

PETER J. GALLANIS

BOOK 1

THE REPORTER

a Novel



Nic Pappas, a reporter with the Palatine Star newspaper, is assigned to cover a cold murder case known as The Brown's Chicken Massacre. Pappas meets, and falls in love with, Mary Jane Santos, who lost her brother, Roland, Jr., in the tragedy, tempting Pappas to violate the ethics of the reporter-source relationship. Believing the only way to end his dilemma is to solve the case, Pappas and Santos make a pledge to catch the killers.

The Reporter

Book I

Rise and Fall

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The Reporter

A Novel

Part I Rise and Fall

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 Earl Montgomery: my hero, teacher, mentor, and friend.

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 bear in mind 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

Africa, 1954

The butterfly comes to rest upon a delicate lily.

A rainbow of color; the butterfly fans itself, sticky pollen attaching to its wings. The butterfly dips, drinking its fill of the lily's delicate nectar, then its wings flap, taking it airborne, scattering pollen as it continues its trek, carrying on the cycle of life.

Specks of pollen lift off its wings and gently float up in the hot, African sky to all points of the compass.

The gentle winds blows one spec of pollen west, out of Africa, over the Atlantic Ocean where it's picked up by the trade winds and carried to South America. There, a strong northern wind catches it and carries it through Central America, over the deserts of Mexico, across the Rio Grande, into Texas and the United States.

Now on a northeastern route, it passes over the ranches of Oklahoma, the Missouri, and then up the mighty Mississippi River and into Illinois, up, up, up, following the Mississippi into the city of Rock Island, Illinois, just east of the Iowa border.

It continues its trek where it's finally sucked into the ventilation system of St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Church, on a Saturday afternoon in October, 1954 where it's spit out through a heating vent and into the temple.

* * *

The bride and groom stand before the altar, heads bowed in prayer. To the bride's right stands the groom with his groomsmen next to him in a quiet line. To the bride's left stands the maid of honor, her bouquet held firmly in place, just at waist level as her mother taught her. She's a charismatic, intense, defiant young woman with the beauty of a 1920s movie star. She found her mind wandering, wondering what the bridal night would be like for her cousin, Kukla (her real name is Tula, but ever since she was a curly-haired little girl they've called her "Kukla," Greek for "doll") and herself on her own wedding night, if it ever came.

Frankly, she didn't care if it did or not. The young woman harrumphed; *I'll be damned if I'm going to be a good little housewife! I have plans; I wear slacks, smoke cigarettes, and*

squirrel away every penny I make from working at Uncle George's diner. I'm going to attend college and then become a famous writer, maybe a war correspondent, something—anything but the drudgery that awaits Kukla.

She took a long, deep breath through her nose to calm herself and felt something slip into her left nostril. She had the sudden urge to sneeze and quickly clamped her teeth, not wanting to embarrass herself, her cousin or most of all her parents seated 10 feet away. She suddenly felt every eye in the church boring into her back, waiting ... waiting ... waiting ... She took a breath, slowly, to steady herself but she was going to sneeze and she knew it. She turned her head to the left, placed a hand under her nose. *Oh God, not here, not now!*

But she's reached the point of no return and, "ah, Ah, AH, CHOOOH!" came on hard and fast right into the front pew of guests. She caught a glimpse of a young man recoiling as her spray caught him full in the face. The congregation, bridal couple, and Father Constantine started, quickly righted themselves (although to the young woman it felt like an eternity) and the aged, veteran priest of hundreds of weddings and twice as many mishaps soldiered on.

She glanced at the young man who was the unfortunate recipient of her nasal faux pas and watched him unobtrusively wipe his face with a handkerchief. He pocketed his hanky, winked at her boldly (causing her face to immediately turn bright red) and turned his attention back to the ceremony.

He was handsome, very handsome actually, young, not tall but well-built. He had a face that you remembered, one that stuck out in a crowd. He had a smile that split from ear to ear showing off white teeth against a dark olive complexion. But it was the eyes that held her, green eyes! Green like the inside of a lime, she'd never seen a color like that much less on a *Greek*. He caught her staring at him and she hastily turned away, her attention back to her cousin, but all she could think of was *the eyes*.

She caught him looking at her more than once and was determined to meet him. Maybe he liked forward women. She did after all have the perfect excuse by way of an owed apology. Yes, she smiled to herself smugly, confidently, she would meet him.

Later, at the reception those two did meet and the first thing the young man did was offer her a hanky followed by another of those

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big, face splitting grins. She declined the first and very much liked the second.

Wise guy.

“Pos se lene?” he asked as they began waltzing.

“O Athena emai.”

“The Goddess of Wisdom? It suits you.”

“Yours?”

He gave it.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr.—”

“It’s just Samouel, okay?”

Chapter 2

*Saturday, February 17, 1962, 10 p.m., CST
Danville Memorial Hospital, Danville, Illinois*

During a full moon and solar eclipse an extremely rare grand conjunction of the planets occurs. At the precise moment of the moon/solar eclipse, the moon, Mercury, Venus, and Jupiter are clustered within 3 degrees of each other, with the earth in conjunction with them. Taken in totality, this grand conjunction includes the sun, the moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and Uranus, with the earth also in alignment with the sun and moon at the exact moment of the moon/solar eclipse. For one frozen moment in time, nine celestial bodies in perfect alignment ...

* * *

“So,” the old woman said in her wheezing Greek, “a son at last!” The old woman being Athena’s mother-in-law, Vasiliki.

“Yes, this is him. No, Mom, *wait!*” she yelled, holding the baby protectively.

Too late, the old woman leaned forward, crossed herself, and spat at the child three times; in the name of the Father, the Son, and of course, the Holy Spirit: “Ftou! Ftou! Ftou!”

“What *are* you doing spitting on my son!”

“Aye girl! We have to protect him from demons! Do you want him cursed by Vaskania before he’s been baptized?”

Vaskania, the evil eye! Damn the witch! Not only was the old woman spitting on her son, but when Athena was pregnant with him, more damn *Greek* superstition, anytime she visited her mother-in-law’s home (as little as possible!) and there was food cooking, the half-reformed pagan made her taste it, every damn dish!

“Has Father George blessed him?”

“Yes, he left a while ago. Mom, please don’t do that. This is America, if you keep this up you’ll be burned at the stake!”

The old woman snorted. “Girl, American or not we must never forget who we are or where we come from. No matter what soil we stand on we’re Greeks! Don’t ever forget that.”

Athena sighed; there was no arguing with the old woman. Born and raised in a little mountain village not far from Athens, she grew

up very third world, and although staunchly Greek Orthodox she had an interesting mix of Christianity and paganism in her wicked old blood. She believed that garlic, salt, and (as previously seen) spitting warded off evil; an itchy hand means you're about to give or receive money; and Tuesday is the unluckiest day of the week because that was the day Constantinople fell.

"Has my Sammy been here?" the old woman asked, her voice filled with pride and affection.

"Come and gone." *And don't ask me where he is either, because you know.*

"Ah! boymoo! He must be so proud! The first son produced by your generation." This baby was the youngest of four; his three sisters were with family. Sam's siblings only had daughters, Athena's younger brother Gustavo (Gust) was a newlywed and her younger sister, Panagiota, had two daughters. One thing was for sure, this baby was destined to be surrounded by women—and beauties if she did say so herself!

And where's the damn father? Not with his daughters, eh?

"Have you named him?"

"Yes, after his papous."

"Ah! Good, *very* good and proper," the old crone said, pleased. Not so pleased, however, when she learned the boy's first name was after Athena's father, now dead. In fact, she just remembered Athena's father passed of a stroke exactly one year to this day, something else she found very interesting. Athena's mother had passed some years ago of stomach cancer.

"Has he suckled?"

"Yes, I fed him. Mom! I'm a grown woman with *four* children; I know what I'm doing!"

"And?"

"He ate well. In fact, he bit me!"

The old woman chuckled. "Ah! He's feisty, eh? Good, very good! Now, let his Yia Yia hold him." Without waiting she took the baby in her arms, cooing, rocking, and looking at him.

"Mmm, a big, healthy baby, your beautiful expressive brown eyes, his father's smile and, well *here's* something new, a little cleft in his chin! Good, *very* good! That means luck!"

The old woman believed in such things, Athena knew. Her mother-in-law fancied herself as an astronomer and fortune teller.

She was always looking at the sun, the moon, the stars, plotting their courses, telling anyone with an ear what it all meant in the big scheme of things, what rubbish! But, Athena conceded the old woman had an intuition like she'd never seen. Athena had seen her open the door for a guest before the guest even knocked; sometimes she'd pick up the phone before it rang, knowing who was on the line, hence Athena's (secret) name for her—*witch!*

"Now, girl, listen to your mother and listen well. We have to take care of this one; he's special, very special."

"Of course he is. *All* my children are special!"

"Do you know what happened tonight?" the old woman asked, expertly rocking the baby who was surprisingly quiet, having only exited the womb an hour earlier.

"My child was born."

"Don't sass me, girl. This is serious business. This evening a very special event occurred, one that does not occur often. In fact, it's very rare."

Athena sighed, having an inkling of what was coming.

"What Mom? What happened this evening?"

"Tonight, and I would have to recheck, but about the time he was born there was a solar eclipse *and* a planetary alignment. For one single moment in time, nine celestial bodies perfectly aligned."

"Really?" Athena asked, interested in spite of herself.

"Yes, it was on the news, too, but you were busy giving birth! I didn't have to be told of course, knowing of such things. Anyway, in The Old Country it is said any child born during one of these alignments is unique, that fate has something extraordinary planned for such a one—he's destined to do something special and he will! I can *feel* it! *My* grandson! Aye! My God (crossing herself again), I only hope I live long enough to see it! I can't wait to tell the other Yia Yias at church!"

"Sure Mom," Athena said, yawning and smiling at the same time. "Whatever you say."

"You'll see. But girl, now *I* see you're tired, so here's your boy back, take care of him. Do me a favor, eh? Let him sleep in your bed tonight for luck, do this for an old woman who loves you both."

"Okay Mom, I will."

"Good! Now, before I go do you need anything? Can I get you something?"

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“No, Mom, thanks. I’m fine really. I’m just sleepy.”

“All right, I go now, goodnight!”

Alone with her little son Athena held him to her breast, stroking his full head of thick, silky, jet black hair—her hair she decided. He’ll be a handsome man; she could see that already, the doctor and nurses even said so.

Trying to tuck herself in for sleep she found her mind wandering. *Here I am, a grown woman and I never left home, I never went to college, never did the things I had always dreamed about. I gave them up for a handsome green-eyed Greek who at this moment is in another woman’s bed. Well! I have four beautiful children now—I had my chance and let it slip away but by God I’ll see my children have theirs! I’ll see **their** dreams come true, I swear it!*

Slipping off to sleep she remembered what the old crone said. *“This one is destined to do something special ... I can feel it.”*

“What *does* fate have in store for you, little one?” she asked dreamily.

Chapter 3

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, moon, and 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 I will 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 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 up there are 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?

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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?

Do not 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 40th year on this earth. 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 and 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 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, and 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! 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, soap, shampoo, conditioner, 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 it? Can't have it? Can't make it 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 an 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 ...

Chapter 4

Tuesday, April 2, 1992, 7:00 a.m., CST

"I want to thank you for meeting with me so early and on such short notice," the girl said.

"You're welcome," the detective answered. "But unfortunately, and I told you this on the phone, I don't have anything new to report."

"We made a deal, you give us updates once a month, so here I am." Actually it used to be once a week—now, more than a year later it had become once a month. Damn it!

"Right now all I can say is the case is open, active, and we're pursuing all leads."

"I've heard that before."

"That's because it's true."

"How many are on the case now?"

"Two of us."

"Two! It used to be ten! And before that you had an entire task force!"

"I know that but you have to understand we're discussing one case—one of several that I'm working on right now."

"So, we're no longer a *priority*?"

"That's not fair, not true, and you know it. Look, I'm sorry, I really am, but we only have so many detectives, so much time, so much budget, and when it comes down to it, and I'm just being honest here, it's never enough."

"Do you want me to tell that to the other families?"

"If you like. Look, we've got a team in place, no matter how few. And, sometimes, the fewer the better because you don't have ten men tripping over each other, getting in each other's way, and second guessing each other. More doesn't necessarily mean better."

"Do you have anything planned?"

"In fact, yes, I can tell you that much. We're discussing consulting with the county's detectives, and there's even discussion of involving the FBI."

"All right, I guess that's something."

"Good, you see? We're doing everything we can. Now, tell me about you."

“Not much to tell.”

“Oh? The word on the street is you’re back in school.”

“Yeah? So what?”

“Well, I think that’s good, keeping yourself busy. What are you studying?”

“Criminology.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Any particular reason?”

“It’s become an interest of mine in the last year—for obvious reasons.”

“What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Right now? Getting good grades.”

“After you get your degree, then what?”

“Is there a point to all this?”

“Yes, and I have two things to tell you.”

“One?”

“One, there’s a battery—a long battery of tests required for anyone who wants to join the police force. They’re created by psychological experts—you know, to weed out the undesirables.”

“Are you suggesting I’m undesirable?”

“Something tells me *that* word has never been applied to you in your entire life.”

“Thank you. You did say two things.”

“Number two, a badge isn’t a license to commit murder.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You damn well do.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. Sometimes these cases take time to solve, I know that’s the last thing you want to hear, but I promised to be honest with you. It might take a day, a week, a year, or even several years, but eventually they do get solved. Statistically the odds are in our favor. Now, do you know *how* these cases get solved?”

“No, tell me.”

“Many times someone talks, someone remembers something, the right person says the right thing at the right time, and just like having the final piece of the puzzle, it all comes together. I’ve seen—hell, I’ve *worked* several cases that were solved just like that! Not by the cops but just an everyman on the street. And I’ll tell you this, my

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longhaired friend, he's out there right now, just waiting for fate to slap his ass."



Nic Pappas, a reporter with the Palatine Star newspaper, is assigned to cover a cold murder case known as The Brown's Chicken Massacre. Pappas meets, and falls in love with, Mary Jane Santos, who lost her brother, Roland, Jr., in the tragedy, tempting Pappas to violate the ethics of the reporter-source relationship. Believing the only way to end his dilemma is to solve the case, Pappas and Santos make a pledge to catch the killers.

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