

PROLOGUE

I dropped the receiver back into the cradle, fully aware that I'd told a flat-out lie. No denying it. I had no intention of turning in early tonight. Though unaccustomed to keeping Betty in the dark, I had no choice. No point in getting my daughter-in-law all riled up at this stage of the investigation. We'd had more than our share of false starts and disappointing leads over the past eighteen years. This could be another.

But I honestly didn't think so.

Deep in thought, I smoothed the creases of the tattered *Los Angeles Times* article on my kitchen counter. The article, written nearly a year ago, had given me hope. It was the first real lead in years.

I glanced down at the article. The headlines danced before my eyes, and once again I wondered how much of the article was fact and how much was a heap of creative fiction. I prayed that tonight would lead me down a new path. One that would prove that Lori London's death was no suicide.

I checked the clock above the counter. It was only quarter to nine. I'd have to cool my heels for at least another three hours. Reaching for my unfinished glass of milk, I pondered what effect my reopening this particular case might have on my daughter-in-law. She'd have a strong reaction—that was for sure. But for the life of me, I couldn't predict what that might be. Would she support a full-speed-ahead approach or would she still be afraid to have me reopen the case?

This unsolved case remained an open wound—one relegated to the back burner for far too long. Now was the time to bring it front and center. Betty was resilient, but the thought of her slipping back into the uncharacteristic kind of depression that overtook her following my son, Hal's, senseless murder filled me with more than a bit of unease. Would reopening the Lori London case bring it all spiraling back to her?

I shook my head.

I knew deep in my soul that no matter what the night had in store, this case was now my number-one priority.

CHAPTER 1.

Around 11:30 p.m., I pulled out of the garage and headed for Hollywood Boulevard. Luck was on my side and I found a parking spot less than two blocks from Lori London's special star. A good start for this long-awaited night.

As I made my way down the street, a lifetime of memories wove its spell. My long legs propelled me past a good portion of the five acres of bronze stars. They were embedded in pink terrazzo and lined the celebrated Walk of Fame. I'd taken in the famous names of movie icons of the past, such as Gloria Swanson, Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe, right up to the present. Their contributions barely registered.

I strode across the stars of Orson Welles, Jack Benny, Red Skelton, right on past Boris Karloff, George Burns, and Gracie Allen, as I approached the corner of Hollywood and Las Palmas.

Thoughts of Lori London overshadowed all others.

As I reached the corner, I realized this was no ordinary newspaper machine. The papers were free for the taking. I dropped the coins I'd held ready to deposit back into my pocket and lifted the metal door of the bright-red contraption. The paper listed a wide range of jobs, along with scores of advertisements. I glanced at the paper, then retraced my steps to the shelter of the broad concrete column outside the neon lights of the tattoo and body-piercing establishment.

I'd scoped out this dubious business a bit earlier and decided my best bet was to pick up a newspaper and wait to see what I could discover from this obscure vantage point.

Just inside the doorway of this specialized business of body mutilation, on a high stool, at an equally high counter, sat the slim young man with the flaming-red hair, six rings in each ear, and tattoos covering both arms as if they were long sleeves. When I'd spoken to him earlier, he told me the establishment remained open until 3 a.m. "Later if we have a late-night client." Now, I'd hardly describe a 3 a.m. customer as "late-night," but that's what the young fellow said.

Leaning against a flat surface on the five-sided concrete column, I tried to get somewhat less uncomfortable. I casually opened the newspaper, but my interest lay elsewhere.

Shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his leather jacket and turning up his collar against the December chill, Detective Craig Scott picked up his pace. This three-quarter-mile strip of Hollywood Boulevard had recently been targeted by the LAPD's Crime Analysis Detail. Detective

Scott had drawn an assignment a few blocks west of the unusual array of costumed spectacles lining the street across from the El Capitan Theater.

Scott could think of a hell of a lot better places to be on a night like this. Promoted to Detective I not quite three weeks ago and here he was back on the street—the steamiest street in Los Angeles. Only difference was he no longer wore a uniform. *Thank God for small favors.*

Pausing beside the Egyptian Theater, Scott observed a stately, silver-haired man in a pristine gray suit, who strode purposely toward the newspaper vending machine at the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and North Las Palmas Avenue.

Noting the total incongruity of the polished gentleman and the tawdry surroundings, Scott shortened his stride and headed toward him. Glancing down at his wristwatch, he noted that it was a few minutes before midnight. This gentleman couldn't actually be seeking the type of job offered in one of those throwaway rags, and he sure as hell was no candidate for tattooing or body piercing. So why was he lingering?

Hollywood Boulevard, though still ablaze in a backwash of ambient light from the ubiquitous marquees up and down the renowned Walk of Fame, was relatively quiet—relatively deserted. Relatively was the only way I could describe this section of Hollywood, the part of the infamous city that never seemed to sleep.

Away from the area near the El Capitan Theater, there were only soft whispers of tires from the occasional automobile or the light tread of a lone pedestrian. A cold silence wrapped around me. I hadn't realized how darn cold it was until I'd stopped walking.

Then from somewhere in the night, the sweet, poignant loneliness of an alto saxophone drifted

into my consciousness. It lingered for only a moment.

Distracted by the deep-throated vibrations of a powerful engine, my focus shifted. A red Ferrari crossed the white line a yard or so in front of me. It pulled up to the curb on the opposite side of the street, facing the oncoming traffic—had there been any. The driver's door stood ajar as the Ferrari's powerful idle pierced the early morning air.

Knowing this might be who I'd been waiting for, I tucked the unread newspaper under my arm but stood rock steady, taking a moment or so to observe.

A dinner-jacketed young man, shirt collar open, tie dangling, emerged from the Ferrari and stared pensively down at the sidewalk—the very spot that housed that special bronze star. The instant I caught a glimpse of the something red in the young man's hand, I knew I had my man. The time for observation had come to an end. It was time for action. In one long stride, I reached the large, circular trash container beside the cement bus bench, dumped the newspaper, and raced toward the reflective young man.

He'd stooped and laid a red rose gently on the sidewalk, then stood for a moment, head bowed, seemingly oblivious to anything other than his mission. I sprinted toward him.

Scott felt a wave of familiarity wash over him as he approached the man in the gray suit, taking in his ramrod-straight posture. Who was he? A military officer, out of uniform? A politician? A high-powered businessman? Or perhaps some shrewd criminal he might have come face to face with at the Hollywood precinct? Whoever this distinguished looking gentleman might be, Scott knew he'd seen the man before. But where? He couldn't put his finger on it. One thing was certain, he had

lingered far too long in this tough, crime-ridden neighborhood not to have something specific on his mind. Now was the time to find out what it was.

Scott rubbed his hands together briskly to ward off the cold, flexed his fingers, and cleared his throat, ready to ask some very pointed questions. But before he had a chance to utter a single syllable, the man tossed the paper in the trash and bolted into the street.

“Hold it!” Scott called out as he took off after the man.

The man paused, looked in his direction, but continued across the street at a rapid pace.

“Halt!” Detective Scott boomed, sprinting to and then stepping in front of the man while flashing his badge.

The man stopped mid-stride and blinked, as if the detective had appeared from thin air. “Sorry,” the silver-haired man said. But his words did not ring true. Hell, the man hadn’t even met his gaze—a gaze intended to bore straight through to his soul.

With his badge a mere few inches from the man’s face, there could be little doubt he meant business. Damned if this long-legged jerk wasn’t attempting to peer around him. Hell, he was flat-out ignoring him, his attention clearly riveted on the man who’d stepped from the Ferrari.

Feeling a wave of heat rise from the base of his collar bone and travel the width of his forehead, his gaze froze.

As the man distractedly reached inside the pocket of his gray suit, Scott’s hand inched down to the butt of his Beretta.

I reached inside my jacket and withdrew my wallet. Dang poor timing, I nearly said aloud, as the detective stood in front of me, blocking a good portion of my view. I knew the detective had a job to

do, but so did I, and I was still a good three yards from the young man in the Ferrari. The officer deserved my undivided attention, but I couldn't afford even the few precious seconds it would take to explain the situation. There was no time. It ticked away at a breathtaking pace.

I wasn't about to let another year slip by. I peered around the detective in time to see the dinner-jacketed young man ooze back into the Ferrari, make a slow illegal U-turn, and head east at a speed that could be described as nothing short of excessive.

Risking the detective's rising ire, I took a few more seconds to ponder the license plate as the Ferrari slipped out of sight. No numbers. Just five letters: M-O-R-G-U-E. I smiled. I, too, had once had personalized license plates. No numbers. Just seven letters. B-A-R-N-A-B-Y.

While the detective looked over my ID, I focused my full attention on him. "My name is Barnaby Jones. I'm a private investigator, and you are Detective . . .?"

The officer looked up from my ID, pulled a business card from his jacket pocket, and handed it to me. "Detective Scott, Hollywood Precinct," he said. His gaze remained on my face briefly, before returning to my ID. "Bar-na-by Jones," he repeated, pronouncing each syllable slowly and deliberately. Then a smile of familiarity spread across the features on his ruddy, round face. "You're that legendary PI who's worked some cases with Lieutenant Biddle." It wasn't a question.

"Legendary?" I felt my lips turn up in a smile. I had to tilt my head to meet the detective's eyes. At six foot four, I seldom had need to look up to meet anyone's gaze, but this barrel-chested detective must have been a good six foot seven or so. "Not sure whether to take that as a compliment or consider it as a polite way of telling me I'm old."

"No. Not at all," Detective Scott said at lightning speed, his face glowing bright red rivaling the red of the lettering on the nearby marquee. "Lieutenant Biddle touts your skills as an investigator,

and says your deductive reasoning is top drawer. Tells us if we master even a portion of your skills of logic, we'll be up for promotion.”

“He does, does he?” I couldn't help but smile. Lieutenant Biddle and I had been friends for eons. We shared a mutual respect and I knew we were good together, but neither of us had a tendency to gild the lily. Compliments had never been a part of our MO. Challenges were a lot more like it. “Well, don't—” Before I could finish, Scott asked, “You want to tell me what brings you out to this part of our fair city at this late hour?”