



# Murder in the Script

Book 9

S. E. Grosskopf

**\*PREVIEW\***

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## Chapter I

Wednesday, April 22, 1931

**L**orenzo Cross tightened his grip on the pistol, ready to pull the trigger. He stalked alongside the trunk of a fallen tree, peering through the twisted limbs. A slight motion caught his attention. He aimed and fired three times, point blank into the branches, enjoying every moment of it. “Come out and show yourself!” He almost smiled.

“Come and get me,” Alistair Hamilton shouted. Two gunshots answered.

Renz didn’t bother to duck. He hopped onto the trunk, standing at an angle and aiming downward at the opposite side. Hamilton wasn’t there.

He glanced sideways at the damaged house. The front door was completely blocked, hidden behind the fallen tree. The top part of the tree had ripped through the second floor, taking a bite out of the roof and exposing the interior to the weather and wild animals. The sight still bothered him. It had been a decent house once, and the only home he’d ever known. Now, it wasn’t worth fixing. The branches rustled and creaked.

“You’ll pay for what you did to May!” Hamilton shouted from somewhere behind him. “I’ll kill you if it’s the last thing I do!”

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Renz spun around, still balanced on the tree trunk. “Oh, yeah? Ha, I’m shaking.” He took aim and pulled the trigger. Hamilton ducked back and bolted across the overgrown yard. Renz hopped down to follow, only a few feet behind him. Overtaking him would have been too easy.

Tires squealed. A car careened over the curb and spun sideways in front of them, blocking their path. Hamilton stopped and glanced back at Renz, confused. “That’s not in the script. What’s going on?”

“Cut!” Waterson, the director, yelled and waved his arms. “What’s that car doing here?”

Beyond Waterson, the camera man stopped turning the crank. The rest of the cast and crew murmured and gathered around.

Waterson strode across the set to confront the intruding vehicle. Four men stepped out. Doors slammed. The intruders stepped apart as if to surround the crew, each standing confidently broad-shouldered.

“Hey.” Waterson approached the man in the lead. “What do you think you’re doing? We’re filming here.”

The leader of the group shoved Waterson off balance, then swung a punch that knocked him backwards. Waterson scrambled back and started to prop himself up on his elbows, but the intruder pinned him down with a foot on his chest. He took out a gun and turned to face the others. The rest of his men encircled the crew, moving in like wolves surrounding a flock of sheep.

Renz finally glimpsed the bully’s face. Sonny Herrera. He hadn’t seen the man in six years—and meeting him again prompted a surge of rage. He brought his gun up and fired until it clicked empty.

Herrera turned to look. He grinned, holding the cocky stare long enough for Renz to realize that he’d been armed with nothing but blanks, then took aim and fired one shot.

Pain seared through the nerves in Renz’s arm. He dropped the gun and jerked back, grabbing at the injury. The crewman behind him crumpled and fell.

Hamilton squealed and threw his useless gun down, spinning away to look for an escape. Herrera's men hemmed him in, turning him back toward the group. Renz lifted his hand long enough to stare stupidly at the blood on his fingers. Waterson shouted. Herrera kicked him.

"You're not gonna make this movie," Herrera shouted. When Waterson objected, Herrera kicked him again. "The filming's over."

The cast and crew condensed into a tighter group. Hamilton disappeared somewhere in the middle, doing his best to hide behind everyone else. His blubbing noises drifted over the crowd. Several of the other actors bent down over the fallen crewman. Renz stood apart from the others, holding his throbbing arm. The cameraman hadn't left his position beside the tripod.

"You." Herrera advanced toward the camera. The cameraman's eyes widened and he stepped back. "If I catch you turning that crank again, I'll break both your hands. Got it?" He knocked the tripod over, then motioned for one of his men to take over.

Herrera's man opened the canister and pulled the film out, ruining it with light, then stomped repeatedly on the tripod until a loud snap sounded. The lens shattered. Pieces scattered across the yard. The cameraman winced.

Crunching sounds continued in the background. Herrera turned back to Renz, circling until Renz was forced to turn to face him. "Don't ever come back here."

"It's still my house." Renz gripped his arm. His fingers tingled and went numb. He met Herrera's glare without backing down.

Herrera snarled and lunged forward, swinging his gun. Renz couldn't bring his arm up fast enough to block. The blow spun him around, and the next one toppled him over. He landed on the ground beside Waterson.

"If I catch you here again," Herrera screamed at the cowering group, "you're all dead!" He fired his gun into the air. Everyone flinched.

Herrera's men joined him at the car. They piled inside. When the car backed into the road, Renz resumed breathing.

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“You know that guy?” Waterson pushed himself up and stood.

“Sonny Herrera. He’s the reason I went to jail.” Renz tried to stand, but dizziness forced him back down. He stared at his arm for a moment, then glanced over to where several of the others helped the injured crewman back to his feet. Nothing remained of the camera but twisted fragments.

“I’ll get to a phone and call the cops,” Waterson said.

“Ha, don’t bother. They’d just pin it on me again.” Renz shook his head and nodded toward the injured man. “Get him to the hospital first. After that . . . I know a guy.”

“Who would go up against Sonny Herrera?”

“O’Malley the Giant.”





## Chapter II

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Waterson followed Renz down the shadowy alley. The fog at the end of it glowed eerie green.

Fantastic atmosphere for a location, but the green wouldn't have translated well onto black-and-white film. Rough red bricks under layers of grime, litter and broken bottles, the general stench of salty fish and mold, the foghorn droning in the distance . . .

“I haven't been here since . . . before.” Renz paused and glanced back and forth. He didn't like to talk about the years he'd spent in prison. “It wasn't here, then. They change the location a lot, but I asked around and it wasn't hard to find. That green light is a marker.” He reached for the doorknob, moving his arm stiffly, though the bandage wasn't bulky enough to show under his jacket. Thankfully, the wound hadn't been much more than a deep scratch.

The door creaked open, revealing a narrow room, empty except for a payphone on the wall and a pile of broken furniture in the back corner. Splintered chairs displayed cobwebs frosted in dust, sagging between the broken spokes. The sharp smell of alcohol mixed with cigarette smoke filled the place, assaulting the senses.

“I thought most speakeasies had a guard at the door. Isn't there supposed to be a password or something?” Waterson followed Renz inside, walking on his toes and glancing around. Muffled conversations drifted through the door.

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“Not here. They don’t try to stop anybody from getting in. At this place, if you walk in without an invitation, you’ll get robbed to start with, and then either killed or shanghaied.”

“Shanghaied? They still do that?”

“If you look like you’re fit for work, and there’s a ship’s captain willing to pay for extra crew members . . . yeah. After that, you’d probably end up somewhere along the Barbary coast.” Renz reached for the door to the next room, then paused and turned back. “Don’t look scared. All these guys can smell fear, especially O’Malley. Just stay close and follow my lead.”

Renz pushed the door open and stepped inside. A scuffed mahogany bar and unpolished brass rail took up the far wall, salvaged from the ghost of some pre-prohibition saloon. Tables and chairs, heavy tobacco smoke, few working light fixtures. Bullet holes marred the back wall. The patrons were exclusively men in rough clothing. Renz guessed that every one of them carried a gun.

“How well do you know O’Malley?” Waterson stayed beside Renz, close enough to bump his elbow while trying not to look nervous.

Renz stepped away. He fit in with the crowd. His coarse, scarred face, his dark-colored clothing, the confident way he carried himself even in such surroundings didn’t differ much from the others in the room. “By reputation only. We’ve never met, since he wasn’t around before I went away. I’ve heard a lot about him, though. If we’re going to make Sonny back off, we need somebody on our side who’s bigger than him. O’Malley’s the only guy I could think of.”

“What do you mean, you’ve never met him?” Waterson looked like a dumb parrot, repeating everything and following along. He never knew how to respond when he wasn’t in charge. “When you said you knew a guy—”

“Shush.” Renz motioned him to silence. He glanced around and headed for a booth at the back of the room.

“Then how do you know he’ll help us?”

“I don’t.” When Renz stopped in front of the booth, conversations and the clink of glasses quieted.

Everyone stared at them. A few men put their hands under their jackets. “Renz . . .” Waterson edged closer to him, almost stepping on his feet.

The booth was built larger than the others, proportionate to the giant occupying it. He wore black. The cut of his jacket seemed reminiscent of a military uniform with silver markings. No hat. His hair blazed red. He turned to stare, his face expressionless apart from the annoyance in his strangely nonhuman yellow-green eyes.

“Mr. O’Malley . . .” Despite his earlier confidence, Renz swallowed hard. His voice twisted. “We want to hire you—”

“No.” The answer was immediate and harsh. A strange accent tainted his words. “I don’t work.”

“We’ll pay you. If you could just give us a minute to talk about it—”

O’Malley hurled an empty glass. It hit Renz in the face hard enough to knock him backwards. Stinging shock made the dim lights flash. Glass shards scattered across the floor. While Renz staggered and put his hands to his forehead, O’Malley growled, a wolflike warning that transcended all languages. “Go away.”

Waterson grabbed Renz’s arm to help him find his balance. Around the room, several of the other men had half-risen from their chairs. Without Renz acting the part of a gangster, neither of them would walk out of the speakeasy alive. Blood dripped into his eyes. He took out his handkerchief to wipe it away.

“We came to ask for your help,” Waterson said. “After Sonny Herrera messed up my film set, I wanted to hire you for protection. I could even put you in the movies, if you wanted, but not if my production gets shut down before I’m even halfway done filming.”

“You want . . . protection.” The giant spoke slowly, as if translating his thoughts from some other language. “You . . . movies?”

“Yes, I make movies, but Sonny Herrera’s gang showed up today and attacked my film crew. I would pay you to stop him from doing that again.”

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O'Malley looked away and growled again, but not as threatening as before. More like he was thinking. Getting paid to fight couldn't have been a completely unappealing proposition. He slid out of the booth and stood, unfolding himself to his full height. Though Renz was over six feet, O'Malley was more than a foot taller. Waterson and Renz backed away, still waiting for an answer.

"You come." O'Malley stalked toward the back door, his heavy footsteps thudding across the floor.

Renz backed away and wiped blood off his forehead with his handkerchief. "Where?"

"You come." The giant made an impatient motion. "You talk." It sounded more like a threat than an invitation for discussion. "You come. You talk. Maybe I work."

"We're coming," Waterson said. He and Renz followed O'Malley outside.

The giant ducked through the doorway. Darkness covered the cityscape. Finding a cab at this time of the night wouldn't have been easy. O'Malley didn't stop to look for one. He crossed the street with long strides, moving as if he had a definite destination in mind. Their path twisted through alleys and pitch black side streets. Waterson and Renz jogged to keep up.



## Chapter III

One solid *thud* jerked Lowan out of a deep sleep. Lost in a spinning world of pain, he fought for breath. The blackness of his bedroom left him feeling blind and disoriented, with no idea what had caused the disturbance.

One more *thud* made him wince. Sen's knock.

Gasping, Lowan struggled to throw off the blankets and sit up. Less than a week ago, he'd been kicked in the ribs by a man wearing steel-toed work boots. His broken ribs might take the full six to eight weeks to heal.

He put his feet over the edge of the bed, stood, and stumbled through the darkness to reach the light switch. Even in the light, he only saw variations of gray. Exhaustion was often accompanied by temporary monochromatic colorblindness, which would likely continue until his ribs healed. The injury dulled his telepathic senses to the point that he couldn't feel Sen's distinctive presence even from across a room.

Another knock would probably catapult the door off its hinges. Sen wasn't patient.

Wearing his pajamas, he stumbled across the living room, then fumbled with the lock on the apartment door. Sen glared down at him. Two men stood behind him, farther away. One had blood on his face.

Lowan pulled the door open and stepped back out of the way, holding his arm against his side. He tried not to wheeze. In this

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condition, he couldn't see what Sen wanted. It was safer to let him speak first, rather than demanding explanations. Their last meeting—late the previous evening—ended with Sen throwing him down the stairs. That was typical.

Sen ducked through the doorway. His two companions followed him inside, looking dazed. They glanced around at his sparse furnishings, at him, and then at Sen. A tense minute passed. The two men whispered.

Finally, Sen turned on the visitors and spoke in harsh English. "You talk."

They both flinched and retreated a step backward. One nodded and spoke. "I'm Mark Waterson, and this is Lorenzo Cross. We're shooting a film, and we had some trouble earlier today. We tried to hire O'Malley for security . . ." He glanced sideways. "I even offered to put him in the movie. He said no, at first, but then told us to follow him here. Who are you?"

"I am Lowan." He edged closer to Waterson while keeping out of Sen's reach, reminding himself to use the alias O'Malley in front of them. Sen's double identity would be difficult to explain, and he didn't want it to become public knowledge. "He may not be sure what you want. I can translate your offer into his language."

"I've heard that name before," Renz said. "In the newspapers. Aren't you a detective?"

"Yes. My association with O'Malley is not my choice. Would you explain the situation to me?"

Waterson and Renz took turns describing the attack on the set, the injuries, the damage to their equipment, and Sonny Herrera's threats.

"And why did you not go to the police?" Lowan's feet began to ache from standing. The room only had one chair, and leaving the conversation to sit in it now would be rude. He rarely entertained guests.

"Because Sonny said he'd come back and kill everybody if we did that," Waterson explained. He glanced sideways at Renz. "And . . ."

“I’d rather not get mixed up with the cops,” Renz said. “They wouldn’t believe a word I said, anyway. I’ve got a record.”

“Oh.” Lowan tried not to stare.

“We mostly just wanted O’Malley to be there in case Sonny showed up again, then scare him away,” Waterson clarified. “It’s not like we were trying to hire him to kill anybody. I could put him in a few scenes, too. It might help with advertising if we can say we have a giant in the film, and he does seem to have a local reputation. I was hoping he would take that as payment, since we’re already overbudget. Not that we had any budget to begin with. I just bought a studio that was up for sale, along with some used equipment, and Renz and I were mostly funding the production with our own money. If this doesn’t succeed, we’re both bankrupt.”

“O’Malley appreciates cash, and so do I, but I will explain the situation to him.” Lowan repeated the details in Sen’s harsh and growling language, emphasizing the potential opportunity to fight a skilled opponent, and the prestige involved in becoming a film star.

Sen’s expression never changed. Lowan finished and waited. Tense silence followed while the giant made up his mind. Lowan sensed him calculating each option, weighing various motives and outcomes against each other in a mathematical way. The exact details were beyond his view.

“Yes. I will come tomorrow.” Sen’s deep voice rumbled. He turned around and ducked out into the hallway. Heavy footsteps echoed away.

“What language was that?” Waterson asked.

“It is something quite obscure,” Lowan said. “You would not have heard of it. I am surprised that he agreed, particularly without the offer of a large payment. I suspect that your bravery impressed him. Few men would be courageous enough to walk into the Green Light and approach him with such an offer.”

“Ha.” Renz touched his forehead. “I can understand why. For a minute, I didn’t think we’d get out of there alive.”

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“I had not been planning to take another case so soon.” Lowan went to his chair and sank gingerly into it. “I have not had enough time to recover—”

Jane Maplewood, his neighbor from the next apartment, leaned through the open doorway. “I heard Sen over here. That knocking almost shook me out of bed. Is everything alright?”

“Yes, Jane, everything is fine.” Lowan tried holding his breath to avoid showing pain. As much as his ribs ached, he only wanted to be left alone to finish the night’s sleep in peace.

“Don’t tell me everything is fine,” she scolded. Heavysset and past middle aged, she padded across his living room in her pink fuzzy bathrobe and slippers to fuss over Renz. “How did you hurt your head? I can take a look at it for you. I am a nurse. I spent almost a year in France and Belgium during the war, so I’ve seen a lot worse than this.”

She blustered forward and grabbed his arm, which made him yelp. He gritted his teeth and let her examine the gash on his forehead.



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