

WORKING FOR A CRIME GROUP AS A SCRIPTWRITER 我在犯罪組織當編劇

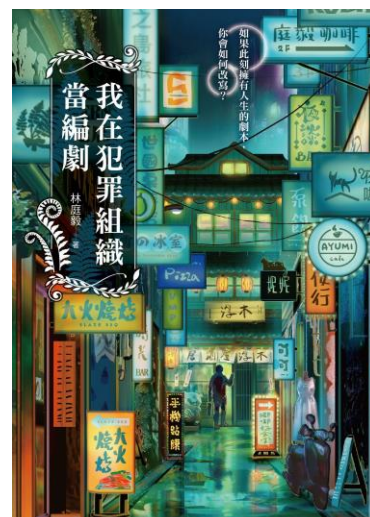
- * 2022 ACFM Busan Story Market Selection
- * Top Ten Bestseller at Naiin Retail Bookstores (Thailand)
- * Film adaptation currently in production

Rumor has it that a secretive criminal organization housed in an izakaya-style restaurant possesses the power to magically alter the course of a person's life – at a price. But be warned, becoming everything you ever wanted might cost more than you ever bargained for.

Aspiring writer and hospital worker Ho Ching-Cheng's life is shattered when a car accident robs him of both his mother and his true love. With nothing to soothe his heartache, he pours himself into writing stories and posting them online. Just as his work begins attracting a following, Ho receives an invitation to join a secretive criminal organization as a "screenwriter" who will rewrite the lives of the organization's clients.

Operating out of an izakaya-style restaurant, the organization consists of a "director", a "producer", an "art director", a "screenwriter", and a "cinematographer". Clients need only carry a copy of the screenplay of their new life with them as they enter the mysterious attic above the restaurant, and the story of their life will be rewritten.

But the price for these services is high: the client must accept full responsibility for all of the consequences of their newly chosen life. Nonetheless, there is no shortage of people who seek out their services: the disabled woman who longs for the normal life led by her neighbor, the teacher who will accept any risk for the sake of his child's future, the stage actor who destroyed the life of a close friend



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in a fit of jealousy. But do their lives really change for the better? Are they truly willing to let go of the lives they once had?

With his breezy narrative touch, author Lin Ting-Yi weaves together the lives of protagonist Ho Ching-Cheng and his clients, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality even as the richness of our human nature comes into clear focus. Authentic emotional landscapes resonate from the page, endowing readers with the courage to face their own life choices – a testament to the power of a heartwarming ingenuous novel that brims with quirks and surprises.

Lin Ting-Yi 林庭毅

A former hospital worker and current member of the Crime Writers of Taiwan, Lin Ting-Yi was born in 1986 in Taichung City. His suspenseful and fantastical works of crime fiction first gained a following online. Since its publication, *Working for a Crime Group as a Scriptwriter* has received numerous awards, and a film adaptation is currently in production.

WORKING FOR A CRIME GROUP AS A SCRIPTWRITER

By Lin Ting-Yi

Translated by Sarah-Jayne Carver

Chapter One: The Woman Running on the Racetrack

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It was 11 pm and the TV screen hanging beside the bar at the izakaya was broadcasting a story about a celebrity's affair as though it was the most important news in the world. The couple's personal grievances were actually entertainment for the public. Sometimes even life itself was a drama.

"Even when something's clearly going to shit, everyone just lets it happen. That's the world we live in these days."

I leaned on the table in the late-night izakaya, feeling hopeless as I finally had dinner after working overtime. The only people still out on the streets of Ximending, Taipei's entertainment district, were foreign tourists who wandered around in groups of twos and threes looking for authentically exotic food. There weren't many choices around, so the groups had a quick look at the izakaya from outside and immediately wandered in. The place was called Driftwood.

It wasn't that different from any other izakaya – just a typical Japanese-style bar with orange lights and wooden tables and chairs. The décor was simple and unadorned, but there was a warm atmosphere and a faint sense that all the details had been carefully chosen.

"Hey, Ching-cheng, can you move down a bit so the others can sit?" asked Wu Ting-kang, Driftwood's owner. He was two years older than me and had turned thirty-five earlier this month. He was tall with a broad physique which he claimed was because he'd drunk milk like it was water while growing up in Japan.

After greeting the new customers, he grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge and flipped it open with a smooth pop before slowly pouring it from the edge of the glass, the golden liquid and fine white foam still perfectly proportioned as he placed it in front of me.

Now the news had switched to a story about a vindictive gang incident involving a teenager who'd been attacked with a knife and had left a messy trail of blood on the ground before he was sent to the emergency room. Listening to the thinly-veiled disdain in the news anchor's voice, Wu Ting-kang stared at the screen for a while and poured himself a beer.

"I keep thinking that life is just like pouring beer, sometimes the angle's ever so slightly off and the whole thing goes wrong," he said, staring straight at the TV. "Then again, maybe it's nothing."

I didn't say anything, I just kept silently drinking the beer he'd grabbed from the fridge for me.

"Hey, well you look like you'd know all about that."

"Is it that obvious?" I laughed.

"Your face gave you away," he said, taking a big gulp of his beer before continuing. "Oh yeah, how did it all work out after that thing?"

He was talking about my transfer last month. I was an internal manager at Taipei Capital Hospital, a two-thousand bed medical facility. When people first heard that hospitals had managers, they always looked intrigued, but also a bit doubtful, which didn't surprise me. If you thought of a hospital as being like any other business though, it made sense that you'd need someone who was responsible for stuff like assessing investment benefits, putting forward plans and setting prices for medical treatments. Everything needed to be evaluated by a manager, from small things like buying a trash can, all the way up to the big stuff like establishing a performance-based bonus system.

When I told people about it, they always thought that it was a job that came with a lot of power, but anyone on the inside knew that despite the title, the reality was more like being a senior assistant with no decision-making authority. The role was sandwiched between the hospital's senior management and the healthcare professionals on the ground, and of course, as the manager, you had to be the one to relay the difficult orders from above.

For example, when doctors wrote prescriptions it presented an interesting conundrum because there were so many drugs that all had the same effect, but they were carried under different brands, so management encouraged doctors to choose the most profitable drugs. On our internal computer system, high-profit and low-profit drugs were even distinguished by color so doctors could see it at a glance as they scrolled through lists of drugs. We referred to this as "color management".

It was very common practice in private businesses, where companies needed to maximize profits to maintain operations, so sure enough, survival became the single most important factor in their decisions. Hospitals on the other hand were also responsible for healing patients. Since survival was the ultimate goal for both the hospital and its patients, what were we supposed to do when these two things came into conflict?

Inflating National Health Insurance numbers or encouraging patients to pay their own medical costs were both frequent occurrences. A more serious issue was that patients sometimes received unnecessary treatment that could end up worsening their conditions. This was particularly true in situations where patients didn't have the same information at their disposal as medical practitioners. In other words, all of the time. In general, patients have no way of knowing whether they need the treatment they are receiving, let alone whether or not it might be harmful.

In an internal report last month, I learned that the inflated National Health Insurance numbers and patient-funded procedures both getting increasingly worse. The media somehow managed to get hold of the report the day after the meeting and it caused a huge uproar.

Afterwards, senior management decided to quell the turmoil by blaming me and claiming that I had been passing on false orders to the medical personnel.

My punishment was swift. I was demoted to writing the hospital's internal newsletter and was given an office on basement level two next to the morgue.

I downed my beer in one go and the coldness went straight to my head.

"I don't know, maybe it worked out for the best. I mean, I have way fewer phone calls each day," I said with a smile. "When I'm feeling angry, I just think about all the corpses lying in the room next door, and suddenly my problems look pretty small by comparison."

"You're right, fuck it. As long as we're still alive, it's enough to just keep eating and drinking," he replied. He poured me another beer and clinked his glass against mine.

"Cheers."

"Cheers," I replied.

"Oh by the way, I read that online serial you wrote. It was well written, and I liked that the motherfucker who killed the homeless guy got what he deserved in the end," he said, glancing back at me as he cleared the plates.

"That's good," I said with a slight grin.

It was getting late and nearly time to go.

"There's not much you can do," I said as I got up. "Sometimes reality sucks so much that you just have to imagine there's a perfect world out there somewhere."

"For sure. We all have to find a way to go on living somehow."

"Anyway, I better get going. Bye, Ting-kang."

I stood on the street corner in the middle of the night and contemplated whether I should call a cab or just walk home since the metro had already stopped running. At that exact moment, another customer stumbled out of the izakaya reeking of booze. The red-faced middle-aged man was carrying on loudly as he walked, and his booming laughter caught my attention. He stumbled up to a silver SUV that was parked in front of the bar, and then he rummaged around for his keys. When he opened the door, there was a girl, maybe five years old, fast asleep in the passenger seat. It looked as though the girl had been waiting for her incompetent drunk of a father for a long time.

I'd originally planned to just walk away, but when I saw the contrast between the girl's expression as she slept and her father's blotchy-faced drunkenness, an image appeared in my mind of the tragic car accident that might follow. I took out my phone and made a call. When I was done, I calmly walked over to the car and tapped on the driver's window, shining the bright white light from my phone directly into the drunken father's eyes, which angered him.

"What the hell are you doing?"

He was so drunk that he reached his hand through the window and grabbed me by the collar.

"Sir, this is an inspection, please cooperate," I declared in a low, steady voice.

The man's face turned pale, and he began to panic, "Oh no, no. I was just in the car to get something, I wasn't going to drive!"

“Oh really. Well, sorry to bother you but can I trouble you for some ID?”

“Oh yeah of course...”

He began angrily rummaging through his briefcase. I couldn't tell if it was because he was drunk or nervous, but his stuff kept falling onto the floor until he eventually found his ID and handed it over.

“I'm so sorry, officer.”

Just then, two police officers on white motorcycles appeared at the entrance to the alleyway behind us, having responded to my call. They spotted us and drove over.

The little girl slowly stirred, then gazed at me with large eyes.

“It's okay, go back to sleep.”

I smiled at her and beckoned the policemen behind me.

The scene in front of me overlapped with a scene from a story I'd written. Another night, another guy just like this who was drunk off his face. I'd dealt with drunks in my stories before. Sometimes, I experienced a kind of illusion that there wasn't any difference between what happened in my stories and what happened in reality.

My name is Ho Ching-cheng, and by night I work as a scriptwriter for a crime ring.

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We were very careful about our division of labor. The roles that I knew of were the director, the producer, the scriptwriter, the cameraman, and the artistic supervisor. At first glance we looked like an ordinary production team, but once you understood the nature of our work it was clear that we just used the same titles and in fact our roles had very little to do with those of an actual film crew.

The organization's name: Dark Fern.

Secrecy was our specialty as we silently carried out acts which couldn't be exposed and wouldn't be recognized by law, such as recovering stolen goods, sharing banned information, and even sometimes being entrusted to attack evil people whose deeds would otherwise go unpunished by the law. We were like a fern sprouting in the dark, growing slowly and inconspicuously, waiting for the right moment to make our move.

In short, we were an illegal crime ring. Each role performed its respective functions with cog-like precision, each component linking to another without attracting attention or making so much as a sound, invisible gears turning quietly in the dark.

The most mysterious function of Dark Fern, however, was to reshape people's lives.

Over a year ago, I hadn't known a thing about Dark Fern. That night, I got out of a management meeting at the hospital and left the office just after ten o'clock. The huge pale building behind me glowed even brighter in the moonlight, turning a cold, harsh shade of white.

I sat alone in the last subway car on the Tamsui line, the hard plastic seat only offering a very slight sense of relief for my exhausted body. Every time I tried to focus on a complicated work

problem, another thought pulled me away: if I died here and now, the world wouldn't change at all, would it?

When the sun rose tomorrow, the admin secretary would rush into the office last minute to clock-in as usual, only to discover that the manager who'd always been so punctual wasn't sitting in his seat. She'd call his phone, but no one would answer and this would prompt a series of back up measures to commence. All the incomplete files would be stored on the cloud system and the various appraisal projects would be assigned to the managers of other departments for them to handle. There might be some complaints at first, but within about three days, the colossal system with its comprehensive programming will have automatically corrected this deficiency. My disappearance would no longer be an issue for the system, and thinking about it, the only thing that might cause genuine trouble for the team would be my reappearance.

I couldn't help laughing bitterly to myself as I thought about all of this. Really, there was no one who couldn't be replaced.

The words "Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall" flashed on the display screen above the subway doors. For years I would subconsciously move to stand up every time the train stopped at this station, but I'd already cut those instances down by half over the past year. My childhood home and the place I shared with Hsu Ching-chih were both about a ten-minute walk from the station. Ching-chih was my girlfriend and by chance we had both grown up nearby but didn't get to know each other until we met at an inter-university social event.

It was a sunny day in July and the moment I stepped inside, the AC in the auditorium isolated me from the blazing heat outside. A girl with long black hair, wearing a sleeveless pale blue dress, was staring at the actors on stage with her round eyes. Her focused expression made other people subconsciously follow her gaze to see if the performance on stage was genuinely unmissable. My gaze, though, remained fixed on her.

I learned afterwards that she dreamed of becoming an actress. I myself had dreamed of becoming a renowned, bestselling novelist. The instant her clear eyes inadvertently met mine, each of us recognized that we were the same kind of person. It was like something you'd see between two animals in nature, identifying each other as the same species with minimum vocalizations, just relying on certain smells and imprints. We started dating a few weeks later.

We did so much to encourage each other during the years that followed. Ching-chih urged me to keep writing. She was always my first reader and was able to give useful writing advice regardless of what genre the story was. Quite a few of the best ideas in my stories were suggestions from her and they'd helped my stories go on to win prizes. At the same time, I supported her theatre auditions in Taipei and when she ended up performing all over Taiwan, we would travel to places on my motorcycle come rain or shine. She was always the most radiant performer on stage, and I felt an immeasurable sense of pride when I saw the rapturous expressions of the audience below.

After we graduated, I went to work at Taipei Capital Hospital, starting out at the bottom as a management trainee. While the hospital work was arduous, the people I came into contact with every day became excellent source material for my night-time writing. Hospitals were where

life began, and also where life ended. For the duration of our short lifespans, it seemed that humans were inextricably linked to hospitals. All the joy and sorrow came together in this giant white building, and if you asked me to find the best place in the world for storytelling, it would undoubtedly be here.

Over time, we became each other's staunchest supporters. I protected Ching-chih and she encouraged me to the point where I even believed that the fundamental purpose of my creative talent was that it brought me to her, and in the end, it didn't really matter if I became a bestselling author. We were already on our best possible life path together. That was until spring two years ago, when it all came abruptly to an end.

I had just been promoted to hospital manager that day and had been working a lot of overtime in preparation for the transition. Ching-chih happened to be performing at a theatre near the hospital and I guessed that I would have enough time to at least catch the second act. Since it was close to home, my parents had gone to see her in the play. They both really liked Ching-chih and would bend over backwards to go and see her perform if she was in Taipei.

"We know you're busy with work. You're taking care of Ching-chih's future, so we'll look after her in the present," my mum joked, although deep down she was secretly thrilled that she had such a beautiful, talented daughter-in-law.

The clock on my desktop screen said it was only 8pm, but then it was 8:30 and then 9, at which point the executive manager sent me the project report for the next day and time kept slipping away until I knew that I'd missed Ching-chih's performance. Even so, I rushed over to the auditorium and managed to get there just before it ended.

Ching-chih was on stage and wearing a gorgeous pale pink satin costume. It was my favorite. The material was pure and smooth, just like the feeling she gave people when she was around them. There was enthusiastic applause from the audience as the entire cast stood in a line on stage with Ching-chih in the middle. She gave a small salute, and the crowd went wild. She wore a gratified smile, and I knew that she was truly happy in that moment. I waved at her, which made her laugh on stage, and she flashed me a peace sign.

When my parents and I met up with Ching-chih in the carpark, she hadn't had time to change out of her pale pink dress, so she was still wearing it under her dark coat. She leapt nimbly into the back seat like a hare and started speaking at a mile a minute.

"I knew you'd all be here! Ching-cheng, you know, it was such a funny performance today, guess who I met backstage? He—"

The excitement in her voice filled the whole car, she and I sitting in the back while my parents sat up front. She always had a carefree smile on her face, and there was never a shortage of laughter with her around.

"That's great! Remember to tell him more about yourself next time you see him," I added.

I was so happy, not because the guy was a big star but because Ching-chih was getting closer to achieving her dream. Being on a stage like this had seemed like a remote possibility back when she was first starting out, but little by little she'd gained a strong foothold in the industry.

Just at that moment, the red light turned to green, and the car started but none of us noticed the black Mercedes with its headlights off, hurtling towards us at over a hundred kilometers an hour. The Mercedes hit us from the right, and the strength of the impact caused our car to flip over. The windows shattered into tiny shards but there wasn't even time to feel the pain as they sliced through my body. I felt like I'd been thrown inside a huge washing machine. I kept turning and turning with no idea when it would stop, and no clue how it would all end.

When I regained consciousness, I was already in the emergency room at Capital Hospital, surrounded by a busy scene that I knew all too well. Several of my colleagues were whirling around me. Multiple clear tubes protruded from my body and an IV dripped slowly into my wrist. I noticed a gaping wound in my arm where there were still several shards of glass. I moved my arm and the pain of it shocked me into clarity.

My mum was dead. Ching-chih stubbornly held on for one more week in the observation ward. I was also seriously injured, with several broken ribs and countless other cuts and wounds.

In the end, I found her pale pink satin dress in a storage room for personal effects. The blood stain had turned a dark coffee color, but the satin was still delicate and soft to the touch. I hugged it to my chest and squatted down in the storage room as I wept bitterly. Every sob was laced with searing pain and my tears dripped onto the dress, soaking the fabric, and mingling with the dried blood, staining my chest with traces that could never really be wiped away.

The doctor handling her case said that she was so brave, that he'd never seen such a courageous young woman. She didn't shed a tear the entire time.

I nodded and said that he hadn't even seen her at her most determined because he'd only met her at such a late stage in her life. In the early morning of our seventh day in hospital, Ching-chih passed away.

My dad and I were discharged a month later, but a part of me remained at the hospital and then disappeared forever.