon as I shook hands with Ms. Jennifer, I scanned her, and my brain pinged *Slut*. She was about thirty-five with long, straight brown hair and bangs that fell just above her eyebrows. She had blue eyes and a bust that would have made Barbie jealous, and she showed a hell of a lot more than she covered.

Jennifer invited me to stop by to “discuss something interesting things I’ve heard about that story you’re working on.” That got my attention. While I didn’t think the woman really had anything to say, I’d reached the point of desperation. As Cap reminded me, I was reaching for anything that might bring the case to a conclusion.

So, I went about 5 p.m., and when I came to her door, it was standing open. I called Jennifer’s name and heard her call back, inviting me in.

Not a bad house, I thought, looking around—a nice suburban ranch, nothing fancy but comfortable.

I smelled food cooking, and the dining room table was set with dishes, candles, and an open bottle of wine next to two glasses.

Now, I’m not stupid. I knew what all that meant, and where it was going. In fact, as soon as I saw the candles, I turned to the door just as Miss Jennifer made her entrance from the hallway, dressed in a little red teddy and matching thong. She erotically posed herself against the doorjamb with the practiced ease of a pole dancer. I guess subtlety wasn’t her forte.

“Going someplace?” she asked.

“Disney World.”

“What’s your hurry, Nic? Are you shy? That’s certainly not your reputation. I hear you’re quite the lady’s man.” She was smiling and slowly turning her body.

I felt no desire for her, none at all.

“Don’t believe everything you hear, and remember, that’s coming from a reporter. You have nothing to say to me, and I want nothing to do with you. I’m leaving.”

“Oh, get off it! You’re a man. I’m a woman. I’ve seen you looking at me. What’s wrong with a little fun? We’re both adults. Well, *I am*, anyway.”

“Goodbye, Jennifer. I’m going to forget this happened.” I reached for the door.

“Does a *real* woman intimidate you? I’ve seen the way you look at that Santos *girl!* Well I’m no girl. I’m a woman—all woman. What’s the matter? Don’t you think you can handle me?”

“Not without a whip and a chair.”

“Wait! Look, I’m sorry! I just like you. That’s all. Is that so bad? Is it so wrong to want someone? And you know all about wanting,

don't you, *Nicky*? I'll tell you what. You can even close your eyes and pretend I'm Mary Jane, if you like."

I pointed down the hallway. "Is that your bedroom?"

"Yes, it is," she purred, thinking the game might yet be played out.

"It can't be there's no revolving door." I left then and quickly.

She half-followed me outside and suggested a few things I should do to myself that were actually anatomically impossible, called me an interesting array of vile names, of few of which I filed for later use, and then threw in a few hand gestures for good measure.

Of course, no one was going to believe me now, no matter what I said. I saw Crooning's strategy perfectly, portraying me as the freewheeling cad—his collection of pictures of Mary Jane and me; the reports from folks who had seen us walking, talking, Mary Jane's arm always coiled around mine; the other pictures of me dancing with women; pics of me with Barbie and Friday; me, shirtless on my bike. It was all very damning, and the public was going nuts over it.

Then, today's little missive—that slut with her story that I pushed myself on her, just enough half-truths to give it credibility. It would never hold up, of course, because, just like a sexual harassment case, there were just the two of us there. It was a week ago. She had no marks. I had none on me. But none of that mattered. It was all about pressure; Crooning had blown so much smoke, it no longer mattered there was no fire.

Of course, Crooning, the fucking little bastard, knew I'd have no time to challenge his "facts" once his work hit the newsstands. The pics, my giving him the black eye, my fight with Cap Caputo were damning enough. I was willing to bet my old friend Jennifer wouldn't even press charges; she'd change her mind in a few days, knowing her fiction wouldn't hold water, but for me, it would be too late.

And so it was. I was out of the newspaper business, and my life, as I knew it, was over.

*I will not fucking open you, Box!*

*I continued pacing, drinking water, knowing that box and what it represented got me in this mess in the first place. Nine years of my life, gone!*

*Peter J. Gallanis*

Feeling as if I were under siege, I locked the door, closed the blinds, unplugged the phone, didn't answer the door buzzer, and didn't come out for three days. I lived on takeout pizza and beer.

## Chapter 3

"Hello?" I answered the cordless, holding my breath, half expecting another reporter.

"Nicky?" It was my sister, Steffi—my favorite sister.

Steffi is a pharmaceutical saleswoman and a damn good one. She's a traffic-stopping Greek goddess with long, wavy, shining raven black hair, and a megawatt smile. You could immediately tell we were brother and sister. We have the same angular faces, dark olive complexion, set of the eyes. She's a little woman, not as little as Mary Jane, but still a good six inches shorter than I. Whistles, catcalls, and propositions from male suitors were a way of life. She's good-natured, kind, and has a great personality, but most of all, we didn't get along like siblings—Steffi and I could *hang out*.

I had stayed at her tony two-story place in Lincoln Park when I attended Columbia. Being a saleswoman, she was on the road a lot, so I had the place to myself. She refused to take my money for rent, so in exchange, I took care of the place. I kept it clean, paid the bills (she would leave me money for that), grocery shopped, took messages, and ran errands. When she returned from her travels, I always had a nice dinner waiting for her. We both love music and went to blues clubs together: Blue Chicago, Bitty Mulligan's, Buddy Guy's. She gave me money when I was broke, talked to me, advised me, and I loved her dearly. In fact, I hadn't realized until that moment that she and Mary Jane were very much alike. Had I unconsciously chosen a woman based on one that I loved and admired above all others, this side of my Ma? Well, maybe so, but then again, why the hell not? Steffi's one in a million.

"I'm here, Steffi."

*I will not cry—not now, not ever. Clamp it down! Burry it! Cover it with gravel! Pour cement over it!*

"Damn! What the hell are you crying for?" She was being downright pouty, and that was very un-Steffi like.

"Nicky, how can you say that? How are you honey? I've—we've all been worried."

"I'm okay. It's been several days, and things have quieted down. I quit, Steffi, and once that happened, the press vultures flew off, looking for their next big headline. As we say in the biz, I'm old news."

“Do you want me to come over? Do you need someone to talk to?”

“No.”

“Do you need money? You’re out of a job, Nicky.”

“I remember well enough what Ma taught us: pay yourself first. I have money in my savings account and my final paycheck coming from the paper. I’ll be okay for a while, thanks. It ...” I was choking up but clamped it down hard. “It’s good to hear your voice, Steffi.”

“I’m so sorry, honey. What can I do?” She was crying openly now.

“You can stop crying. I’m a grown man. I knew what I was doing, and now I’m paying the price.”

“You’re not too grown up to still be my little brother,” she sniffled in hurt tones. “Nicky? We’ve been talking, Ma and us girls ... um ... I want you to come back to Lincoln Park and stay with me. You can rest. We can hang out and order Chinese food like we used to, hit a few blues clubs, and then you can decide what you want to do. Would you like that? I miss having my little brother around to talk to, and you’re still the best French toast maker in the family.”

My resolve—and heart, nearly broke. It sounded so inviting—to be back with my family, home, where I felt safe and loved.

*And running away with your tail between your legs, Buddy?*

“Steffi, I can’t. As much as I want to, I can’t. I may have been run out of my business, but I won’t run away. I just need to rest up, and then I’ll start looking for a job. I don’t know what’s going to happen. My name is pretty well known. I’ll think of something.”

“Nic? There’s another reason I called. I’ve been talking to Erika—”

“Awe fuck, Steffi!”

“Please, Nicky, just listen. Erika knew you’d get mad if she called, so I was elected. Now, Erika has a friend in Chicago who owns his own business, some type of marketing firm, and he’s willing—very willing according to big sister—to talk to you about a job. His name is Chip Morgan. Do you remember him? She said you might.”

Bloody Hell! That’s the thing about sisters, well *my* sisters. They were always plotting when I wasn’t around. Erika had a bad habit of trying to live my life for me. She felt I was too good for a filthy business like journalism and thought I’d be much more productive

and successful in the corporate world. Bah! Working for *the man!* That's why she had Steffi call. She knew, the fucking manipulator, that I'd at least listen to my favorite sister. I did try to remember Erika loved me.

"Yeah, I remember. I met him last year. Erika had 'casually' invited me for lunch in the big city, and her boy Chip just happened to join us, coincidentally enough, with a copy of my resume in hand."

"Come on Nic. She loves you, all of us."

"I know."

"Well, will you call him? Really, Nic. What have you got to lose?"

That was true. My biggest worry was name recognition. I'd never work in the media again, not with my new rep. I had to do something.

*Keep on truckin', Buddy. The more you move, the less time you have to think.*

"I suppose you have this guy's number?"

"Yes."

She gave it to me, and I told her to pass the word through the henhouse that I'd make the call.

"Nicky? What about Mary Ja—"

"Steffi, I don't want to talk about that—ever."

"I love you, little brother."

"I love you too, big sister."

As expected, a few days later, Crooning dropped his battery charges, and Miss Jennifer who'd said, "He's suffered enough," announced she wasn't planning on filing charges either.

I cursed.

## Chapter 4

I called Lester “Chip” Morgan, owner of Morgan Communications. His office was a swanky place on an upper floor of a high rise along the Chicago River, just south of the Chicago Opera House and walking distance from one of the commuter train stations, these days called the Ogilvie Transportation Center.

Erika said he owned a “boutique” (whatever the hell that meant) communications, public relations, and marketing firm, and a guy like me—meaning in Erika’s mind young, handsome, aggressive, a good writer, etc.—could really go places.

I got him on the phone, and as I had remembered, he was a real nice guy, late 30s, and just as an aside, I knew from the way those two (he and my oldest sis) looked at each other at lunch that day that they knew each other pretty well. I was hoping Erika wasn’t cashing in a favor—her unbound aggression toward me being successful was legendary. After our parents divorced when I was three, and Ma immediately had to go to work to put food on the table, Erika stepped in and took over as surrogate mother to me, to all of us. But she’d always paid me special attention, maybe because I was the youngest or because I was the only boy in town without a dad. I’m not sure, but our relationship has always been, well—*complicated*.

“Chip Morgan.”

“Mr. Morgan? My name is Nic Pappas. I’m calling at the request of my sister Erika; she mentioned you’re in the market for a new man.”

“Mr. Pappas! It’s great to hear from you. How are you?”

He knew damn well how I was. “It’s just Nic, Mr. Morgan. I’m well thank you.”

“Okay, Nic, and it’s just Chip. Hell, Erika talks about you so much I feel I already know you, and I still remember you from that lunch some time ago. I understand you’re in the job market, and I was hoping you’d visit me here in my Chicago office to talk about it.”

“I’d be happy to Chip. When, and at what time? I’m available to meet at your convenience.”

I dressed in one of my nicer (one of three) suits and made the trip downtown. We met; he was a nice enough guy, tall and handsome, looking very dapper in a charcoal gray Louis Vuitton and

very much in control of himself. I scanned him when we shook, and my brain pinged: *capitalist*. He explained, very politically, that whatever happened to me was in the past, and he was very interested in having a good writer on board. He told me he wanted me to prepare press kits, do some public relations work, make statements on behalf of his clients, write trade magazine articles, and attend trade shows. He asked if I'd done much business traveling, and I answered in the negative. Subtracting a few college campus visits as a kid, I don't think I'd ever been further than 300 miles from home.

"Take a look at this press release," he said.

"It's a piece of shit."

He laughed. "I guess the first thing we'll have to teach you is subtlety. But never mind. You hardly glanced at it. Why the reaction?"

"Because I spent my entire career looking at crap just like this. You have to teach your writers to get to the point, man. A reporter on deadline has very little time to read a bunch of fluffy PR crap before a release, like this one, gets to the point. I don't know what the hell this piece of writing is about until I get 200 words into it, and a busy reporter will never get that far. It'll get shit-canned before he gets to the pitch."

"Go on," he said. He was impressed I could tell.

"Just like a news story, Chip, that easy. Get them in the first graph—two at the most. Tell the reporter immediately what this is about, and you'll get their attention. Next, it's too long; remember you're sending out the word, not the story. Give the reporter enough to whet his appetite, get him interested, interested enough that he does what you and your client *want him to do*, pick up his phone and start asking questions.

"And let me guess, you don't have a single person on staff that was in the newspaper business, do you?"

He smiled, a big, handsome smile. "Right again! You're as good as advertised, Nic, and I want you on board—as soon as possible."

He told me a bit more about the company, its mission, how I could contribute. In spite of myself, I did find it kind of interesting. He wanted to bring me on as a utility man, get me writing some stuff, try me out on other stuff, and see how I did—kind of create a position for me based on my skill set. Then, he quoted me the salary.

"Uh, Chip? That sounds awfully generous." His offer was nearly three times what I'd made at *the Star*.

"You're an award winning reporter, Nic, and I plan to use that to our fullest advantage. Don't worry about that shit that happened to you. It'll fade soon enough. Is that the reason for the beard?"

He had noticed—well, it was hard not to—that I had the grizzly beginnings of a silky, curly, black beard. I also wore a pair of lightly tinted designer sunglasses to complete the disguise. He ignored the butterfly bandage around my left eyebrow, courtesy of Herb the Doctor; it healed well enough, although it did leave a small, horseshoe-shaped scar that I bore for the rest of my life.

"Is the beard a problem?"

"Not all at. It makes you look quite devilish. Keep it."

"Okay, Chip, there's one more thing I'd like to discuss. I want to go back to school, and seeing as we're in Chicago, I want to return to my alma mater, Columbia College. Any problem with that?"

"Are you kidding? That's great! That gives me even more to brag about. And I'll tell you what, I have a tuition reimbursement program here. Usually an employee has to wait a year to qualify, but for you, you just register whenever you like and then bring me the bill. Got it?"

"I don't want special treatment, Chip."

"Look, Nic. This isn't special treatment. I've met you before, and I wanted you then, and I want you now. This is just like a pro team offering a hot free agent a sweetener. Now, is it a deal?" He offered his hand.

"Deal."

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I spent four years with Chip and Morgan Communications.

As soon as I started, he got me working on press releases and press kits to ease me into the job. He accorded me a small, but comfortable, office with a commanding view of the Chicago River, and while I knew he was giving me preferential treatment, I certainly enjoyed it. After taking the emotional beating of my life, it was nice to get pampered a bit.

I spent my first month writing and rewriting press releases, assisting in putting together media kits, talking to reporters (name

recognition got them on the line although I pointedly refused to discuss HugGate), and meeting with Chip's clients.

One of the first things I did was get an Amex Corporate card. I was allotted an expense account for business travel and entertaining, something I'd never done, but Chip explained it all to me, and while I had the writing skills for sure, he made it clear there was a lot he could teach me as to the finer points of business and properly running one. He kind of treated me like a kid brother, and that was nice, too. He only mentioned what happened to me once. He actually joked about it over lunch one afternoon at the famous Shaw's Crab House. "Nicky? There's no such thing as *bad* publicity." I could have said a lot but instead snorted and enjoyed my crab cakes.

Then, as Thanksgiving approached, Chip came into my office and announced I was to take my first trip to Las Vegas to a big trade show where we were representing a client. Our mission was to assist with marketing and public relation efforts, try to get the trade press to our booth to interview our clients, and help market their products to prospective buyers. I was almost excited; I'd never been to Vegas and was looking forward to it.

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The show was held at the Las Vegas Convention Center.

We stayed at The MGM Grand, and I'll tell you, Chip knew how to treat a guy right. Upon my arrival, I was taken by limo to the hotel and spoiled rotten. I felt a bit intimidated walking into the cavernous lobby of the MGM until I passed a guy dressed like a cowboy right down to a Stetson, boots, and belt buckle the size of a dinner plate—Chip told me Vegas drew all kinds.

My job at the show was to hand out press kits, talk to folks who came to the booth, talk to the press, smile and be real friendly. I noticed Chip was keeping a close eye on me. I was handsomely dressed (the first thing I did when I started making all that new money was buy suits. Chip liked well-dressed men) in a red wine, double breasted pinstripe suit, complete with leather suspenders and silk tie, and the women at the show immediately took an interest in me. Many commented that with my beard, longish hair, and designer glasses, I looked a lot like Al Pacino in that movie *Serpico*. Chip liked that I could tell. Then, after about two hours of that, he

called me into a meeting with a buyer—buyers is what our client wanted, of course—to buy their wares, and the buyers, the ones who made the purchasing decisions for their companies, were among the main attendees at these types of shows.

I was introduced to a handsome woman buyer, about 45, my height (in heels) brunette, nicely turned out in a skirt suit that was sophisticated and kind of sexy.

We shook hands, and I gave her a scan. *Ping: she likes you.*

Chip took over. “Penelope, this is Nic Pappas, my top man. Nic, fill Penelope in on what we’re trying to accomplish here.” I could see by the look in his eye that this was a big fish, and he wanted her landed. I also knew what else he was asking of me.

I did my best to charm the hell out of her. It was explained to me that good looks could be a weapon. Steffi, Erika, and Chip had told me that. They weren’t talking about whoring themselves out, but they made it clear to use every available advantage because the competition sure as hell would. I could now see the logic in that.

So, I went off on my spiel. I’ve always been a good talker, and as a reporter, I spent a lot of time selling story ideas to Lou. When it comes down to it, we’re all salesmen at one time or another. Penny, as I called her in my mind, batted her eyes at me, I swear! She seemed much more interested in running her eyes over me than listening to my pitch. I talked about the quality of our client’s products, what they could do for customers, a brief mention of pricing, marketing, and in-store signage techniques, and then I showed her a few stories I’d written and gotten published in the trades.

“Well, Nic, that’s all very interesting, and I certainly would like to hear more, but I’m afraid my time is up.”

Ah, coy, eh? The games we play.

Chip gave me a look. He didn’t want this to be the one that got away.

“I can understand you’re busy here. We all are, that’s for sure. However, there’s a lot more story to tell. Let’s continue our discussion over dinner this evening.” I felt like a real schlep, giving her a knowing smile and wondering what my Yahoos would have said if they could have seen me now.

“And if I have a prior engagement?” she challenged.

“You break it.”

She made a pretense of looking over an appointment book. "This evening would be fine, Nic. Why don't you stop by my hotel about eight? We'll have a drink, dinner, and you can tell me more."

I asked what hotel. She named it—nice too—and she left with a smile. I gave her hand an extra squeeze when we parted, and she squeezed right back.

Chip clapped my shoulder, his face beaming. "Nicky? You were fucking *made* for this."

We blew town a few days later having made our client a million bucks of Ms. Penny's business, and a few days after that, Chip waltzed into my office, handed me a bonus check—a very large bonus check—a raise, and a promotion.

"*We all do—what is necessary,*" Madame Publisher once told me.

*I continued to pace, seething, drinking water and remembering.  
"I will not open you, box! Never!"*

## Chapter 5

My life continued.

Things quieted down during the holiday season. Chip explained the period between Thanksgiving and the New Year was always quiet in the corporate world because companies were trying their best to shore up their bottom lines in the fourth quarter, or QT4 as we called it in the biz, and to plan for the coming year's budgets and business plans.

Not me. I shadowed Chip like a second skin, and he was the most willing teacher I'd ever had. He talked to me at great length about negotiations with clients for fees, budgets, and all things business. He warned me to always be mindful of the competition and ways to keep an eye on them that I could certainly understand now. He took me under his wing like an apprentice. My natural curiosity kept me relatively interested, and while I won't say I was happy, at least I was doing something. I threw myself into it; I was the first to arrive and last to leave. Chip and I took to meeting over drinks in his office, chatting, bullshitting as men do. He enjoyed the good life and was always giving me good cigars, offering me nice things to drink. He was single like me and enjoyed male company. He questioned me at great length about women, my Harley, and other things male. He laughed at me when I stoutly refused to take up golf, but I relented when he told me how many deals were scored on the greens—almost as many as were scored between the sheets.

"Nicky? What you doing with all the money I'm paying you?" he asked one evening over long cigars and good deep snifters of brandy.

"Nothing."

"Hum, thought so. Look, you're a young guy, and we're entering a real growth phase in the economy and the market. Have you ever considered investing?"

"I don't know anything about that stuff, Chip, and to be honest, money was never a big motivator in my life."

"I know, Erika said the same thing."

"Ah shit, Chip! Come on! Has she been at you?"

"She's your sister, and she loves you, okay? I know the score between you two, and yes, she asked me to mention it."

"Oy, I knew it. Look, I'm your golden boy. I'm making you money, and I'm quite successful for a guy my age. I'll be in grad school in a month, and I'm doing better than she should have hoped. Damn, Chip! What does that woman want?"

He laughed, slapping my thigh. "What every woman wants for the man she loves—the best. Let me give you a few names of some guys I know. They're really sharp. What's the damage? If money doesn't mean anything to you, then what do you care if a stock tanks? And I care about you, too, and want to see you do well. Come on, kid, is there anything wrong with that?"

I sighed. "I guess not. Okay, Chip, I'll take the names. I owe you a lot for what you've done for me."

"Good, now get the hell out of here, and go home."

*Home—the last place I wanted to be, looking at that goddamn box. Are you hiding in there, killers? Fuck you!*

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I spent the holidays with my family.

We had Thanksgiving at Erika's and as always, Christmas at Ma's. I did not buy a Christmas tree that year—make that the next nine years.

It was difficult getting through the holiday season, the first one without Mary Jane. My entire life was difficult. Who the hell was I trying to kid? My family took great interest in what I'd been doing. Erika had been bragging to Ma and my siblings about my adventures with Chip. She took great delight getting me to talk about my travels, the money I was making—and now investing—my new clothes. She encouraged me to move out of Palatine and back into the city. I guess she and Steffi had been plotting because another polite offer was made for me to move in with Steffi, save my money, and then buy a nice condo. I had no interest in living in Chicago again. It was fun while it lasted, but I still enjoyed living in The U. Funny though, I was never there. I was up and out early, and by the time I got back, the Sun was long set. I really didn't do much more than eat, sleep, and shower there and really not much of that since I was traveling. Chip made it clear my travels would be more frequent (as school allowed) in the coming New Year, 1994, so I really didn't see the point of buying something I'd never enjoy.

Also, I didn't want to leave Palatine because of Mary Jane. I had made it clear in my letter of resignation that I wanted no contact with anyone from my former life, and all said parties were honoring that request. I thought of my former colleagues often though: my Yahoos, Barbie, Lou, Madame, and mostly, Friday. I always thought of Mary Jane and missed her. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get her out of my mind. Every time I saw a longhaired woman, my heart skipped a beat. Every time I smelled a perfume similar to hers, I got goose bumps. Mostly I missed her company: pooling our money, sitting on the floor eating pizza, walking, chatting under the arch. I don't know, Mary Jane's presence had always comforted me, knowing she had my back, and I hers. I was learning there was a difference between being alone and being lonely.

I was not a fun guy to be around at work. I knew my success wasn't making me any friends, but I also knew Chip had my back. I was cool and aloof to everyone around me. They called me a loner when they didn't think I was paying attention, and I pointedly ignored it. I was spotted often down at the riverfront, looking out over the water, pacing, smoking, thinking, and reflecting. Several times, I had picked up the phone and seriously considered calling Mary Jane but never did. I had humiliated her and her parents, as well as everyone who was with me at ground zero at the time of my fall and came to believe that I simply didn't deserve her. I knew if I reconnected with Mary Jane, the media circus would begin all over again. It would simply be assumed I was involved with her the entire time and was just waiting for the storm to pass. It was bad enough the first time around. I would never again risk putting her and her parents though that, nor my Ma, sisters, or friends.

When I got home in the evenings, I would stand on my balcony, look out over The U, think of all the friends I had watched walk through coming to visit me: Friday walking along the flower-lined paths, smiling, waving to me; my Yahoos calling out to me when they stopped by. And always, Mary Jane, beaming at me from down below, coming to me with some small gift or treat her mother had made for me. I guess while I didn't want to go back, I didn't want to lose the memories either. I don't know. It was all very confusing. I did not date, although several of my co-workers made it clear they'd be receptive to such an invitation. I scanned them all and knew their intentions were far from sincere. Oh, I'm sure they wanted me

physically (just being honest here), but more so because I had the president's ear (not to mention my hand in his pocket) and was a rising star, and they, in turn, wanted to rise with me. It made me sick.

On New Year's Eve, I found myself alone at The U. I refused all invitations to go to Jimmy's or Steffi's. I stood under the arch, drunk, looking at the North Star at one minute to midnight, and then I went back inside and drank some more until I passed out on the couch.

I spent January 8, 1994 in a drunken stupor; when February rolled around, I pointedly ignored my birthday.

## Chapter 6

In the spring of 1994, Chip sent me to San Francisco, and my life took a turn.

I was back in school, studying journalism once again. I really didn't know why, after all I'd been though; I guess I just wanted to understand the business that had thoroughly fucked me in the ass. While I was not innocent in my misadventures, I do believe the punishment was far worse than the crime. Technically speaking, the pic of Mary Jane and I on that beach was *Much Ado About Nothing*. It might be considered splitting hairs, but at the time that pic was taken, I'd been officially suspended and removed from the Brown's story; hence, ethically speaking, there was no issue of impropriety. But that made no difference to the press corps; they were on a hot, juicy story and running with it. The entire Goddamn country had crawled all over it—the “experts” calling for my head. Jeez! What a bunch of voyeurs.

I was in night school and almost enjoying it. I attended school four nights a week, and if I was out of town, I brought my books and worked on planes, in hotel rooms, at work. There were a few classes I needed for graduation (master's degree) that were only offered during the day, so Chip just told me to come to work, go to class, then return to work after.

I'd never been to San Francisco, so I told Chip after I concluded my business, I was going to take a bit of vacation time and sightsee. He thought that was a great idea since I averaged about 80 hours a week between work and school.

I did all the touristy stuff: I bought chocolates in Ghirardelli Square, visited Alcatraz, took a boat ride in the bay, walked around Pier 39, ate clam chowder out of sourdough bread bowls and crab on the Wharf, took a ride down Lombard Street, gave money to The Golden Man, and ate at The Fog City Diner.

I was enjoying a cup of coffee and a magazine at a little coffee shop near San Francisco State University—I like colleges and being around all that knowledge. I had stopped by the university, took a walking tour around the campus, then retired for a good cup of Joe. I was sitting at a table, reading and sipping, when I was accosted.

“Excuse me, young man, would you be Mr. Niccolo Yannis Pappas, the reporter?”

I didn't like the sound of that at all. I turned and confronted an old guy who looked as if he'd just walked off the set of some Victorian movie. I scanned him hard then from head to toe. About five-nine; thin, sandy brown hair, parted on the right side; light brown tweed suit complete with vest, pocket watch and chain; no rings; shiny shoes; intense, beautiful blue eyes; a little handlebar mustache, neatly waxed, the ends twisted up at jaunty angles. He stood tall and straight, perhaps 60. He carried a fashionable cane but didn't lean on it. He liked it for the image. The only thing missing was a damn pipe. My brain pinged: *academic*.

"I'm no longer in the journalism business—*Doctor*?"

"And how do you come to the conclusion I'm a Doctor?" he asked. He had an Old World way about him, very polite. Hell, I'll bet this guy even *slept* in an ascot.

"A little trick of mine and observation; your right hand, sir, is dusted with chalk, as is your jacket, and from the looks of the bulge in your right jacket pocket, I'd say, resides the offending chalk itself. You carry yourself like an academic, and if my guess is correct, being this close to the university, this is a popular spot for students and faculty alike. And let me guess, you're the one the students hope they *don't* get."

He laughed, a nice gentle laugh filled with humor, and in spite of myself, I found myself smiling with him. "Well done, my boy! Well done! You have identified me correctly. Allow me to introduce myself: Professor Errol Montgomery, instructor of Journalism Law and Ethics, San Francisco State University." He offered his hand.

I gave him a shake, noting his firm grip. "That's a real mouthful, Professor. I'm just Nic. What do you want?" I did not invite him to sit.

"Well, young man, being a professor of law and ethics, I know of you. You're somewhat famous in certain academic circles."

In the last two years, I'd had it up to here with fame. "Would you mind explaining that, Professor?" I didn't like where this was going.

"Well, my boy, not to boast, but I'm one of the most foremost authorities in the country and have published many papers. Now, I see that I've upset you, so I will just say I know of your recent *experiences*. I, and others like me, have used your, again, *experiences* as points of reference for several academic pieces, publish or perish. Do you know the term?"

"Are you telling me that you, and others like you, are writing dissertations and case studies about me? Using me as some kind of damn *example*? Good day, Professor."

"I apologize for upsetting you, Mr. Pappas. I've read much of your work and was very moved by your story. I also came to the conclusion through your work that you were an honorable man, one who was more concerned with doing the job than the fame that comes with success. Perhaps I was mistaken. Good day to you, young man." He turned to leave.

"Professor, wait!" I stood, then sighed. "I'm the one who owes the apology. You came to introduce yourself in good faith. As you can tell, the pain of my *experiences*, as you call it, is still very fresh. I'm sorry. Please, would you care to join me?" I waved at my table.

"Thank you," he said, completely unfazed. "I always assumed you were a man of great passion, so in that regard, I was right." He set his cane against a wall behind a chair, and we sat. He waved to a waitress, ordering tea (that didn't surprise me). She returned with said tea and topped off my coffee.

"Is this your first visit?"

"It is, and I have to tell you, Professor, I love it. This is a beautiful city. Of course, I've seen San Francisco on television and in the movies, but actually being here is quite different."

"And what is it that you like about our fair city?"

"Oh, everything! The hills, the bay, the excitement in the air. It looks like a place where pretty much anything goes. I especially love the Victorian architecture; we don't have many places like that back home."

"Chicago, correct?"

"I work in Chicago, Professor, but I live in the suburbs. However, if you know my story, then I imagine you know where I live as well."

"And what do you do now?"

"I'm vice president of national media relations with a marketing communications firm."

"Hum, that doesn't suit one such as you," he said, tugging at the tip of one of his handlebars, a habit, I guessed. "Nor does the beard, I should think."

Damn! The guy was good. In three minutes he had read me like a book, and I felt far from comfortable with those intense blue eyes clapped on me.

I shrugged. "As you've probably guessed, Professor, my career in the media is over. I have to do something, and for now, this is it. I'm also a graduate student."

"Ah! That I did not know. Tell me more."

"I'm studying journalism at Columbia."

That pleased him greatly. "So, you've returned to that which spit you out, eh? There's an irony there, my boy. How far do you intend to take your studies?"

"All the way."

"Why are you studying journalism?"

"I don't know."

"What will you do when you graduate?"

"I don't know."

"How long do you plan on staying in your current position?"

"I don't know. As you can guess, Professor, I have a lot of thinking to do."

"Hum, thinking indeed. I'd say acceptance is your issue."

"Would you care to explain that, sir?"

"Professor will do, young man. Now then, you tell me you're in school but don't know why, and you work in a profession, and you don't know why. Something tells me you know exactly why you do what you do; you simply haven't accepted the reason. Something also tells me you've never taken that perception of yours and turned it inward. You should. You might be surprised, not to mention enlightened, by what you learn."

"But let's move on to something else. Tell me, are you teaching yet?"

"No, Professor, I won't be teaching for another semester."

"Ah, I see. Well young ... *Young Master*, yes, that suits one of your age and station. *Young Master*, I have a proposition for you."

"I'm listening."

"I would like you to return to the university with me and to lecture my students; something tells me you have a lot to say."

"Uh, Professor, don't you think me lecturing a bunch of *ethics* students is just a bit hypocritical?"

He snorted. "Hardly, you were all but forced out of the business by a competitor. Not so?"

"To a point, true."

"That has been the underlying theme of my papers and others like me. You became a victim, Young Master, and you'd be surprised, again, in certain circles, how many supporters you have. If it's not too forward of me, why didn't you sue?"

"That was discussed, Professor, but by the time I could have agreed, it was too late. And to be honest ... this is very hard for me, please ... I would have had to cease contact with my ... friend, and that was something I wasn't sure I could, or wanted to do." I found myself looking at the floor. This was the first time I'd even mentioned the past out loud, much less to a 60-year-old stranger, no matter how sympathetic.

"Mmm, I see."

I prayed he wouldn't say her name.

"Well, why don't we do this, Young Master? Come to my class and talk about anything you like. Once you get my students talking, you may find the experience enjoyable. And if it interests you, we do pay lecturers, and you could use the practice—soon you will stand in front of students in your own classroom, my boy. And after, I would like you to join me for dinner in my home, if that would please you."

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"Now, how many of you are freshmen?" I asked the class. Several hands went up.

"That's good because I'm a freshman lecturer." That earned me some hearty laughs, including the Professor.

I stood in his classroom, filled with a collection of students, and I'll be damned if they didn't look, well, *young*. I had recently turned 32, and many of the students didn't look much older than 18. I was beginning to feel my age.

"Now, as Professor Montgomery told you, I was in the newspaper business for some years, and I am also a graduate student at Columbia College in Chicago where I'm studying journalism. Let's do this—since I'm no expert in either ethics or law, let's open the floor. Ask any question you like about the business."

A voice called out, "What's the most difficult thing about being a newspaper reporter for a daily?"

"An excellent question." I suddenly found myself pacing, as I did when I think. "I would say the most difficult aspect of being a newspaper reporter is remembering that you have a certain power

and always remember that words, the tools of our craft, have power as well, and if that power is misused, it can spell disaster.”

“Can you expand on that?” another voice rang out.

“All right, think of it this way. Who can tell me what is the primary function of a newspaper? Meaning, why are newspapers in business? Don’t raise your hands, just call out.”

“To inform the public!”

“To keep the government honest!”

“To expose corruption!”

“All very good, but all wrong. Think, reporters, why is Ford Motors in business? What do they do?”

“Sell cars!”

“Good. You’re on the right track.”

Then, “To make money!”

“Well done young lady. To make money, or more to the point, *to make a profit*. Now, consider—you immediately knew why Ford was in business, but when I asked about the newspaper business, you said things like ‘informing the public’. My point is that the media is held to a higher ethical standard than other industries—why? Because words have power. The stories we write can end or make careers, cause stock prices to raise or fall, can literally change the world, and that, my young friends, is a lot of responsibility for a simple man, or woman, to carry. That power can fill you, and if you’re not careful, it can destroy you—or someone else.” I couldn’t believe the irony of what I was saying, but I saw they were captivated. This must not have been taught in J-101. I’d remember that.

“Have you ever written a story that ended a career? Can you give us an example?” another voice called.

“Yes. In fact on my first day at *the Palatine Star* ...”

And so, I went on. The kids were great, and they loved the part when I told them about the stooges (I left MJ out). They laughed their asses off when I got to the flag pole part. I didn’t say who had been responsible for those shenanigans, but they knew. The time passed so quickly that I was mid-sentence when the class ended. When I thanked them for their time, they applauded.

Many shook hands with me on their way out, and I couldn’t help noticing many admiring looks from the more delicate types.

"I believe you've found a vocation, Young Master," the Professor said.

I stayed and lectured three more classes before the day was done, and each time, they applauded me. I have to admit, it was the first satisfying experience I'd had in a long time.

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Inspired by my success, I was almost in a good mood.

"Well, Young Master, that went very well," the Professor said later, when we were seated in his office. "You have a real knack for teaching; you're well spoken, handsome—if I read the looks correctly from our female students, know how to teach and to entertain at the same time, and to instruct using real world examples. You'll do very well when your time comes. Now, tell me, where are you staying?"

I named the hotel, a touristy place on the Wharf.

"Egads! That won't do at all! I have a very charming house in Nob Hill; I insist you join me there."

"That's too generous, Professor."

"Not at all, my boy. You won't accept my department's money for lecturing, and I want to thank you. I live alone and would enjoy your company. I own a large home with plenty of guest rooms; allow an old man this one thing, eh?"

"All right, Professor. That's very kind of you."

"Excellent!" He picked up his phone, and I heard him instruct whoever answered to go to my hotel, collect my things, check me out, and bring my luggage to his home, posthaste. The man obviously had money. I could tell from the cut of his clothes, his manner, and unless my instincts were dulling, he was talking to some type of manservant. The Professor came from money, old money.

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*Walking my apartment's floors, I called to him. "Professor, what do I do?" I clamped my willpower down hard. No, I will not. That part of my life is over. I will never again open myself to that kind of pain.*

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When we exited the university, a car was waiting for us where a liveried driver exited, opened the door, and the Professor and I entered therein.

"Professor? If you tell me your driver's name is James, I'm going to throw up."

He laughed. "Home ... *Thomas*. Well, Young Master, as you've guessed, I come from money, old money, as it's called. I didn't earn it but rather acquired it, the old-fashioned way, inheritance. It comes in handy, the funding. It allows me to pursue my pleasures and to live a comfortable life."

We drove eight miles from the university to the Professor's home on Sacramento Street in Nob Hill (called "Snob Hill" by some). We were dropped off in front, while Thomas parked the car.

"Well, here we are, my boy, and as you can see, there's plenty of room."

Good God! The home was magnificent. A stately, grand old Queen Anne stood in front of me. Like many homes in San Francisco, it was built up, instead of out. Three stories tall, it stood like a proud guardian on the block with its beautiful square floors stacked on each other, topped off with a large triangle that defines Victorian architecture. There was a large bay window in front, and the second floor, facing the street, was covered with windows, as well. The garage was to the left, a set of stone stairs to our right, iron railings on each side. We ascended these to the grand entrance, rounded double oak doors under an arch that reminded me of the arch in the gardens of The U.

Once inside, we stood in a grand foyer. To our right was a beautiful, long maple staircase; directly in front of us was a hallway. The Professor took my elbow and escorted me down the hall where we turned right and entered a large formal dining room, complete with, what I assumed to be, a crystal chandelier over a wooden dining table that must have been 15 feet long but actually looked small in comparison to the size of the room.

We passed through the dining room, under a beautifully appointed wooden archway, into what looked to be a combination library, sitting room, and den. There was a huge fireplace, and to each side of it, were lovely, comfortable looking, high-backed antique armchairs. There were side tables next to each, and on one, the one I presumed to be my host's favorite, there was an ashtray

and a pipe rack with several lovely pipes and a pouch of tobacco. The aroma of pipe tobacco hung in the air, rich and fragrant. On the opposite table, for guests, I assumed, sat a lovely old humidor.

At this time a man, perhaps age forty, entered and stood at the Professor's elbow.

"Ah, Michael Kodem, this is Young Master Pappas, who will be staying on with us. Has his luggage arrived?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Excellent, please tell cook we have a guest for dinner. We'll take our dinner on the roof terrace; desert, coffee, and tea in the gardens. Also, if you would, my good fellow, prepare a room for our guest, second floor, the Blue Room, if you please."

"Of course, Professor." And he scuttled off then to do manservant things.

While the Professor made said arrangements for my comfort, I scanned his collection of leather-bound books and saw the man loved literature. Philosophy, poetry, art and many of Shakespeare's works dominated his collection. It was a warm, lovely, inviting place, and I immediately felt at ease.

"Professor?" I said quietly. "You're a very lucky man."

"Do you like it?"

"Simply put, it's magnificent."

"Thank you. It's been in my family for generations. Now then, Young Master, sit here," he waved at the guest chair, "and let's take our ease while dinner is prepared. Do you smoke, my boy?"

"Cigarettes, Professor, and cigars, when I can get them."

"Ah! Excellent, Young Master, excellent! Well, you sit there and choose a cigar for yourself, while I enjoy my pipe."

The Professor sat in his favorite chair, and I in the one next to it. I opened the humidor and was immediately rewarded with the rich, nutty, smoky aroma of fine cigars—the Professor certainly enjoyed the good life. I chose a Romeo y Julieta, clipped off the end with the cigar cutter, lit it, and puffed it to life. It was obviously Cuban. Only Cubans can make a cigar so fine. I puffed away, savoring the smooth creamy flavors of the smoke, as the professor drew on his pipe. We sat in companionable silence, as if we'd known each other a long time.

My host chuckled.

"Do I amuse you, Professor?"

"Let me rather say, Young Master, that you please me. You should see yourself, puffing on your cigar, a faraway look in your eyes. You strike me as a deep-thinking man."

I had a chuckle of my own. "Well said, Professor—some have said I think too much."

"Hum," he said, drawing on his pipe and musing. "In my experience, there's no such thing."

"I see by your collection of books, sir, that you're a deep thinker yourself. Tell me, as a Professor of law and ethics, are you also a lawyer?"

"Actually, I am. It was something my father wanted me to do. He was an Esquire himself and wanted me to join the family business. Being young and a bit more headstrong in my youth, I did this thing to please him but would have been much happier studying literature and poetry. So, when I graduated with my law degree, I took the position at the university, again to please him, then continued my studies until I received my Ph.D. So, how is it that you young people say it? My position at the university is my 'J.O.B.'? Yes, that is the way it's put. So, I teach and instruct, and in my leisure, study my other pursuits.

"But now, Young Master, let us retire to the terrace. Dinner will be ready soon. Bring your cigar."

I followed the Professor upstairs to the second floor and stopped. The entire wall of the hallway was covered with paintings and antiques. What caught my attention was a rack of fencing swords with white vests and bird cages set up like a museum display.

"Ah! Do you like that, Young Master? I see you do."

"Yes, I have a love of antique weapons, particularly swords."

"Do you fence?"

"No, sir. You?"

"In my youth and at university, I was on the fencing team—my father believed all aristocratic gentlemen should know how to fence and to waltz." He plucked a foil from the rack, backed up a few paces and struck an en garde. He looked very stately.

"Here, you try." He tossed the weapon at me hilt first. I was still working out five times a week, so my reflexes reacted. I caught it neatly, made an attempt at his en garde, and cut with it a few times.

It felt light and useful in my hand. I stopped a moment and inspected it, wondering if it was an antique.

"You take to that weapon like a natural."

"I'm an expert in unarmed combat, and while I've never used a sword of this type, I am experienced with Asian bladed weapons."

"Karate?"

"Yes, sir. Three black belts."

"I thought so. You move with the grace of a trained swordsman."

I laughed. "Professor? You're a hopeless romantic."

"In that, my boy, we're two of a kind. Come."

We continued up the stairs to the top floor, then climbed an old, wrought iron spiral staircase to the roof, the "terrace," he had called it, and once again, I was stunned.

The view was nothing short of perfect. Up there on the roof we were masters of our domain—pardon me for waxing poetic, but the professor, with his Old World ways had that effect on me. The roof offered a commanding view of downtown and to the west, the San Francisco Bay. I could even smell the Pacific. The breeze was coming in just right, and it was cool and refreshing.

In the center of the terrace, a round table was set with a white tablecloth, silverware, and a bottle of wine next to two fine-looking glasses. China had been laid, and it looked as if the Professor was preparing to entertain royalty instead of a disgraced Greek scrapper from the little country town of Sugar Creek, Illinois.

"Sit, please," he invited.

The Professor poured the wine, and soon after, what I assumed to be a cook (Timothy) and a maid (Miss Lindsay) arrived with platters of food, and we dined and dined very well. The Professor was an authority on a variety of subjects, and no matter what he discussed, he had a wonderful talent to make it all sound so interesting. We discussed art, literature, and poetry. He was very knowledgeable about wines and their manufacture and spoke of many trips he'd taken to area vineyards and wineries.

After dinner, we "retired" to his backyard garden for dessert. We enjoyed crème brûlée and lit up more cigars and pipes to accompany the coffee—tea for the Professor—and a very, very fine cognac for me. I'd never tasted anything like it before; it was liquid gold, so delicate and smooth that it didn't bite or burn in the slightest, and every time I swallowed, I felt a warm glow in my solar plexus. I

looked around his lovely garden and was reminded of the gardens of The U.

"This reminds me of home, Professor."

"Tell me."

I described The U, its paths and flowers, the different types and varieties and colors of my favorites. He asked me to describe over and over again my favorite spot, the bridge in the center of the gardens of The U, under the arch, over the bubbling brook with real fish in it.

"You're excellent at describing things, but as a writer, I'm not surprised. You strike me as a man who appreciates beauty."

"In all things, Professor."

"Now, answer a question, Young Master. How does it feel to be a writer?"

"I'm not a writer anymore, Professor. That was another life. Now, I'm what you might call a communications expert."

"Hum, I think not. Just because you're not currently using your gift doesn't mean it no longer defines who and what you are."

*"One of these days Nicky you're going to have to come to grips with who and what you are."*

"What's that?"

"An extraordinary man."

"Gift? I never thought of it that way. Well, when I was a writer—what can I say?—it felt great."

"I think you can say more than that, Young Master."

"All right, you're obviously after something, so I'll see if I can explain it to you. I knew many reporters who actually didn't enjoy the process of writing their stories. They more enjoyed the chase, running down the story, the thrill and excitement. I, too, Professor, enjoyed that aspect of it. However, to me, the writing, that was what it was all about, telling the story. When I would sit and begin the process, when I was really in the zone—I don't know, it's hard to describe—but it's almost as if my hands just moved on their own. I couldn't get the words out fast enough; it's a never-ending race against the clock; I could feel my heart pounding, eyes bugging, hackles raising. I would ignore everything around me, and the words just seemed to flow out of my mind, through my hands and then just

appear on the computer screen in front of me. When I wrote, Professor, well, it just felt as if everything was right in the world, that I—*belonged* to something.”

“Hum, well said. How does it feel to be an artist? A creator, if you will.”

“Artist and creator? I never thought of my work in those terms, Professor. Are you being a romantic again?”

“Certainly not, Young Master. Consider: you take a blank slate, and you create a story, correct?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“So you create, just like a painter, a sculptor, or if you will, God.”

I chuckled. “I’m agnostic, Professor, and certainly don’t compare my work to that of a—higher power.”

“Agnostic, eh? Well, you’re the first agnostic I’ve met who wears a Catholic saint around his neck.”

I touched my buddy, Francis de Sales. “It was a—gift, from a very dear friend.”

“We’ll leave that discussion for another time; tell me about the creation aspect of your work. Please an old man.”

“All right. In the terms you put it, yes, I was a creator of sorts, but to me—the way I see it—the idea of any immortality wasn’t within me, myself, but rather within the words I created.”

“You fascinate me. Do go on.”

“What I mean is that the words, Professor, *that’s* where the immortality lies. Shakespeare has been dead for hundreds of years, but his *words*, his messages, themes, those live on, and I may have hoped at one time that my words may have outlived me as well, the stories I was trying to tell.”

“Did that idea please you?”

“I guess it did. I am not an arrogant man, Professor, but I suppose I did want to leave my mark. What’s the old poem? ‘To live a life of quiet desperation’—that’s never the life I wanted.”

*Oh yeah? Well, Buddy, what kind of life are you living now?*

“So, you hoped that your words might live on? Have some effect on the generations that followed you?”

“Yes, I imagine so, but, Professor, that part of my life, as I said, is over. I’m just a man, and a simple man, at that. I really don’t think what I did had any significance.”

“And why is that?”

"That's something I've argued with myself. Consider, Professor, as a reporter, I did nothing more than observe, record, and report what others did."

"And you see no significance in that?"

"Hardly. I would also ask you to consider this: when we study ancient cultures, what *do* we study? Their art, literature, music, philosophies, architecture, but have you ever studied an ancient cultures' *newspapers*?"

"No, my boy. But remember, while we don't study what you might deem as their news, all we do study came from those who bore witness; historians, *recorders*—men just like you."

"I hadn't considered that, sir."

"Perhaps you should."

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I was appointed a beautiful room for the evening.

It was on the second floor, and it looked like the most charming bedroom you could ever see in a grand old bed and breakfast. It had a very soft four-poster bed with a wonderfully soft comforter, a nice bureau that Michael, the Professor's man, had filled with my clothes; it had its own private bath and a fireplace with a few logs burning brightly to ease me into the gentle goodnight. There was also a small balcony, just like home, that offered a wonderful view of the Professor's gardens.

After the Professor and I parted company, I was escorted here by Michael, who then offered me a short glass of a lovely beverage he called "Plum Wine" that I drank eagerly. He asked me if there was anything he else he could do for me, and then left me on my own.

I sat on the balcony for a while, smoking, musing, stargazing, and wondering what Mary Jane was doing at that moment.

After a time, I lay down and experienced the best night's sleep I'd had in a long time.

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I awoke the next morning, relaxed and refreshed. I took a shower, dressed, packed, and made my way downstairs, where I found the Professor in his garden, enjoying a cup of tea and a pipe.

"Good morning, Professor. Do I find you well?"

"Good morning to you, Young Master. You find me very well. And you, my boy—how did you sleep?" He offered his hand.

I shook with him warmly. "Best I've slept in a long time; you know how to treat a guest."

I sat and happened to notice the Professor had set out the humidor for me on a small table next to his chair. I took a short cigar, a "morning cigar," lit up, sipped coffee, and enjoyed a beautiful, sunny morning in San Francisco.

"Now, my boy, what time is your flight home?"

"In a few hours, and I am sorry to go."

"And I, young man, am sorry to see you go. Now, allow me to have Thomas drive you to the airport, and when you get there, do an old man a favor and give him your address. I am not much for the telephone. I avoid the annoying, but necessary, machines at all costs. I shall write you a letter, my boy—letter writing is an art form that has unfortunately disappeared—and if you'd be kind enough, write back and tell me of your adventures."

"There you go again."

"We spoke last night of your interest in the metaphysical, Young Master, and something tells me the Fates you swear by aren't finished with you. Now do an old man this favor, eh?"

"I would be happy to write to you, Professor."

"Excellent, my boy! And do me another favor. Come back soon and visit. My home is always open to you, and the sooner you come back, the happier I'll be. Now, let me escort you to the car. It's time for you to be off."

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*"... all we do study came from those who bore witness; historians, recorders—men just like you."*

*I looked at the box—considering. Is there a story buried under that lid? Something that would be studied by future generations? Would someone write a book, make a movie telling this story? Would that story outlive me? Hell! I'm becoming as romantic as the Professor! There was no story hidden under that lid; tragedy, pain, suffering, that's all Pandora's Box held.*

*That and what else, Buddy?*

*Shut up!*

\*\*\*

A few days after I returned from San Francisco, I found a large FedEx package waiting for me in front of my door. It didn't look dangerous, and when I saw the sender's name and return address, I got excited.

I took the box inside, placed it on my desk, removed my coat, tossing it on the couch with my now broken-in leather backpack (the same one my Ma had given me on my first day at *the Star*), and turned my attention to the package.

The first thing I removed from the box was a sword. Good God! It was magnificent! It couldn't be anything but a Katana, an authentic samurai sword: elegant, curved, deadly, with a rounded hand guard at the top of the hilt. It was a collector's item, for sure. I stepped back into the living room and pulled the blade from the scabbard with a hiss and found myself holding three feet of sharpened steel. It was beautifully balanced, and the single-edged blade, while nicked and scratched, was still in excellent shape. What a generous gift! I tossed the scabbard on the couch and took a few cuts with it, executing part of what's called a "Kata." A Kata is similar to an ice skater's program with choreographed moves, kicks, punches, and whirls. I whipped the blade through the air in figure eights, turning it into a blur. I inspected it again, wondering if the thing had ever gone to war. I slid it back into the scabbard and placed it on the mantle over the fireplace. Years later I had that weapon appraised for insurance purposes, and it was valued at \$23,000.

Also, in the box I found another box, a square one, and on top of it was an envelope, beautiful and expensive. I turned it over and found it was actually sealed in wax. I chuckled at the Professor's romanticism, but he did tell me he loved his letter writing, so while amused, I wasn't surprised.

I sat on the couch, broke the seal, and removed a letter composed on fine quality stationary in what I came to know as the Professor's scratchy hand.

*Dear Young Master,*

*I cannot begin to express the joy I felt in making your recent acquaintance. Now that you have left, a certain melancholy has fallen over the old house and my heart. While melancholy yourself, it*

*was refreshing to have the company of one such as you, who seems to delight in exploring and experiencing the world around him. Ah! Youth, my boy! There's nothing like it.*

*Enclosed, you will find a humidor filled with Cuban cigars, a gift from an old man who quickly became fond of you. I hope you enjoy them. Living so close to Canada where the sale of such cigars is legal, it is not overly difficult to acquire them if one has the proper, "connections." So, please enjoy and think of us relaxing in my garden when you do!*

*Also enclosed, you will find a fine weapon. I am a lover of antiques, and while shopping recently, I saw this sword and immediately thought of you. Being a writer, and living, perhaps, by the mantra that the pen is mightier (as may be evidenced by the beautiful silver pen you carry in your shirt pocket), I thought this gift would amuse you.*

*The pen and the sword: may they both serve you well. And if this old sailor has read the winds correctly, something tells me you'll need them both one day; the former as a matter of practicality; the latter, symbolically.*

*Finally, you will find in the humidor a check in the sum of \$3,000—payment for your services to my students who were asking after you as soon as I walked into class the other day. I know you refused my funds, but do this for an old man. One day, my boy, you might find wealth comes in handy, and perhaps you might follow my example: collect it, enough to suit your needs, then one day choose to use it for more mundane things, such as satisfying your creditors, in order to live your life and to follow your pursuits as you see fit.*

*Please write to me at your earliest possible convenience.*

*Your loyal friend I shall ever remain,*

*Errol Montgomery, Ph.D., Esq.*

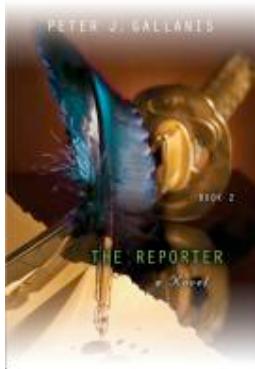
*Department of Journalism*

*San Francisco State University, San Francisco*

Well, I'll be damned! While the Professor leans to the dramatic, melodramatic, and if you will, the *romantic*, I found his letter more touching than any other I'd ever received.

I suddenly realized that I had a 60-year-old buddy and pen pal, but then again, who the hell ever put limits on friendship?

I went out later and bought a beautiful old box, storing his letter and the many, many more he would write me over the years in it, and placed it on my mantle, alongside my sword and humidor. That very night after I “dined,” to use my new friend’s word, I sat on my balcony, smoked a cigar in his honor—this one a Monte Cristo (delicious!)—and looked out over The U, at the arch and thought of my friend, and for a little while, I was almost content.



*Ten years after resigning in shame from the Palatine Star, Nic Pappas is reunited with Mary Jane Santos to once again investigate the case that has become known as The Brown's Chicken Massacre. Through use of the Freedom of Information Act, Santos acquires the Brown's case files. Pappas and Santos assemble one of the largest undercover teams to ever investigate a single case, and launch a nationwide manhunt to find the Brown's murderers.*

# The Reporter

## Part II

## Redemption

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