

A BORING ASSIGNMENT

“This sounds about as exciting as watching grass grow,” muttered Nick Costello to himself. A stringer trying to catch on with one of the New York papers, he’d just gotten off the phone with Melissa Horowitz, the metropolitan editor at the *Gotham Gazette*.

“I want you to check out the Human Service Alliance,” she’d said. “Pete Morrissey, who runs one of the big social service agencies, has been after us for years to see life on the inside of their organizations. He’s complaining we don’t see how hard it is to keep things afloat. He says business models don’t fit what they have to deal with.”

There’d been a pause on the phone as she responded to one of her reporter’s queries. “We’ve heard that cutbacks are hitting agencies hard over the next 5 years, given this economic downturn. It can’t hurt to take a look at what they’re up to.”

“I’m happy to take your assignment, Ms. Horowitz, and I appreciate your call. But I don’t see the hook you’re looking for. There’s a story every month or so on what’s happening to the poor.”

Nick had hoped he didn’t sound indifferent, but it would be the kiss of death to his journalistic career if he turned in a 5,000-word article that had been written a hundred times before or, even worse, was boring.

The editor had laughed. “No, no, I don’t want that kind of ‘needed services for the poor’ piece. I’m after something different. This alliance isn’t some grass-roots operation doing their normal advocacy thing. It’s made up of executives; the players in social work, mental health, health; and even some educators. They’re trying to see if they can set up an operation like the National Association of Manufacturers. My contact said they’ve got to get people to see that what makes them tick isn’t

the same as big business, even though they run operations that are just as large.

“If that’s what they want, then let’s find out how they really manage. Morrissey said he got his people to agree for us to look inside. Hell, his place had \$50 million in contracts. That’s no fly-in-the-water storefront. So I want to see how they really run things, what’s so different between them and a profit-making company. You get to sit in on their meetings, see how they make decisions. I want to know the ‘who, what, how, and why’ of their management structure. Look at their decision making, how they work as a team when faced with hard decisions. See in what ways they do and don’t compare to GE or Microsoft”—she’d laughed again—“besides the money. It may take you awhile, but then we’ll know. Are you interested?”

“Of course I am,” Nick had responded untruthfully. “You said it may take awhile. Can I put in for per diem and expenses?”

Hearing the affirmative, he had relaxed a bit, as had the worry lines around his eyes. Freelance work had aged him since he’d hit 30 a few years ago. *I may end up bored but not broke*, he had thought.

Looking back 2 months later, Nick had to laugh at his reluctance. He’d had no idea at the time that the most boring assignment he’d ever been given would turn out to be one of his best.