

# THE JOURNALIST by David Gardner

## EXCERPT

### Chapter 1

*SCORPIO Oct. 23 – Nov. 21*

*Your ancestors are the raw material of your being, but who you become is your responsibility alone.  
Learn to turn your troubles into opportunities. Today is a good day to defrag your hard drive.*

He hovers in the doorway at the far end of the newsroom, his feet not touching the floor. When he spots me, he glides forward, trailing diaphanous versions of himself that become smaller and smaller until they disappear. He wears leather chaps, an oversized black cowboy hat and high-heeled boots that almost bring him up to five feet. He has leathery skin and a drooping gray mustache.

It's my great-great-grandfather Hiram Beekle, back for another ghostly visit.

He first showed up when I was six years old, right after I shot and killed my stepfather.

I'm the only one who can see him, hear him, talk to him.

As a kid, I would wet my pants and run away whenever Hiram showed up. Now he's just a pain in the ass.

I turn back to my keyboard, hoping he'll go away. I'm not in the mood for advice, taunts, prods, complaints, boasts.

He showed up last week to tell me to quit my job and find something better. Same thing the week before and the week before that. Probably why he's back today.

I have to admit he's right, but I'm sure as hell not going to tell him that.

Just four months ago I was a hot-shot investigative reporter for the *Boston Globe*. Now I write for a tacky supermarket tabloid, the *Boston Tattler*. Its newsroom is an open bay on the second floor of a ratty building that once served as a cheese warehouse that on humid days still smells of camembert. Out front are the marketing and distribution people, along with the office of the publisher, my Uncle Sid. Only he would hire a disgraced journalist like me.

I churn out fanciful tales about creatures from outer space, Elvis sightings and remedies for double chins. Some readers believe my stuff and some don't. Those in between ride the wave of the fun and nonsensical and don't care whether the stuff they're reading is true or not.

Our larger rivals concentrate on noisy Hollywood breakups and soap-opera stars with gambling addictions. The worst of our competitors traffic in fake political conspiracies. But Uncle Sid stays with alien visitors, kitten pictures and herbal cures for chin wattles. He likes to point out that kittens and spacemen don't sue. He's been sued too often.

I type:

*Although local sportswriters puzzle over the inconsistencies of Red Sox hurlers, the shocking truth is that—*

“That's crap, Jeff.”

Hiram has drifted around behind me to peer over my shoulder.

“Try ‘terrifying’,” he adds. “‘Shocking’ is overused.”

Hiram pretends he'd been a cowpoke, but in fact made a living writing pulp westerns.

I look around to see if anyone is watching, then turn back to Hiram and whisper, “Is that why you're here, to dispense advice on adjectives?”

“That and to let you know I sense danger.”

“You're always sensing danger. Just last week, you told me than an earthquake was...”

I stop whispering when Sherwood shuffles over, coffee cup in hand. He's a doughy, middle-aged man who reads the dictionary for pleasure. “Another tale about space critters, Jeff?”

“A follow-up to last week's. It's Uncle Sid's idea. He loved the national exposure.”

Sherwood nods. “You knocked that one out of the ballpark.”

Sherwood loves sports metaphors but hates sports.

One of my stories from the week before somehow got into the hands of a particularly dim U.S. Congressman who scrambled onto the floor of the House of Representatives to fume against the government agency for hiring a mob-controlled construction company to build a prison for creatures from the planet Ook-239c.

I kick off my sneakers, tilt back my chair and put my bare feet up on my desk. “What're you working on today?”

“I’ve got a TV chef who’s gone on a hunger strike, identical twin sisters in Chattanooga who’ve been secretly exchanging husbands for fourteen years, and an eight-year-old boy in Brisbane who can predict the future by licking truck tires—the usual stuff.” Sherwood takes a gulp of coffee, shrugs, sighs. “Do you ever wonder what you’re doing with your life?”

“Sometimes. But who doesn’t?”

Again Sherwood sighs. I’ve never known anyone to sigh so often. His wife ran off with a termite inspector a few years back, and soon afterward he lost his professorship and his house. Sherwood was put on the earth as an example of what I don’t want to become.

“You should look for another job,” I say.

Sherwood shrugs, then ambles back to his desk. He doesn’t want another job because it would make him feel better.

But I want a better job so badly that I dream I’ve found one, then wake up to reality.

Hiram floats around front and shakes his head. “The little guy’s right—you should get a better job. And for that, you need to get that darn Pulitzer back.”

I delete ‘shocking’ and type ‘terrifying.’ “Think I’m not trying?”

“Try harder. Young people these days—”

“...don’t know the meaning of hard work,” I contribute. “Yeah, I know. Now go away.”

“No, you go away. You’re in deep trouble, young man. Two black-hearted sidewinders have ridden into town to—”

“That’s the ridiculous opening line from *Rise From Ashes*. A dreadful novel.”

“*Dreadful*? Do you know how many copies I sold?” Hiram says.

“The protagonist was an idiot who shot his own big toe off.”

“That had a solid plot purpose. And at least he shot himself, not a member of his own family.”

Whenever I piss Hiram off, he brings up the shooting.

“Screw you!” I whisper and turn back to my keyboard.

*Green Monsters on the Green Monster!*

*Late last night, a sharp-eyed Boston Red Sox guard spotted a pack of green, three-eyed space monsters in Fenway Park. Authorities believe them to be the aliens who escaped from the secret government prison first brought to the public’s attention in last week’s Boston Tattler. The guard reported seeing the creatures scrambling up the wall that Red Sox fans have lovingly dubbed ‘The Green Monster.’*

*Green monsters attracted to a green wall? A coincidence? Unlikely. In fact, experts on the subject of aliens from outer...*

“This little piggy—”

“Hey!” I jerk my foot back.

Melody has sneaked up on me. She likes to do that.

She wiggles my little toe again. “This little piggy went to market, this little piggy—well, you know the rest of the narrative.” She lets go of my toe.

“Actually, that felt good. Don’t stop.”

“That’s as much wiggling as you get, Jeff. You’re married.”

I pull my feet off my desk and rest them on the floor. “Separated.”

“That’s still married.”

Melody is my editor. She’s thirty-seven—three years older than I am. Her face is narrow and pretty, her hair red and wavy. She likes hoop earrings and has long feet.

She shuffles through the printout in her hands. “You sent me eight stories this week but promised me nine.”

“I’m still working on the last one. Did you know that a space creature has replaced the Red Sox mascot and has put a hex on the top of the batting order?”

“They’re already hexed,” Melody says. She eyes me for a long moment, then screws up her mouth. “I’m concerned.”

Here it comes again. “About my articles? About my bare toes? Or my collection of metal toys?” I reach across my desk, pick up the *Spirit of St. Louis* and fly it back and forth overhead.

Melody puts her hands on her hips and rolls her eyes. “Yes, all those things, Jeffrey, but in this instance, what I meant was I hate to see you wasting your talent writing this garbage. You’re the best writer I’ve ever edited. You deserved that Pulitzer.”

“Which they took back twenty-seven days later.”

“Most journalists would kill to have one for even twenty-seven days.”

Melody said that with a smile. She says most everything with a smile. It’s a pretty smile, but sometimes forced, as if she were trying to make herself happier than she feels. She’s the opposite of Sherwood, who wallows in gloom and wants to pull everyone down with him.

I say, “You always see the best in every situation.”

“Thanks.”

“It drives me batshit.”

Melody raps her knuckles on my desk. “I need the copy by two o’clock.” She raps her knuckles on the top of my head. “At the latest.”

I watch her go. I shouldn’t tease her the way I do. Melody’s not the hard-ass editor she pretends to be. She’s in fact a softy, smart and thoughtful. Also curvy.

Hiram says, “That young lady has a fine carriage.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” I say and pick up my typing where I left off:

*Space lizards have the ability to slow down fast balls, strip the spin from curves and send knuckleballs off in...*

Hiram says, “‘slow down fast balls’ is flabby and clumsy because ‘slow’ and ‘fast’ interfere with each other.”

“Un huh.” I keep on typing.

“Clementine’s coming to visit.”

“Oh?”

“She’s worried about Ebenezer.”

I look up from my keyboard. “What is it this time?”

“He’s missing.”

“Grandpa Ebenezer is always missing,” I say.

“Clementine thinks he’s in trouble.”

I delete ‘slow down fast balls’ and type ‘retard fast balls. “How can Ebenezer be in trouble? He’s dead.”

“I don’t like that word—and now you’re the one in trouble.”

I look up to see Uncle Sid coming toward me. Two burly guys walk with him, one on each side, clutching his arms.

My uncle looks scared. I hate to see that. I love the guy.

“Jeff,” he says with a quiver, “these two gentlemen want a word with you.”

I’ve watched enough local news to recognize the Ramsey twins—Hank and Freddie. Not gentlemen. Mobsters.

I get to my feet, pull Sid free from the pair’s grasp and wrap my arm around his shoulders. They’re trembling. “What in hell do you two want?”

Hank steps closer and blows his cigar breath in my face. He has big ears and black hair combed straight back. At six feet three, he stands eye-to-eye with me, but he's half again as wide. He says, "Did you write that idiotic story?"

"Which idiotic story? I write lots of idiotic stories."

Freddie says, "Asshole!" and steps forward.

Hank reaches out to hold him back. "Easy."

Although the two were born identical, no one has trouble telling them apart because Freddie had the front half of his nose lobbed off in a knife fight. This gives him a piggy look.

Hank says, "You know what I'm talking about, wiseass. Who told you about that government prison for space monsters?"

"Who? No one. I made it up."

"You made it up?"

"I make up everything I write."

Hank tilts his head back and half closes his eyes. "You made the story up?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

Hank pokes me in the chest. "Then how come it's true?"