

# CHAPTER 1

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA - 1928

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Marc Fraser was enjoying a Scotch at the Writers Club on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood near Highland Avenue. The ivy-covered building was the social club of the Screen Writer's Guild. Fraser was not a screen writer but was friendly with many of its members through his father's connection to the film industry as an executive with Metro Goldwyn Meyer. Here the liquor was first-rate, smuggled *real stuff*, not some disgusting alcohol-based concoction made illicitly.

Prohibition was into its ninth year. The monumentally ill-conceived exercise attempting to regulate American morals by narrow-minded pressure groups had not only failed but had given rise to unintended social problems of vast proportions. Beyond providing the funding basis for the creation of organized criminal enterprises throughout the country, illegal liquor now fueled wholesale corruption of otherwise law abiding society. People that drank had every intention of continuing to drink, especially since it was not illegal to drink under the law, only to sell alcoholic beverages. Corruption took the form of public servants, most significantly law enforcement, facilitating the satisfying of the public's thirst by collusion with criminal elements. Simply too much money was involved. There could be no party-decade of the 1920's without booze.

Fraser was a newspaper reporter for the Hearst-owned Los Angeles Examiner. His current drinking companion was working on a screenplay involving bootlegging of a criminal gang, corrupt cops, and a crusading hero. The stuff of real life. Covering Los Angeles crime, Fraser was himself investigating police corruption. He was acting as his friend's technical consultant.

Fraser's current journalistic investigation involved an ugly extension of this climate of official Los Angeles corruption. Murder and the cover-up of a murder. The murder of a prostitute most probably by a Los Angeles Police lieutenant. Fraser had already been warned off. Not his style to back away from a story though. What if this real-life murder story could be incorporated into his friend's screenplay?

"I like the idea, Marc, but the prostitute angle, I don't know. Harder sell to a studio. Violence is ok, but sex is always touchy. Got to keep the sex as implied. Maybe if she was a girlfriend, not a hooker?"

"But your story is about the corruption caused by Prohibition and bootlegging. If she's a girlfriend then you lose that connection. That connection is the protection racket of organized crime's bordellos, gambling, and extortion enterprises funded by bootlegging profits," Fraser said. "That's where they reinvest those profits."

"I know. I'll wrestle with the idea some more," his friend said. "Let me ask you something. With so many of the cops turned bad are you in any danger doing stories like this?"

Fraser knew the answer. Of course he was but he didn't want to worry his friend. "Perhaps. But cops are still afraid of the press. Especially a paper like the Examiner. Hearst has too much clout. Still, I'm careful."

It was a dark overcast evening in early December. The first winter rain had abated to a drizzle. Fraser was glad he would not have to drive far. He lived a couple of miles to the north near the Cahuenga Pass as the elevation increased through the mountains. He had a piece to work on that would appear in the newspaper the day after tomorrow. It was a bombshell so he was anx-

ious to flesh it out tonight so he could polish it by the two o'clock press deadline tomorrow. And of course he still had to sell it to his editor.

Fraser left the Writers Club and walked toward his car parked in front on Sunset Boulevard. Two men exited a car parked behind his as he approached. Both were dressed in dark suits. As Fraser was about to pass their car, one man came around the front. The other fell in behind him.

"Stop right there, Fraser," the man said holding a revolver and barring Fraser's way. "You'll be coming with us. We can do this easy or the hard way. Suit yourself. Now put these on your wrists."

The guy with the gun extracted handcuffs from his coat pocket.

Fraser turned to look at the man behind him. He was holding a slim-bladed knife. A grin on his face.

"Are you guys cops?" What am I being arrested for?"

"Didn't say you were being arrested. Just coming with us. Now put the cuffs on."

Fraser was not about to go off with these goons whether cops or not. That could only end badly. Out here in the open he still had a chance. He had to assume the guy with the gun preferred not to shoot him. Probably didn't want to kill him much less draw possible witnesses. But the guy with the knife could mean all sorts of ugly possibilities.

According to his boxing mentor from high school, success in street fighting meant surprise and landing the first blow. A calculated risk that might get him shot weighed against the uncertainty of being abducted for some sort of nasty physical abuse? An instantly clear choice.

Fraser reached out to take the handcuffs with his left hand. The guy was holding the revolver in his right hand so Fraser's hand crossed in front. With a sudden motion, Fraser threw his left hand against the guy's wrist holding the revolver, deflecting the weapon to the side. This was immediately followed with a straight blow to the man's nose with his right fist.

The tactic was effective catching the gunman by surprise. Fraser could hear the nose cartilage break with the blow. The old ex-boxer movie studio janitor, Guido Leopardi's favorite axiom stated, *go for the nose*. A good blow there took the fight out of your opponent.

The gunman went down with blood spewing from his shattered nose. But the guy with the knife was quick to grab Fraser from behind with an arm around his throat. With a shooting pain in his right side Fraser knew he had been stabbed. Reacting, he came around with his elbow catching the second assailant on the side of the head. It was enough to cause the guy to release his hold.

Little fazed by the blow, the assailant still held the knife. His accomplice sat on the ground holding his nose. Blood streamed through his fingers while attempting to recover the dropped revolver with his other hand. This was not over yet.

As Fraser turned to kick the revolver into the gutter awash with a rapid flow of rain water, the guy with the knife lunged at him catching the long stiletto-like knife blade in Fraser's overcoat but not connecting with flesh this time. For a moment the knife caught in the overcoat affording Fraser the opportunity to land a blow to this guy's nose as well.

Still holding the knife, the man staggered backward stunned by the blow. Enough of a lapse for Fraser to move in with a barrage of jabs to the man's face. The blows went undefended until he went down dropping the knife. The guy seemed barely conscious.

Fraser quickly picked up the knife. Searching the knife assailant, he found a revolver in a shoulder holster. He had to be quick about this realizing he was wounded. How bad he didn't know. The adrenalin keeping him functioning would eventually turn into shock.

He also found the knife-guy's badge and identification. Detective LAPD.

Holding the revolver, Fraser turned to the first assailant, "Throw me your badge and ID."

The cop fumbled in his pockets eventually tossing over his badge and wallet.

"Where were you going to take me?" Fraser said.

"Fuck you. You know this'll go badly for you when we catch up with you again. You can't run from the LAPD." The blood running into his mouth from his nose sprayed with the words.

Fraser needed to end this and get away. Get medical attention. If the wound was bleeding internally he didn't have much time.

"I assume your friend also has a set of handcuffs?"

The detective made no response.

"Get his cuffs. Handcuff him to the bumper. Handcuff yourself to his other wrist."

The detective glared at Fraser not moving.

"Do it now! Otherwise I shoot your friend in the leg, then you next. It'll bring witnesses. You'll have to explain how a newspaper reporter got stabbed by a couple of LAPD detectives then got shot by their own gun. I image whoever sent you would not welcome that attention. So get to it."

A minute later the detectives were secure. Two sorry looking rain-soaked thugs. Blood running down both their faces soaking their shirts. No badges, their guns thrown in the flooded gutter.

Fraser got behind the wheel of his Packard roadster coupe. He first folded his overcoat on the seat to protect the leather seat from the spreading blood now soaking his shirt and trousers. There was a hospital only a few miles to the east, Hollywood Presbyterian at Sunset and Vermont. Already feeling light headed, he hoped he could hold on long enough.

The last thing he recalled was discarding the badges and police ID's out the car window.



Fraser woke the next morning to the bright lights of the hospital recovery room. Still groggy from the anesthesia, the attending physician told him he would fully recover. Bad stab wound but fortunately no major organ damage. Just a nick to his liver. The internal bleeding had been manageable once under surgery.

From the post-op he was wheeled into a pleasant room with light pouring through the window. His father and stepmother were waiting for him.

After the usual tearful exchanges with his stepmother, his father said, "This wasn't a mugging was it? Do you know what happened, Marc?"

He wasn't going to lie to his father but neither was he going to add the worry that the attackers were from the LAPD. Even he wasn't sure how he was going to deal with that. Obviously the entire LAPD was not corrupt, much less violently preying on civilians. But who could be trusted?

"The doctor says you'll be here for a couple of days," his father said. "When they release you how about staying with Margo and me until you're back on your feet?" He wanted to say more. Wished his son were doing something other than investigative journalism. Something like this was bound to happen. His son must be making dangerous enemies. Best not to raise that argument now.

"Ok, Dad. I'll consider that."

"Unfortunately we have to leave now. There's an LAPD detective captain waiting to talk to you about this assault. Randal Schmidt is also waiting, demanding to see you. The police captain told him he'll have to wait his turn.

His stepmother kissed his forehead. "Your Dad is going to the office but I'm staying. I'll be back in to be with you once these other people have gone, Dear."

"Thanks, Margo. Go ahead and tell the police officer I'll see him. Tell Randal to keep his shirt on. Tell him I'm going to be ok."

The detective entered Fraser's room. A bookish, stout man probably early fifties, balding, with wire rimmed glasses. Cheap suit with a terrible tie, holding a hat that could use a cleaning.

"I'm Detective Captain Frank Carmody, LAPD. I understand that you're going to recover, Mr. Fraser. Glad to hear that. Care to tell me what happened?"

Carmody sat down in a chair.

"As a matter of fact I don't, Captain. Not without an attorney present."

Carmody just nodded. "You're not under any suspicion, Mr. Fraser. You're a victim of a brutal assault. Lucky not to have been killed."

"Come on, Captain, quit dancing about. Why is a captain investing an assault? You know damn well why I'm not talking to you. I'm a reporter."

Carmody pursed his lips and looked down at the floor. "Perhaps. But I suppose it's because the two Cretans we found handcuffed to their car bumper were LAPD detectives. Badges gone. Service revolvers left in the gutter. Both a bloody mess. Both with broken noses. Found by someone leaving the Writers Club. A place I understand you frequent. All this within an hour of you showing up here just a few miles from that scene with a stab wound."

"Don't see the connection to me, Captain. I don't know anything about that. Just a coincidence. Two different assaults. And why would cops resort to stabbing someone?"

"Because they're dirty, Mr. Fraser. But you know that already. So I'll confirm something for you but it's off the record, at least for now. The two cops are a couple of detectives from a South Central precinct. Not my guys. Names are Dombrowski and Felgenhauer. Dombrowski is known to carry a switchblade. I would guess he was the one that stabbed you. Never found that switchblade. But no matter. I understand your position. Why link yourself to what is being documented as an assault on these officers? By the way, they haven't named you. Too much explaining. Gave some cock and bullshit story about a gang of black armed guys that held them up. In upscale Hollywood of all places."

Fraser said nothing.

"Ok, what I'm saying is we're on the same side. I'm dealing with the same problem you're trying to expose. I work out of headquarters division. Major crimes investigation. I report di-

rectly to Deputy Chief Monahan. He's a good cop. All the LAPD isn't rotten."

"Just enough though to make it impossible to clean up the corruption. Especially since even some LAPD brass are dirty," Fraser said. "And then of course you have the City Hall gang. Talk about a den of thieves."

"Let's talk further after you've recovered, Mr. Fraser. Before that, do me a favor. Look up this assistant district attorney. You'll like her. A young fire-eating crusader like you. Name is Abigail Blumenthal. Here's her card. The three of us might have something in common."

Carmody stood up. "Take care of yourself, Mr. Fraser. We'll be seeing each other again. Still wondering though how an educated handsome young lad like you learned to handle himself enough to be able to kick the shit out of the likes of those assholes?"