# CRESCENDO

A NOVEL

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Polygon

First published in Great Britain in 2026 by Polygon,
an imprint of Birlinn Ltd.

Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

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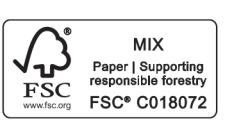
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ISBN 978 1 84697 700 8
eBook ISBN 978 1 78885 761 1

Typeset by Initial Typesetting Services, Edinburgh




Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A

*To Debby, who is in every way the star of my life.*

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In 1959, riding high on the success of his stylish thriller *North by Northwest*, Alfred Hitchcock embarked on an ambitious new film project. After a few months he was forced to abandon it. That much is historical fact. As for what follows, as Hitch himself would say, 'It's only a movie.'

# 1

## STRANGER ON THE SET

When is a story just a story and when is a coincidence just a coincidence? Answering those questions turned out to be a lot more dangerous than I would have thought – and it all began with Alfred Hitchcock's *Crescendo*.

Hardly anybody remembers it now, but at the time it was going to be the biggest thing ever, and I was nearly part of it. If you know anything at all about it, it will be only the scraps and tidbits you read in gossip columns and the scandal sheets, the bits that surfaced like torn fragments of a script shredded to pieces and tossed into the sea.

Would I have passed on the whole thing if I'd known what I was getting into – that beneath the surface sheen of Hollywood glamour there was a treacherous undertow that was going to drag me down into a maelstrom of tortured love and deadly secrets? If I had known, would I have gone ahead anyway, because the lure was too strong, because fate's dark design shimmers with promises that clutch the heart? You must know the feeling, when you're standing on a cliff's edge staring down to where the waves crash and swirl over a forbidding rampart of savage rocks. The danger is as stark and chilling as the icy

grin of a skull, yet you can hear a voice whisper, *Go ahead, take a step*. And sometimes that voice comes with a face as beautiful as something glimpsed on the edges of a dream.

It was a phone call from my agent Lon Pollack that kicked the whole thing off. At the time I was sitting at my desk in my back-street Burbank apartment, nursing a tepid cup of coffee and staring resentfully at the blank page in my typewriter. The basket on the floor beside me was half full of waste paper – all I had to show for five hours' work trying to grind out chapter seven of my projected master work *Finality*.

I was working out a theory that went something like this: given the fact that real life is full of unresolved issues and unanswered questions, fiction is most true to life when the writer avoids the usual plot mechanics. With this revolutionary premise to guide me, I had promised myself that this book would be the new Great American Novel, but things weren't exactly going to plan.

So when the phone rang, I was only too glad of the interruption. Then came the thunderclap. Lon told me he'd been contacted by Alfred Hitchcock's people and the director wanted to hire me. My reaction was the obvious one.

'What is this – a gag?'

'Bobby,' Lon said in that patient way of his, 'if I was going to kid you, I'd come up with something more believable. This is on the level. I gave them your address and they're sending over a letter to make it official.'

Sure enough, less than an hour later, a manila envelope arrived by special delivery with my name and address neatly typed on it. I ripped it open and pulled out the letter. There was the Paramount logo at the top of the page and beneath that the words *From the office of Alfred Hitchcock*. It said the great man wanted me to work on the script for his new picture.

Not a hint as to what it was about, but I made a shrewd guess that it wouldn't be a musical. This was September 1959, and back then the whole country was swooning over *North by Northwest*. If he planned on topping that, he was taking on a lot, and if he was asking for my help, things must already be desperate. How had he even heard of me? Maybe he used a Ouija board and picked up a message from my late Aunt Louisa.

However it came about, I was requested to show up at Paramount Studios, at ten o'clock the next morning. I was to bring a suitcase and my toothbrush as they had a place for me to bed down. If somebody was pulling my leg, they were going the whole hog.

Now, if the president had called me personally and asked me to be ambassador to Mars, I'd have found that easier to swallow. But Alfred Hitchcock was bigger than the president, more famous than Mickey Mouse and more easily recognised. As well as the renowned cameos in his pictures, he had a hit TV show where he introduced each episode with a comic monologue solemnly delivered while blowing bubbles or sticking his head in a noose. It had even provided him with his own theme tune that managed to be both comical and creepy at the same time, a bit like the man himself.

I decided to swallow the huge improbability of him singling me out of all the struggling writers in Los Angeles and celebrate this happy turn of events by finishing off my last bottle of Jack. Then I went back to work on the Novel. Man, how I was hating the Novel.

Let's fade in on a shot of me driving my long-serving Studebaker coupe southwest through the sculptured hills of North Hollywood, with their elegant, stuccoed villas embedded in tame groves of eucalyptus and japonicas. I'm

freshly showered, my hair is slicked, and I'm dressed in dark slacks, a red-and-yellow tweed jacket and a white open-necked shirt, feeling like life is pretty good.

As I drove, I couldn't help but wonder what had drawn me to the attention of the great director. Could he possibly have read that first ambitious novel, *A Flickering Candle*, by wet-behind-the-ears author Robert Burgoyne? If so, he was in exclusive company – barely enough people to fill a lifeboat. I knew now what the problem had been with that first effort. It was too structured, too pat, too easy to ignore. This time I would be bolder and give the reader a challenge.

I was whistling a tune from *South Pacific* as I turned into Marathon Street and saw before me the famed Bronson Gate. The ornate arch was flanked by a pair of pillars and across the top of it were emblazoned the magical words *Paramount Pictures*. It looked to me like the entrance to Wonderland.

I pulled up by the booth on the right-hand side of the entrance and a uniformed guard came out, chewing on a bite of turkey sandwich. I handed him my letter signed by Hitchcock's personal assistant Peggy Robertson and waited for him to be impressed. Sliding a hand under his peaked cap, he scratched his balding pate. 'Gimme a minute,' he said, and sauntered back inside his cubby hole.

When he returned, he informed me that Mr Hitchcock was over in Production Stage 22. 'The staff parking lot's to your right,' he added helpfully. 'The guy on duty there will get you the rest of the way.'

I nosed my way through the gate and followed the signs through a maze of narrow streets and alleys. The sprawling studio complex covers fifty-six acres and is practically a town in its own right. As I soon learned, it has its own barber shop, infirmary, parks and fire station.

All along the way youngsters in golf carts and messengers mounted on bicycles whizzed by me, heads down like they were racing in the Daytona 500. I had to pull up at one point to let some Romans on horseback trot past and made a sharp swerve to avoid colliding with a camel that was being led by a man in a turban.

At the parking lot another guy in uniform took note of my arrival and waved me through. After a search, I found a space between two expensive European sports cars that made my old heap look like an ox-cart. I edged in carefully, and when I got out I strolled casually back to the attendant, trying to look like I belonged there.

I had only once in my life been mistaken for a movie star. My publisher was treating me to a swanky dinner at the Brown Derby when a girl with braces and a ponytail edged nervously up to our table.

'C-c-could I please trouble you for your autograph?' she squeaked, extending the little book towards me along with a pen.

'Sure,' I said, pleasantly surprised. 'You should give your publicity department a bonus,' I told the publisher. 'It looks like I've made the big time at last.'

His brow furrowed and he shook his head sceptically.

I had the pen poised when the girl said, 'I read in a magazine that you sometimes eat here, but I wasn't expecting to actually see you.' She clasped her hands together and goggled. 'Really, Mr Holden, I must be your biggest fan!'

I took that punch like a pro and, rather than disappoint the kid, I wrote out my name as *William Holden*, finishing with a manly flourish.

When I explained to the attendant where I was headed, he flagged down one of the speed demon golf-carters. Once on

board, I was whisked away on a zigzag course and dropped off at the entrance to a massive concrete block big enough to house a Zeppelin.

There was a red light outside that I figured would be on when they were filming, but right now the coast was clear and the heavy metal door was ajar. I slipped inside and gazed around at the scaffolding and the walkways high overhead. Stepping over snaking lengths of cable and weaving a path through piles of prop furniture, I followed the sound of two male voices. One was gruff, the other thin and testy.

Three fake walls had been set up to represent the interior of a bedroom. There was a lot of lace, some antique dolls, a dresser with an oval mirror and a large four-poster bed that the two men were manoeuvring into position.

'No, he wants it over here,' said Gruff, 'so a shot from the doorway will take in the big bay window.'

'The window, eh?' snapped Testy. 'That fake background they've stuck out there isn't going to fool anybody. A blind mole could see it's just a picture.'

'It'll have to do for now,' Gruff declared resignedly. 'He wants a back projection with moving clouds, but the footage hasn't turned up yet.'

Testy gave a wheezing grunt. 'Don't tell me that's something else that's gone missing!'

'What can I say? The joint must be haunted.'

There were other men in the area surrounding the set, making adjustments to lights and sound equipment. The two men with the bed, however, seemed to be taking a break now, so I walked into the lace-covered bedroom and addressed them.

'Good morning, gentlemen. I was wondering if you could help me.'

Gruff was thickset and jowly while Testy was a goggle-eyed drainpipe of a man. Both were red-faced from the effort of shifting the four-poster and Gruff was leaning on a side table, panting.

'Sure, mac, what's on your mind?' he responded affably.

'I'm looking for Alfred Hitchcock,' I said, glancing around the studio. 'Do you know if he's planning on making a cameo appearance?'

'What are you?' asked Testy, his eyes darting over me like flashlights. 'Press? An extra?'

'Mr Hitchcock's hired me to work on the script for his new picture,' I said, trying not to sound too pleased with myself. I looked the set over curiously. 'What's it about, anyway?'

'It's called *Crescendo*,' Gruff informed me.

'With the emphasis on the *crash*,' Testy added. 'As for what it's about, that's anybody's guess.'

'Anyway, welcome aboard, chum,' Gruff grinned. 'I hope you brought your life vest.'

I didn't like the sound of that, but before I could ask what he meant, Testy pointed and said, 'If you want to talk to the captain of this leaky tub, go back outside and cross the street to the door marked *Wardrobe*. He's there right now.'

I thanked them both and headed off. Behind me I could hear the creaking and scuffling as they continued adjusting the bed into the required position. Everyone else I passed was either working in silent concentration on some piece of equipment or discussing technical matters that were over my head.

Once outside, it was only a short walk to the Wardrobe Department. I stepped through the door and stumbled right into a rack of coats – blue serge, leather and cashmere – which enveloped me like a crowd at a ball game. I wriggled my way out and had to catch the rack to keep it from toppling

over. There was rack upon rack of every kind of clothing – suits, dresses, uniforms – and shelves stacked high with hats and shoeboxes. Weaving my way through the maze of fine tailoring and haberdashery, I spotted a familiar profile at the far end of the room.

There was no mistaking the great Alfred Hitchcock. Not only was he the most famous director on the planet, he was also the only one the man on the street could have picked out of a lineup. So there he was, in a dark blue suit, white shirt and black tie, with his distinctive paunch and that lugubrious expression on his hound-dog features. He was facing a wiry, curly-haired woman in a smock, the pockets of which were filled with scissors of every size, rulers, bobby pins and tape measures. Draped over her arm was a cotton nightgown trimmed with lace and festooned with pink ribbons and crocheted flowers.

As I drew closer, Hitchcock shook his head sombrely and spoke in that slow, polite drawl so familiar to his millions of TV fans.

'No, no, this simply won't do. You're dressing a beautiful young woman, not Old Mother Hubbard.'

'You said you wanted something old-fashioned,' the wardrobe lady countered sharply.

'I meant something that suggested an antique fairy tale, not a fire sale at a retirement home,' Hitchcock explained in a tone of sorely tried patience. 'Start again and find something diaphanous.'

The lady cocked an eye at him. 'You mean you want something you can see through.'

The director drew himself up with outraged dignity. 'I mean no such thing. I mean a gown such as Sleeping Beauty might wear to lure a prince into her bedchamber so that his kiss might break the spell of the wicked witch.'

The wardrobe lady flounced irritably. 'Fine, I'll see what I can rustle up. Something that will smack a prince right in the eye – even if he can't see through it.'

As she stalked off, Hitchcock, suddenly aware of my presence, turned to face me with an inquisitorial glare.

'Can I do something for you, young man?'

I started to offer him my hand, then drew it back. I didn't know if he was the handshaking type, and I didn't want to make a bad impression by being too forward.

'Mr Hitchcock, I'm Bobby Burgoyne.'

The director treated me to a blank stare. 'I don't doubt that for a moment. What I fail to understand is, what has that to do with me?'

The question took me aback and I wondered if maybe this was some kind of test. I'd heard rumours that Hitchcock was fond of practical jokes, so maybe this was one of them.

'Perhaps I should say, I'm Robert Burgoyne,' I explained, 'the author of *A Flickering Candle*. You asked me to come here and meet with you this morning.'

I added a weak smile that was meant to show I was in on the gag and spread my hands out like I was presenting myself for his inspection. 'So here I am.'

'I assure you I did not,' Hitchcock informed me flatly with no change of expression. 'I have no acquaintance with anyone by the name of Burgoyne. Now, I have a very busy day ahead of me and have no time to entertain visitors. Especially when they appear to be delusional.'

I saw his eyes drift in the direction of a uniformed guard who was standing in a far corner of the room drinking a cola. I could hardly believe he was aiming to have me thrown out like I was some drunken gatecrasher.

'But you did, Mr Hitchcock,' I insisted, doing my best to

sound affable. 'I know you're busy, so maybe it slipped your mind.'

This suggestion of mental delinquency drew a scowl, and he snapped his fingers to catch the guard's attention. The man tossed back the last of his drink and wiped the back of his hand across his lips. He lumbered towards us, hitching up his belt in a belated show of professional dignity.

'Young man,' Hitchcock addressed me solemnly, 'I advise you now to depart under your own steam before you cause either of us any further embarrassment.'

'Hold it, Mr Hitchcock,' I said, holding up a hand to ward off the guard. 'I've got the proof right here.'

The director eyed me sceptically as I rummaged through my pockets, wondering where the hell I'd put that damned letter. The guard was stretching a beefy hand towards me when I whipped the note out just in time, like a magician snatching a bouquet of flowers from his sleeve.

'See, there it is in black and white,' I declared, handing it to the director.

Hitchcock took it reluctantly and scrutinised the message with a suspicious frown.

'If anyone is in error, young man,' he informed me, 'it is you.' He presented the letter to my gaze as a piece of damning evidence. 'As anyone can plainly see, this is addressed to one Jack Latimer. I don't see how that gives you a free pass to intrude on my set, Mr *Burgoyne*.'