



LOWAN'S CHECKMATE

BOOK 1

S. E. GROSSKOPF

PREVIEW

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DEDICATIONS

To my friends who read this book and assured me it wasn't completely awful, especially Briana, Abby, and the Greenfield Family, I wouldn't have gotten this far without your encouragement.

To my wonderful editor, Becky McLafferty, who goes above and beyond to take my writing to the next level.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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I first began writing this book several years ago solely for my own personal entertainment. If it ever turns into something more than that, it will still be a surprise to me. If you have as much fun reading as I did writing, I'll call it a success. And if you do happen to find your interests in reading material run similar to mine, hang on to your hat. There's a lot more where this came from!

At the end of a funny old movie called *Monkey Business*, the villains were scolded for being so melodramatic: "You've been reading too many dime novels!"

Forgive me, dear reader, for I have also read far too many dime novels . . .



CHAPTER I

Sunday, March 1, 1931

Eric Saunders checked his shoelaces for the third time when a gunshot echoed down the hallway. He bolted upright, not sure if he misheard, then hustled around the corner at the speed of a fast limp. As the Noritonia Hotel's house detective, handling disturbances was his job. That typically meant looking for misplaced luggage and unregistered guests, not chasing gunshots.

"It came from Mr. Torin's room." Birch, the elevator operator, fidgeted at the end of the hallway. "I brought him up from the lobby. He just went in there."

Horace Torin always stayed in the same room. Saunders edged closer to the door of Room 313 and listened. Nothing but silence. "Go down to the lobby and phone the police."

"Whew." Gasping after holding his breath, Birch scurried back to his elevator. The door clanged shut. Above it, the floor indicator arrow dropped to the left with the speed of a comet.

Saunders stood to the side of Room 313 and pounded on the door. His knee twinged. He had dealt with plenty of shootings on the police force, but that ended three years ago. It caused eternal embarrassment to admit that while pursuing a suspect, an untied

shoelace pitched him down the stairs and ended his career. “Mr. Torin!”

No reply.

He knocked again, then tried the door. It was locked, so he took his ring of passkeys and his revolver from his pocket. The silence worried him. He turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open.

Room 313 was empty. Gun in hand, Saunders advanced slowly. The pungent, acetone haze from a recently fired pistol still hung in the air. Torin’s gray overcoat, his gray felt hat complete with trademark hawk feather, and his overnight bag lay on the bed. Saunders would recognize his belongings anywhere. He stayed at the hotel frequently.

Gaining bravery in the absence of any visible adversary, he conducted a thorough search. The closet was empty. The desk held no answers. He got down on his hands and knees to peer under the bed. Failing to find a single clue, he went to the window and rattled the pane. Locked.

Saunders circled the empty room once more, then studied the door to the connecting room. He turned the doorknob. It was bolted from the opposite side. Defeated in his quest for answers, he stepped into the hallway. Other guests, some in pajamas, looked out from their rooms.

The door of the next room flew open.

“What is the meaning of this?” The later-middle-aged man standing in the doorway of Room 315 crossed his arms, his eyes glittering with agitation behind thick-rimmed glasses. “I thought this was an *exclusive* hotel. How am I supposed to enjoy any peace and quiet with guns firing and people rattling doorknobs in the middle of the night?”

Bristling inside, Saunders raised an eyebrow. “And who might you be?”

“Hiram Black. Checked in two days ago.” His face reddened. Saunders would bet it wasn’t from shame, but from heightened blood pressure.

“Horace Torin, the guest in Room 313, has disappeared.” Saunders addressed all the guests gathered in the hall. “The police have been notified and are on their way, but this whole floor is going to have to be searched. Please return to your rooms until the police arrive.”

Among the murmur of complaints and inquiries put to him by various guests, Saunders faced Hiram Black. In his line of work, the noisy ones often had the most to hide. “Did anyone come through the connecting door to your room a minute ago?”

Black waved a large volume of Dumas in his face. “Of course not. I’ve been reading all evening.” His face tightened further, and his voice sank into a low growl that would have done credit to any bulldog. “And if I caught anyone sneaking through my room in the dead of night, he would have gotten the surprise of his life.”

Saunders could only imagine.

Black leaned closer. “Besides that, the connecting door is locked. I don’t like your tone, so search my room if it will put to rest any questions you might have.” His arms began to flail in dramatic gestures, swinging the book. “Poke through the closet. Look under the bed. Check for robbers hiding in the dresser drawers.”

Squaring his shoulders, Saunders brushed past Black into the room. Black stood rigidly and thumped the heavy book against his palm while Saunders pulled the closet door open, then dropped to one knee to look under the bed. The connecting door was indeed locked. And the window. Nothing out of the ordinary, no hidden person, only Black with his eyes narrowed in contempt toward the disturbance and all associated with it.

“I apologize for the inconvenience.” Saunders turned toward the door. “The police will be here any minute, and they may have more questions for you.” He wouldn’t mind passing this mess off to someone else.

As he closed the door of Room 315, the elevator slid open. A familiar, determined-looking dark-haired young man stepped out. Like always, he wore an old beige raincoat and brown fedora.

Two uniformed officers followed at his heels. Saunders recognized him immediately.

Three years previously, when Saunders resigned from the police department, Detective Lieutenant Joseph Marx had just transferred to Milford Falls from another police department in a smaller city. Having kept in contact with a few of his friends on the force, Saunders heard that Marx was often assigned the more difficult cases and had a good record of solving them.

“All right, where’s the murdered man.” Marx phrased his remark as a statement, not a question. Birch had no doubt been filling his ears with an exaggerated tale of the shooting from the moment he arrived.

“Well, that’s the trouble, sir,” Saunders admitted. “There isn’t one.”

“Waddaya mean?” Marx crossed his arms. “You didn’t call me down here to waste my time, did you?”

“Oh, no sir. There was a shooting, alright. Birch saw Mr. Torin go into Room 313. Then one shot was fired. Everyone on this floor heard it. I was just down the hall at the time, and I got there a minute later and went in. The smell of cordite was still in the air, but the room was empty. The window is locked from the inside. Nobody came back out into the hallway; Birch was there the whole time. Nobody went through the connecting door to Room 315; that door is locked too. Room 315 is occupied, and the guest saw no one. I can’t figure out what happened to Mr. Torin. He vanished.”

“People don’t vanish. He had to go somewhere.” Marx brushed past Saunders into Room 313 and checked everything again. The connecting door, the closet, the bed, the window, the desk. Same results. An examination of Torin’s personal effects revealed no more than the stub of a train ticket, the evening paper, and articles necessary for a stay of two or three nights in a hotel.

While Officers Hanlon and Brody continued to take names and statements from the other guests, Marx knocked on the door of Room 315.

“He’s a nasty old buzzard,” Saunders whispered.

Marx took the badge out of his pocket and held it up as the door opened.

“Ah, Captain, I’ve been expecting you,” Hiram Black greeted sweetly.

“Lieutenant,” Marx corrected. “I have a few questions about the incident in the next room.”

“Anything I can do to help? Come in.”

Saunders waited in the hallway, watching through the open door. No growling, no glaring, no thumping book. Black listened attentively and answered questions in detail as Marx took notes. Apart from not having seen anything, he transformed into the cooperative model witness. Such was the power of a badge. Saunders missed his own. Its absence constantly reminded him that his position with hotel security was nothing more than make-believe law enforcement.

“Nothing.” Marx stepped back into the hallway and shook his head. “Except for what you and Birch heard, I can’t find any evidence of a crime.”



CHAPTER II

Early the next morning, Lieutenant Marx walked down 9th Street, past a row of dilapidated shops: a shoe store, a book shop, used furniture, second-hand clothes, and a tiny Italian diner. The grimy building facades seemed permanently in the shadows despite the cold morning sun. A few early warm days had started to melt the snowbanks along the edges of the street, reducing the white fluff into mounds of re-frozen icy dirt.

A little ferret-faced man approached from the opposite direction, walking in the gloom near the buildings. His sharp glance wandered back and forth, but never settled on Marx.

“Anything new?” Marx paused to admire a shop window display advertising an Amercon radio-phonograph console. He kept his back to Marty and watched the reflection in the window. It would ruin the reputation and end the usefulness of the stool pigeon to be seen together.

“Not much,” Marty hissed. He stopped nearby, kicked around at the dirty snow as if he was looking for something he dropped, then bent down to tie his shoe. “Edgar Gates is in town.” He scurried around the next corner.

Marx accepted the information but attached no importance to it. Gates was a safe cracker of fair capability. He had formerly been in the employ of Lefty Segura, who controlled a respectable mob before the law caught up with him. With Lefty in prison, his

mob had disintegrated. Recent rumors indicated that Gates was attempting to assemble a small mob of his own.

Gates wasn't clever enough to engineer Torin's disappearance. Nothing else concerned him at the moment. Dismissing Marty's information as irrelevant, Marx continued down the street. He'd have a long morning talking to everyone who knew Torin.



Later that afternoon, Marx fidgeted outside the office of the Chief of Police. He paused with his hand on the doorknob and took one last deep breath before entering.

Chief Benson's small office was furnished adequately for his needs with nothing extra. Three filing cabinets and a desk. On the desk, one framed photograph of a woman whose name had been Evelyn. A window overlooking the street alongside the building did little to brighten the room.

The Chief waited behind the desk, his arms crossed, his expression as cold as yesterday's cup of coffee which sat in front of him. Even seated, he projected a military bearing tempered by the dignified quality of his gray hair and moustache.

Despite the two empty chairs in front of the desk, Marx remained standing. He had been working on the case for less than twenty-four hours. In that time, the police had been contacted by the Pioneer Diamond Company and informed that Torin had been transporting the valuable Sunfire Necklace to a buyer in Milford Falls. Both Torin and the diamond necklace were missing.

"What progress have you made?" Chief Benson immediately demonstrated his lack of patience. Not through any visible means, no shouting, no fidgeting, no foot-tapping. Just something about his eyes. The way he held his shoulders squarely. He didn't have to shout.

"It was all in my report," Marx offered quietly, but such a reminder would not satisfy his superior in the least. "Torin hasn't turned up. The diamonds haven't turned up—"

“Don’t expect them to come to you. You should be out looking for them.” Benson’s glare made Marx back down.

“I have been, but there’s no place to start. I talked to everybody who knew him, and nobody knows anything. It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours yet.” Marx knew he had a voice. He could speak with authority when the occasion demanded. He could shout down armed robbers. But when faced with the Chief, his normally soft-spoken manner turned into a whisper. He didn’t dare stutter. He didn’t need another scolding. “Reginald Benchley, the retired banker who was planning on buying the necklace, couldn’t have afforded it. Poor old geezer lost his mind along with his money in the Crash. I’ve been out to his house to speak with him. He couldn’t remember the name of the guy who told him to buy Sunfire Necklace. Nobody else besides him and Torin would have known about it.”

“How about Torin himself?”

“I don’t think he disappeared on his own. Just the same, I’ve had the train and bus stations and the airport watched.”

“I want to see some real progress in your next report.” Chief Benson thumped his hand against the desk and watched for Marx’s reaction.

Marx knew the violent act had nothing to do with his lack of progress. Nor was it an expression of Benson’s temper, but rather a test. Three years ago, he would have flinched. Not this time. Progress of another sort.

“Where am I supposed to start? The one thing I can’t figure is how he got out of the hotel. I already talked to everybody who might know something. The only thing to do is wait for something new to happen.” This option put knots in his stomach, but Benson usually objected to calling on outside help. “The way things look now, there’s only one person who could find Torin any faster.”

“And who would that be?”

“Remember the Wendell case three years ago? Even I thought you were guilty.”

A shadow darkened Benson's face. His moustache began to twitch. "You want to consult Lowan."

"He's solved tougher cases with less than we've got to go on now."

"You know how Kramer feels about him."

Marx's fellow detective firmly believed that such remarkable crime-solving ability, in the absence of conventional clues, could only come from an inside knowledge which may not have been acquired honestly.

"I value Lieutenant Kramer's . . . sorry, *Acting Captain* Kramer's greater experience and he is entitled to his opinion," Marx began diplomatically, his voice quiet and even despite the frustration. Kramer had no use for Marx either. "But I don't agree. And he's busy with his own case right now—that stolen taxi is still missing and the driver's killer hasn't been found. I think Lowan can help."

A long pause settled between them while Benson weighed the options. While consulting outside help made the police department appear inefficient and powerless, lack of progress would result in far more damaging and derogatory headlines in the morning newspaper.

Chief Benson nodded.



CHAPTER III

Marx held a brown folder under his arm as he climbed the shadowy steps to the second floor of an aging office building on South 23rd Street. He walked to the far end of the hallway. At the last door, the sign on the window announced in fading letters, *Lowan and Sen, Private Investigators*. This title puzzled him every time he passed it. Three years ago, it said *Lowan and Sen, Radio Repairs*. Sen hadn't been around then either. Marx pondered the fate of the missing investigator as he opened the door and stepped across the threshold into the undecorated, barely furnished office.

The office suite contained two rooms, probably intended as a reception area and an inner office. However, the front room, the only one that anybody ever saw, contained two desks. On the far side of the room, Lowan's desk was empty. At a second desk nearer the door, an attractive brunette in her early twenties flipped through the pages of a novel.

"Hi, Rita."

She shoved the novel in a drawer, made a pretense of sorting through the paperwork on her desk, then looked up at him with recognition in her attractive brown eyes. The room was chilly enough for her to wear a light sweater over her dress. The touch of perfume made him want to step closer. Something sweet but gentle, like pleasant daydreams on a summer afternoon. She couldn't have had much to do. Lowan's advertised fees were high

enough to keep away all but the most serious cases, and he never touched divorce, which kept most private detectives in business.

“Miss Nanning to you, Lieutenant Marx.” She spoke coyly, her tone holding no malice though the words still stung. They’d met three years earlier, during the case that had begun Lowan’s career in detective work. Since then, Marx had been here no more than a handful of times.

“Well, *Miss Nanning* . . .” He framed her name in mock sarcasm and flashed a brief grin in her direction. “I’m here to see your uncle.”

“We’re not really related, you know. Any friend of my family for more than five years becomes an honorary uncle.”

“Two more years and you’ll have to call me ‘Uncle Joe.’ Is he in?”

“He’s in, but he’s busy in his workshop.” She pushed her chair back from the desk and stood. “I’ll see if I can tear him away from his precious experiments for a minute.”

“What is he trying to build?” Marx’s voice revealed more curiosity than he intended. Lowan was one of the most eccentric guys he’d ever met, in a harmless sort of way. Some old men collected stamps or raised rabbits or grew orchids. Lowan did whatever he did in the back room, and nobody ever figured out what.

“I haven’t the slightest idea. Something with radios.” She shrugged and stepped toward the workshop. “Either that, or a rocket to the moon. Maybe both.” The door was ajar. She knocked. “Uncle Lowan.” No answer. She knocked louder. Still no response. She pushed the door open.

Marx looked past her, standing several paces behind, but still close enough to see. In the center of the small and brilliantly lit room were several tables covered in the dismantled remains of at least three radios, an old telephone switchboard, and what appeared as if it might have once been an electric toaster. Pages and pages of diagrams and squiggly calculations wrinkled at the edges. Remnants of copper wiring and vacuum tubes were strewn between the bits and pieces. Some of the unrulier scraps had

escaped onto the floor. Behind this mass of assorted mechanical and electronic odds and ends, Rita's adopted uncle stood mumbling incomprehensible phrases in a frustrated tone. Light from a lamp glinted off a large ring on his left hand, its deep purple stone pulsating with an inner energy that reflected his frustration.

Lowan's age was difficult to determine. While steel-gray was steadily creeping through his once-dark hair, his face still held a quality of youthfulness. Above a distinctive nose, two fiery blue-gray eyes denoted keen intelligence. Rita hesitated to disturb him. This invention was his passion, far more than detective work.

Marx listened as the old man spoke to himself in a language nobody had ever been able to identify. Even when his work didn't appear to be going the way he wanted, the words still sounded smooth and melodic.

Noticing Rita in the doorway, he turned from his work in a startled fashion. Annoyance flashed across his face for a brief instant. Then he smiled knowingly and set aside the half-formed fruits of his uncooperative endeavor. "Is that young man from headquarters here again?"

Marx hadn't been here in many months. He stepped closer, moving around Rita for a better view, then choked on having to admit that he was stuck. "I've got another one for you."

Lowan rubbed his hands together and moved around his worktable toward the door to the office. Rita was not above average in height, but as he strode past her, Marx noted that Lowan was an inch or so shorter than her. His strong personality prevented anyone from applying a diminutive adjective to him. Rita crossed the room to her own desk, but watched them.

Marx waited while Lowan settled into the swivel chair behind his desk and then took a seat opposite him. He placed his brown folder on the desk and began to take papers out of it. On several occasions, he had seen Lowan take a baffling case and immediately explain it away in the simplest of terms.

"I had a hard time convincing the chief to let me come to see you. He doesn't like having it get spread around that we don't

always have all the answers. To get his okay, I had to remind him about the time you saved his neck three years ago.” Marx fidgeted. Asking for help did not come naturally to him, but under the circumstances, he didn’t have too many other options. “It’s about the Torin disappearance. You read the papers?”

He looked up from the police reports he had been removing from the brown folder and met Lowan’s steady gaze. *Those eyes.* Blazing orbs of blue-gray ice that pierced the soul. A recollection flashed through Marx’s mind—a time when those powerful eyes had been directed against an obstinate criminal. A full confession had bubbled out of the remorseless murderer.

“Yes,” Lowan said.

Marx forgot he asked a question. “Yes,” he repeated while sorting through his thoughts. “Well, then you know what other piece of information the press has gotten ahold of.”

“The Pioneer Diamond Company has been adding to your headache.”

“Yeah. I started getting calls this morning right after the morning edition of the papers hit the street. Some retired banker from up in Patterson Heights phoned to say that Torin had been bringing a diamond necklace for him to buy. Within an hour, I’d been contacted by both the New York and Milford Falls branches of Pioneer demanding to know what had been done to find Torin. They said Torin had been carrying a valuable piece of merchandise—the Sunfire Necklace, worth over twenty thousand.

“The Chief thinks Torin himself skipped with the stones. I checked on that angle. Torin is set to retire in another month. He has business sense. Been investing wisely for years. He survived the crash two years ago with hardly a scratch. His bank account is in good health; he didn’t need the money. And his employers and friends assured me he’s as honest as the day is long.”

“I see . . .” Lowan moved his eyes across the paperwork that Marx set in front of him.

“I asked Pioneer why they were transporting diamonds that way. They agreed that it was irregular. The retired banker, Reginald Benchley, had forgotten his anniversary until almost the

last minute and promised to buy that necklace, if they could get it here in time. Rather than lose the sale by waiting for the next armored truck shipment, they sent it with Torin. They thought it would be safe because sending it that way was so unusual. The plans were kept secret, and they believed Torin could be trusted.”

“How odd. Who else would have known about this arrangement?”

“Reginald Benchley, and he wasn’t much help. He seemed . . . not all there. As far as I could get, some guy he met at the club reminded him about his anniversary and suggested the Sunfire Necklace through Pioneer. Benchley thought this man was a friend of his wife. He couldn’t give a clear description. Since his wife wasn’t there at the time, she couldn’t guess who he was.”

Lowan folded his arms, his hypnotic blue-gray eyes blazing softly as he listened to the story. “An honest man and a small fortune in precious stones have disappeared without leaving any trace.” His quiet voice held the same promise as distant thunder.

“That’s the way it looks.” Marx glanced at his notes to review the order of the details. “So far, we know that Torin took a late train out of New York last night. He got here about ten o’clock and took a cab from the station to the Noritonia Hotel where he had a reservation. I haven’t been able to find the cab, but the desk clerk remembered checking him in. The elevator operator took him up to the third floor and saw him go into his room. Then there was a shot. The elevator operator says that he didn’t come back into the hall. He didn’t go out the window; it was locked from the inside. The guest in the next room said he didn’t go through there, and the connecting door between the rooms was locked. And if he didn’t lam with the stones himself, then somebody had to have grabbed him. But how? I’ve been over that room twice. There’s no other way out of it.” He pushed his hat back and ran his fingers through his hair.

“There must be a simple explanation for all of this.”

In his frustrated state, Marx leveled a glare at the older man. Time stopped. Lowan’s steady blue gaze projected a tangible

calm. The solution was a simple one. Marx blinked and shook his head, struggling to recall the cause of his anger. He didn't consider himself to be a forgetful person. The mental slip had to be job-related stress.

“Uh . . . I'll leave this copy of the police report with you.” He wasn't sure Lowan accepted the case although he was operating under the impression that such an agreement had been made.

“I will get in touch with you when I discover something.” Lowan rose to shake Marx's hand, indicating that the interview had ended. He turned his attention to the paperwork.

Marx showed himself to the door and smirked as he passed Rita's desk, causing her to blush as she reorganized her papers for the hundredth time. “Goodbye, *Miss Nanning*.” He stepped lightly down the stairs, breathing more easily despite the musty smell in the hallway.

If anyone could figure it out, Lowan would.

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