



**MURDER ON HARRISONVILLE ROAD**

**BOOK 3**

**S. E. GROSSKOPF**

**\*PREVIEW\***

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## CHAPTER I

Saturday, March 23, 1931

“Ever wonder about the stars?” Allie’s voice sounded soft and dreamy.

Thomas Nenning had been paying more attention to the road than to the night sky. The drive back to Milford Falls would take at least an hour, and he did not like driving in the dark. But the delay had been unavoidable. The endlessly persuasive and hospitable Mayor Harrison had insisted that they stay for dinner one final time before leaving.

“Those other suns with other worlds around them . . .” Allie slid toward the middle of the front seat and snuggled against his shoulder.

“Sure.” Tom grunted at her speculations and gripped the steering wheel. He didn’t have to wonder what was out there. He already knew.

“It’s hard to get a good picture of the stars.” She brushed her fingers down his arm. “Nothing beats looking at the real thing.”

He slipped his arm over her shoulder and glanced at the sky. The stars were indeed extraordinary. Allie had a photographer’s eye for beauty. The whole world looked different when he was with her. Another bright object, one slightly more within reach, crossed his mind. He had been saving every penny for months. After this series of newspaper articles, he would be able to make

the final payment on the diamond ring that he had asked the jeweler to set aside for him. *Mrs. Allison Nanning*, he almost said out loud.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Nothing, I was thinking about how I’m going to finish writing the Harrisonville articles.” He kept his eyes on the dark strip of road ahead. “It was such a nice place that I hate to leave. I’m surprised that more people haven’t heard of it.”

“It was a nice town to visit, but I wouldn’t want to live there.” She wrinkled her nose. “I can’t wait to get back to the city.”

They passed the gas station, which marked the outer edge of Harrisonville. The *CLOSED* sign showed in the window, but the lights were still on. A car pulled out of the parking lot. Headlights reflected in the mirrors.

“The city has its advantages, but imagine living in a place with low unemployment, high wages, and no crime.” Tom ran his fingers through Allie’s soft hair. He liked Milford Falls too, but was the city the right place to start a family? “I can see why this story is important. Reading about Mayor Harrison’s methods might help other small towns to become more successful.”

“I can’t wait to see how my pictures turned out. The men at work, the housewives with new kitchen appliances, the children with new shoes, it’s wonderful human-interest stuff. A positive story in times like these can make such a difference.” In the midst of the Great Depression, a flourishing little town like Harrisonville represented an extraordinary anomaly.

“I’m sure Wilson will love your pictures,” Tom said. The editor of the Milford Falls Gazette never could resist any of Allie’s work. Neither could anyone else on the paper’s staff. With her silky platinum blonde hair, sparkling blue eyes, and just the right amount of curves, Allison Mansfield caught the attention of every man she met.

How had he gotten so lucky?

“At least as much as he loves your articles,” Allie joked.

Tom shivered. After nine years of writing for the Gazette, Editor Wilson still rewarded his greatest efforts with a copious amount of red pencil markings.

After passing several fenced-in fields, the road curved into the forest again. He looked up at the stars as they disappeared behind thick trees. The headlights of the car behind them lit up the woods and made him a little more comfortable with driving at night.

The narrow highway twisted to the left. Briefly, the headlights shone on empty space. The bend in the road bordered a narrow rocky strip and then a steep drop into a swift-moving river swollen with early spring rain. The rotten skeleton of a fence remained where a concerned citizen had attempted to install a guardrail at some point in the distant past. It would not have stopped any car from going over the edge. Tom slowed for the sharp curve.

A new obstacle sprang up in front of their headlights. He slammed on the brake pedal. The tires skidded on gravel. A truck sat angled across the road, blocking both narrow lanes.

With the cliff dropping down to the river on one side and a high rocky ledge rising alongside the road on the other, the obstruction was impassable. The other car stopped directly behind them.

“Wait here.” Tom left the engine running and the lights on. The roaring of the dangerously flooded river drowned out the sound of his car engine and the gravel that crunched under his shoes. The driver of the truck slumped across the steering wheel. The window was rolled down.

Tom shook the driver by the shoulder. “Hey, are you okay?”

The man didn’t move. Tom reached for the door handle.

*“Tom!”*

Allie’s scream froze his blood. He spun toward her.

Two men stood on opposite sides of the car. The smaller one leaned through the driver’s door. Allie slid to the middle and kicked him in the face. The other man grabbed her from the passenger side and dragged her out into the road.

## MURDER ON HARRISONVILLE ROAD

“Allie!” Tom clenched his fists and gathered himself for a sprint and flying tackle, the truck behind him forgotten. A sharp metallic click made him glance back over his shoulder. The truck’s driver, his face obscured by shadows, now sat upright. The revolver in his hand appeared enormous.

“Goodbye, Tom,” the driver said.

Before Tom could place the familiar voice, the gun went off. All the stars in the sky exploded in one blinding crash.





## CHAPTER II

“Glad you could come.” Tuesday morning, Chief Benson stood framed in the doorway of his home. His enormous moustache twitched. He ushered Lowan inside, briefly made eye contact, and shivered.

Lowan’s piercing blue-gray gaze had a way of unnerving the normally fearless Chief of Police. While Benson was several inches taller, Lowan’s strong personality prevented anyone from thinking of him as short. “I assume this is not a social call?” Benson had left a short message with Lowan’s secretary requesting that he come to his home, but he had not given the reason. “If I was in trouble, we would be meeting at headquarters rather than your house.”

“I’m the one with the trouble.” Chief Benson led the way down the dark hallway to his study, a small room decorated in dark-stained wood paneling, with green carpet and curtains. It would have been a quiet retreat well suited to the Chief, had it not been for some recent unapproved redecorating.

The door of the wall safe hung open at an unnatural angle. The desk drawers had all been removed, the contents tipped onto the top of the desk and spread across the floor. An unpleasant burnt smell permeated the stale air.

“Nitroglycerine.” Lowan took in each detail. Dabs of fingerprint powder and other indications of a recent police investigation littered the scene.

“‘Soup,’ they call it. High quality stuff, better than the average safecracker uses,” Benson said. “An excellent job, too. Last night, I worked late. The neighbors heard the blast at about eight-thirty. By the time we got here, they were gone.”

“Please pardon my asking, but what am I doing here? You are the police . . .”

Chief Benson rummaged through the debris on the desk and produced a box of cigars. After another minute of digging, he cursed the fact that his last bottle of pre-prohibition scotch was indeed missing, apologized for cursing, and then motioned Lowan to follow him into a dining room with faded flower-patterned wallpaper.

By the thick layer of dust on the table, Lowan could see how little the room was used. Benson offered Lowan a cigar, which he declined, then took one for himself, lit it, and explained.

“Magnus Barnsworth, a popular and longstanding alderman, went missing a few days ago. The whole department is busy working on that, and the papers are going to hound us all to death until he’s found. And there have been a couple of other high-profile robberies lately. I had some boys in here to look things over, but there aren’t enough police resources to go around. The budget’s always a bit tight, you know . . .” Benson looked away and puffed on his cigar. “They took the portrait of my late wife—it has a silver frame—and the gold pocket watch that the city of Milford Falls presented to my father for fifty years of public service. And all the money that I had saved for retirement.”

“I am sorry.”

A clock ticked somewhere in the background, the only sound in the empty house. Faded pink lace shaded the dining room window, a clinging memory of a woman named Evelyn who once called this house her home. The wallpaper had started to peel at the seams.

Honest police officers were seldom rich.

Benson mumbled, and wiped at the dust on the table. “I’d been thinking about selling this place and moving into an apartment. I don’t need a whole house to myself. I’ll have to now.” He met Lowan’s sharp gaze without flinching this time. The usual military bark resurfaced. “But this . . . this was personal, and I can’t let it go. You’re the best detective in Milford Falls. That’s what I need right now. Will you take the case?”

“Of course.” Lowan sat up straighter to reflect Benson’s determination. “A list of everyone who has been in your house recently would be helpful, and details the police came up with. I will find who did this.”





## CHAPTER III

Later that afternoon, Lowan signed a few checks and handed them back to his secretary, Rita Nenning. “You may take those to the post office.”

She finished stuffing and sealing the envelopes, organized them into a neat stack, and grabbed her jacket off the coatrack. That would take care of the bills for the next several weeks. She closed the door on her way out. Her footsteps echoed away.

Benson had promised to send a copy of the police report and a list of any recent visitors to his home. Lowan expected to have it within the next few hours. Until then, he had no starting point.

Waiting near the telephone, Lowan turned his attention back to a multi-page contract spread across the desk. Amercon—the largest regional manufacturer of radios—had tried to cheat him once before. A stern visit caused them to immediately rectify the mistake along with adding generous compensation, but he’d never again neglect to read the fine print. If they wanted the privilege of using his electrical components in their radios, they would pay for it. His research and development put them years ahead of their competitors.

Footsteps thudded down the hall. His office wasn’t the only one on this floor, but he was at the far end. When the footsteps didn’t stop, he looked up, sensing a hostile and highly emotional presence. The office door flew open and banged against the wall.

“Thomas . . .” Lowan started to rise from his desk chair. The man standing in the doorway was the last person he ever expected to receive a visit from.

“Hi.” Tom’s voice simmered with formality and suspicion. Rather than the usual hat, his head was wrapped in a bandage. He slammed the door shut and crossed the room, moving with the stiff posture of a feral tomcat.

“I just sent your sister to the post office.”

“I was watching outside and I saw her leave. I came here to see you.” Tom took the chair opposite Lowan’s desk, which was reserved for clients. He returned Lowan’s questioning look with a defiant stare. “Believe me, as much as I hate you . . .”

Lowan looked down at the papers on his desk without answering. He sensed more fear than hatred, but doubted that Tom was ready to be confronted with the truth about his feelings.

“I wouldn’t come here if I had anywhere else to go. I need your help. They killed Allie.” Tom choked. His thoughts spun back to the nighttime country road. He pressed his hands to his aching head, then clenched and unclenched his fists several times and took a deep breath. “I want you to find them. I want you to find out who, and why, and then I want Sen to rip them into little pieces . . .” He held back another sob, covered his face with his hands, and rocked back and forth in his chair.

Lowan waited while Tom recovered, then spoke quietly. “Could you please tell me exactly what happened?”

“Can’t you just—” Tom was the only person aside from Sen who knew that Lowan could read minds.

“It is much easier for me to see if you explain step by step.” He spoke calmly and tried to project a sense of reassurance. Tom’s emotional state was enough to set his own nerves on edge.

Tom perched on the edge of his chair and avoided eye contact. He took another deep breath before beginning. “We were driving back to Milford Falls from Harrisonville. We were there doing research for a story, a series of articles. It was already dark when we left because the mayor and his wife insisted that we stay for dinner. A short distance out of town, there’s a sharp curve in

the road near the river. There was a truck parked across the road and another car stopped right behind us. I went to see if the driver of the truck was okay, and then two men pulled Allie out of the car and the truck driver had a gun . . .” Tom’s words came faster and ran together. He paused to repress another bout of strong emotion.

“What can you tell me about the driver of the truck?”

“He was a bigger man.” Tom tried to remain calm while visualizing what he had seen. “When he was leaning over the steering wheel and I thought he needed help, I shook him by the shoulder. He had muscles like an athlete. I didn’t see his face and I don’t know how old he was.”

“Was there anything else about him?”

“Just before he shot me,” he choked again, “he said ‘goodbye, Tom.’ He knew who I was. I’m sure I’d heard his voice before, but I can’t remember . . .” Tom pressed his eyes shut and wrestled with this phantom voice. The voice of Allie’s murderer.

“You are doing well,” Lowan encouraged. “What about the truck?”

“I think it was green. It was an ordinary older model. The bed had high wooden sides. There was writing on the door, like it belonged to a business, but I couldn’t read it in the dark.”

“Very good.” He shared the picture of the truck exactly as it appeared in Tom’s mind. “Now what about the car and the two men?”

“A gray or tan four-door, probably newer. I didn’t get a good look at it. I only saw the men from a distance, but one was taller and heavier than the other. And Allie kicked the short one in the face. He might still have a mark from that.”

“And then what happened?”

Tom recounted his steps again, more calmly this time. “I was standing by the truck and then I heard a click behind me and I turned back and the driver had a gun. He said ‘goodbye, Tom,’ and . . .” He gently touched the bandage on his head. “And the doctor said the bullet just grazed me, but it was pretty deep. If it had been half an inch farther over. . . . It knocked me out and I

woke up in the river when I hit the water. I've always been a good swimmer, you know, but under the circumstances it wasn't easy. The river was flooded and moving pretty fast. I'm sure I was washed downstream at least a mile and then I somehow managed to climb out into a field. It's a miracle I didn't freeze. A farmer found me Sunday morning and drove me to a doctor, but I barely remember that part."

They sat in silence for several moments after Tom finished his story.

"I was going to propose to Allie," Tom whispered. He rubbed his head and rocked in his chair. "Please find who did this." Drooping from the emotional effort, he leaned onto Lowan's desk.

"I can help with the pain." Lowan reached across the desk toward Tom's hand.

"Don't touch me!" Tom jerked away, knocked his chair backwards, and retreated a few unsteady steps across the office.

The door opened behind him.

"Tom!" Rita dropped the handful of mail and grabbed his arm to keep him from falling. "What's going on? Tom, when you didn't come back from Harrisonville on Saturday, I thought you stayed there a little longer to work on the story—"

"Allie's dead."

"What?"

"Rita, take your brother home and look after him," Lowan said. "I will call for a taxi."

She helped Tom out by the arm, leaving the mail scattered on the floor. He ordered a taxi, set the phone down, picked it up again, and dialed Benson's number. The line clicked.

"Chief Benson?"

"Did you find something already? I have that list of people you wanted."

"I was calling to apologize." Lowan looked down at his desk, hoping to reach for something distracting. His normal habits of organization left him no small objects to fidget with. "I must postpone investigating your case."



“What?” Benson barked. After a pause, his voice took on a noticeably forced composure. “What could be more important?”

“My nephew, Thomas Nenning, was shot and his friend Allison Mansfield was apparently killed.”

“Oh.” A moment of dead air followed. “I’m sorry, I had no idea Thomas Nenning was your nephew. When some country doctor brought him to the hospital with a gunshot wound, they called us to report it. I would help if I could, but as it happened outside of the Harrisonville town line it’s a job for the local sheriff. Harrisonville is almost an hour away from here up in the mountains.”

“I will continue to look for your things after I help Thomas.” Lowan set the telephone receiver down.

The emptiness of his promise hung in the office air like dust in a sunbeam.

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