

PROLOGUE

They say Nature abhors a vacuum. This is just as true in the criminal underworld of Los Angeles as it is in any realm of science. When California finally dumped the crooked Governor Cornelius Yeardley, state law enforcement was finally able to go after the Bruno Rennick mob. The police...and in no small measure, The Flemming Detective Agency, was able to finally convict and incarcerate Rennick and fourteen of his top men. With their influence and heavy-handed control gone, other underworld figures have been taking up the slack. The only question is who will come out on top?

A small band of former Civil War soldiers and mercenaries under the guidance of Gilbert Ingles, Patrick Jameson and others, had stolen an airship from the Prussian army in 1871 and fled west, back to the United States. They'd engaged in criminal activities New York City, fleeing finally to Los Angeles with vast amounts of stolen money. They are well-organized and well-financed violent criminals; and they're determined to be the organization that fills that vacuum. They've ample funds to finance their enterprises, and they've quietly begun building the connections they need to make their dream a reality.

But there are forces arrayed against them; there are individuals who have learned the hard way, how dangerous organized criminals can be, and the devastation wrought in gang wars. They have stood the line despite the danger to themselves to stop them. Now, as other murderers, rapists, and narcotics peddlers attempt to replace that evil with evil of their own, they must continue that battle.

Private detectives Clayton Flemming, Jacob Bancroft, and Bancroft's wife, Lucinda, are three such individuals. And of course there is the editor of the Los Angeles Courier, Hamilton Perren and his brave reporters Emma and Nathan Armisted. They've all faced death and human darkness more than once in their careers, and they won't stand idly by now to watch that darkness return.

CHAPTER 1

With almost all of the shops and businesses, and even many of the downtown taverns and nightclubs closed by this late hour on Sunday night, the streets of Los Angeles were shrouded in darkness. At each intersection, gaslights burned on the four corners, casting dim pools of yellow radiance relieving the long stretches of inky blackness that was otherwise broken only by the occasional dimly glowing fanlights beside some of the locked doorways. It was almost two o'clock in the morning, and there was little traffic, just the occasional delivery van passing, carrying its own twin pools of dim lights from oil lamp headlights.

A truck rumbled its way toward the loading docks in the narrow alley behind the restaurant located on the first floor of a hotel in the next block. A few men on early shifts toiled there, readying their employer's business for the following day. Other than that, the streets were mostly silent. The truck passed, unmindful of the solitary man standing in the deep shadow of a doorway, watching its slow progress down Los Angeles Boulevard.

The man was tall, wore a short top hat and a knee length duster of black oilcloth. His shoes were well shined and expensive. The heels made a soft click at each step, and the slick leather glittered almost wetly under the gaslights as he passed through their radiance and back into the night. He carried a walking stick with a silver top that, at present, was tightly wrapped in black cloth, eliminating any possibility of reflection from the bright metal grip.

He walked at a sedate pace, but he felt none of the studied casualness he put into his stride. The man walked deliberately into a bright pool of light at the corner, looking both ways for any traffic. At the same time, he also rapidly scanned the sidewalks on both sides of the adjacent street, looking for furtive movement, listening for the sound of hard heels striking cobblestones. He didn't see or hear any late night pedestrians. In the far distance, a cat yowled.

He crossed the street, walking through another gaslight pool of yellow radiance, and then he paused in the darkness once more and stepped quietly into the recessed doorway of a closed millenary shop. He was in complete darkness now. He turned, pretending to light his pipe. He knew the light breeze would make his movements, should he be seen, seem natural—merely a gentleman turning aside out of the wind to light his pipe.

He turned his back toward the wind, and as he fumbled with his pockets, seemingly looking for matches, he scanned the street back the way he'd just walked. His glittering eyes darted from doorway to doorway, looking for something, anything that might give away a tail. He listened carefully as he moved his hand from one pocket to another. No sound reached his ears. He looked up at the windows, scanning as far up as he could see in the darkness. A few dim lights showed, but in every instance, curtains appeared to be tightly drawn; nobody was peering out into the night.

He rapidly scanned the doorways once more with a practiced gaze. No flickering light, indicating a lit pipe or cigar; no reflection glinting off a coat button...or a police badge. He breathed a sigh of relief and placed his pipe into the side pocket of his duster, unlit. As he did so, his hand brushed the smooth gutta-percha grips of the small .38 revolver he carried in the event his careful watchfulness would not be sufficient to keep him away from surveillance or attack.

He stepped out into the darkness and moved back in the direction he'd already traveled, retracing his steps. *Nothing like doubling back to flush out any possible tail, he*

thought grimly. He reached into his right pocket again, feeling the comforting weight of the small .38 caliber Iver Johnson revolver in his hand. He placed his thumb over the hammer, should he need the pistol in a hurry. He knew that with his thumb over the hammer spur, the revolver would come smoothly from his pocket without snagging. His pace didn't change. To anyone watching, he'd look like a man walking down the street, and nothing more.

He walked through the pool of light at the next corner, and when darkness enveloped him once more, he hurried across the street to the other side in mid-block, and retraced the steps he'd just taken, heading back in his original direction but on the other side of the street. He crossed Seventh Street, and continued on his way. He knew he was dark; there was no tail. He walked three more blocks, and then crossed back to the other side of the street, once again in the mid-block darkness.

He'd been walking for well over two hours. Now all the switchbacks and sudden turns, all the trips around this block or that block were behind him. His destination was only a half-block away, but he remained cautious, pausing several more times to furtively scan his surroundings for any tell of surveillance. *There's no such thing as being too careful*, he reminded himself for the twentieth time that morning. He walked on.

He picked up his pace slightly as he approached the green glow of the tavern's sign. This place was always open, always crowded. In the Half Moon Tavern he would be just one of many people come in out of the cool night for one more drink before heading for home. He walked up to the tavern, and looked through the grimy glass of the door. He saw nothing suspicious, so he pushed his way in, out of the night.

The room was lit by gas jets on the walls, and there were oil lamps on the plain, deeply scored wooden tables. Some of the lamps were lit, some were not—that was up to the patron sitting there. Sometimes one preferred a little less light, after all. The raised stage on the side was dark and silent at this hour, the tattered and dusty green velvet curtain hanging closed across the entire length of the stage.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the man sitting at a table near the corner along the back wall. It would've been a shame to go through all of this only to have his contact disengage for some reason. Still, the man rationalized, if Woodburn was there, he had double verification he'd not been followed.

He knew Woodburn was an unusually cautious man, and he appreciated that. Without that kind of caution, he'd likely be dead by now for his participation in this operation. To be truthful, he sometimes cursed himself for having been lured into this, but done is done, he figured. He'd had his chance to refuse and now it was too late for second thoughts. He strode back to the table where Woodburn sat waiting. Ray nodded at the man, pulled back a chair and sat down.

Leonard Woodburn had been a professional soldier. At one time he'd been in the vaunted Aerocorps of the United States Army. During the Civil war he'd been a gunner on one of only four primitive combat zeppelins that saw service in that war. That was a number of years ago by now. Ray also knew that after the war Woodburn had been first mate on Gilbert Ingles' privately owned combat zeppelin. By then they'd been mercenaries. Ray didn't know a lot about that, really, just rumors. But he appreciated the man's attention to detail and his carefulness in setting up these meetings. If Ray's boss found them together, Woodburn's life would also be forfeit. All that really mattered to

Ray was the money he was being paid by this man for information about his boss and his boss's operations. He folded his hands on the table.

Raymond Hastings' boss was Paul Gowland, and he'd been working for the man for going on seven years now. Seven years of loyal service, and he was still at the bottom of the organization; it rankled. He'd been as loyal and dedicated as any man working for Gowland, yet others were promoted ahead of him—sometimes men with significantly less time on the job.

Paul Gowland was a gangster; there was no better way to say it. He dabbled in narcotics, but his real business was prostitution—the illegal variety. Though his operation was comparatively small, it was quite prosperous. Gowland had carved out a small but well paying niche in the criminal underground of the city. His stable of girls was small, but the men he catered to paid dearly to be with his girls because all of them were guaranteed to be less than fourteen years of age; for a little extra, he'd guarantee their age as less than eight.

Ray neither approved nor disapproved of this. When he'd come to Los Angeles from New Orleans he'd been broke, desperate, and on the streets for all intents and purposes. Ironically, he'd fallen in with Gowland's crew quite by accident; he'd protected one of Gowland's girls from an assailant. He'd been passing in front of one of the city's ritzy downtown hotels, silently wishing he could afford to stay there, when the door crashed opened right in front of him, and a young girl came running out, almost stumbling down the stairs with a very angry man in hot pursuit.

As the girl ran past Ray, the man caught up to her, and grabbed her by the hair. The man jerked back viciously, pulling the young girl right off her feet. She let out a shrill scream, stumbling backward. Ray had put out his foot and tripped the man. Two more of the man's friends came running down the steps of the hotel. By this time the girl had regained her feet. She grabbed Ray's hand and said urgently, "C'mon." He did.

They ran around the corner, and the girl hurried to a waiting dark blue sedan, tugging Ray with her. They both got into the back. The driver shoved the gearshift into first, and the big steam powered Lincoln saloon made a fast right turn as the two thugs rounded the corner, heavy revolvers in hand. One of them fired one round that went high over the top of the saloon. Ray still remembered seeing the dust spray up from the brick wall where it had struck harmlessly.

In the back seat of the big motorcar, the girl showed Ray the reason she was being chased. She had two wallets bulging with paper currency. She also had a number of silver dollars, and three gold double-eagles. She laughed, and shoved the coins and currency into her handbag, and tossed the wallets out the window, which she then rolled up. She smiled happily, and told Ray what had happened.

"The man paid me and I did him, but his two friends wanted me too. They took me into the next room, but they weren't in the contract. I told them no way; I told them to let me go."

Ray asked, "The...contract?"

"You slow in the head, mister? I'm a whore. My client tonight was a businessman from Philadelphia. His friends are his bodyguards. After I did the businessman, the guards took me into the next room—that was where they were staying for the night. Like I said, I protested. They said they were going to get some too, and I could tell they were

going to rape me if I said no. So I told them to strip, and get on their beds. They did, and when they were both laying there naked, I grabbed their pants and ran.” She giggled. “I ran down the stairs and by the time I was on the first floor, I had both of their wallets, so I dropped the pants and ran.”

“And the reason they were behind their boss is because they had to stop to put their pants back on?”

She giggled again. “Pretty smart, huh?”

And so the nameless girl took Raymond to meet her pimp, who’d subsequently introduced him to Gowland. They’d seemed to get on all right, and Ray had a job that very night. He became one of Gowland’s drivers. His job was simple; he’d be delivering Gowland’s girls to hotels, apartments, and even the city parks, as the occasion required. He hadn’t minded at first; he knew one started at the bottom and moved up in any business. But he hadn’t moved up. He was paid too well to quit, but he was tired of driving young girls to and from their trysts.

And then one night he’d run into Woodburn, right here in the Half Moon. They began talking casually over beers and whiskeys, friendly at first, discussing the city and the weather. When it came to their occupations, both men became more careful. Their words circling each other’s like wary lions. It took three weeks, and a dozen meetings for them to get down to the real business.

Finally, it had been Woodburn who’d made the move. He told Ray about the operation for which he worked. It was new, he’d said, and run by professional former soldiers. They were hungry for a piece of the action, and were willing to pay handsomely in real gold for information that might allow them to expand their area of influence in the criminal underworld of the city. And there would be room for him eventually, if he supplied useful information. Ray didn’t need to think about this for very long. What was there to lose, really? If nothing else, he would be getting paid money from both sides. Things were finally looking up for Raymond Hastings.

CHAPTER 2

“So what do you have for me?” Woodburn scrutinized the new arrival carefully. In his line of work, one could never be certain that one was not being set up; either by the police or someone else in one’s own line of work. He tossed back the scotch, and set the shot glass back onto the scarred wooden table.

The question brought Ray back to the present. He glanced around the dimly lit room, trying not to be obvious. The tables around them were currently unoccupied. He glanced toward the door, his action not unnoticed by the other man sitting at the table.

He’s nervous as usual, Woodburn noticed with a slight smile. He considered the other man’s nervousness to be a good sign. Hastings had always been nervous since the day Woodburn had met him. He’d have worried if the man had simply sat and not looked around like a scared rabbit.

Ray cleared his throat. “There’s some things I know, and then there’s some things I’ve heard. First, these are the things I know for certain. Gowland always goes to a certain empty warehouse he owns over on Jefferson every day like clockwork; the place used to be a machine-shop at one time I believe.” Ray slipped a folded piece of paper across the table to Woodburn between his index and middle finger. The other man deftly palmed it, and put his hand in his lap just as a waitress walked up.

“Anything for you, sir?” She smiled brightly, looking down at Ray, noticing his gold watch chain. *Bet he tips good*, she thought.

“I’ll take a shot of scotch, please,” Ray said.

“And you, sir?”

“I’ll have another shot of scotch as well, Suzi.” He glanced at Ray, and added, “You might as well just bring the bottle.”

Suzi nodded. “Anything to eat?”

“Not tonight, sweetie,” Woodburn said.

Suzi smiled again, and left their table. Leo lifted the folded paper between two fingers. “Tell me about this.”

“Well, one thing I can tell you with absolute rock-solid certainty is that warehouse is no place to try for any kinda’ hit.” Ray nodded, pausing for effect. “There’re a couple of really good reasons I’m saying this. I’ve been in there many times. There’s lots of heavy metal stuff layin’ all over the place; old machines, boilers, heavy railed conveyor belts hangin’ from the ceiling...you get the picture.” Leo nodded. “All that metal will ricochet bullets in God knows what direction. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere around there if there was a gunfight. You’d be just as likely to kill your own men or yourself, as kill him or his men.”

Leo nodded a second time. “And what’s the second reason?”

“The other reason’s that the man’s always got lots of help whenever he goes there. He usually has at least a dozen guys with him, sometimes more. Most of ‘em help keep the girls in line. They keeps ‘em fixed up when they need it and so on. They also travel around and see to it that the pimps don’t skim Paul’s money. They all carry top of the line hardware, and most of ‘em are reasonably good shooters. And like I said, all those bullets flyin’ around and all that metal...”

Leo looked at Ray, disappointment evident in his narrowed eyes, and the slight tip of his graying head. Ray laughed, and then Suzi was back once more with their drinks. She

filled their shot glasses, and set the bottle on the table. They both paid her, and she smiled at the tip Ray had given her.

When she'd gone, Ray said, "Relax, Leo. I got more than that for you." He snickered. "Because I drive his car sometimes, I know all about Gowland's schedules and appointments and meetings. I know for a fact that Paul travels every Wednesday to a certain hotel over in the south-central part of the city. It's not a good area, but better than some. He takes his driver...that would be me, of course, and his two best bodyguards." Ray noticed with appreciation that he'd really gotten Woodburn's attention. He continued. "He's got a woman that lives there, another whore. He pays her for it; not sure I understand how that works. He has his own girls, after all, and I'm sure he could get free shots on demand."

"His reasons for his actions probably don't matter much in this operation," Leo commented. "It'll be his last visit there in any event. Wednesday morning you say?"

"I did say," Ray nodded, dramatically handing Woodburn a second folded piece of paper. "And here's the address of that location. Now I don't know which exact room he goes to, though. I don't even know if it's the same one every time—I always get to just sit and wait in the car, as usual." Woodburn noticed the anger radiating from the man across the table from him. The man felt used and undervalued. Both were good signs in Woodburn's opinion.

Ray continued. "He always takes his two bodyguards inside with him when he goes there, though. The rest of his men stay back in the warehouse or they're out on the street doin' whatever it is they do."

"So every time Gowland goes into that hotel on Wednesdays, it's just him an' two bodyguards?" Ray nodded, and Leo smiled, poured Ray another shot. He lifted his own glass in a toast. "And the rest of it?" Ray grinned, and returned the toast before continuing.

Once more Ray handed a folded piece of paper to the man on the other side of the table. "This note shows either the intersections or the specific buildings his four pimps set up at on Wednesdays. Unless one's sick or he died, you'll find each of 'em right there, guaranteed." Woodburn opened the paper, rapidly reading what was written on it in a difficult, sprawling hand. Now he smiled. *Easy targets, all spread out and waiting to be picked off.*

This was exactly the information they'd needed, and exactly what Ray had promised to deliver. Woodburn folded the small sheet of paper once more, placing it in the breast pocket of his vest with the other two. He grinned, reached inside his jacket and produced a black leather sack, tied tightly at the top. He hefted it once; Ray heard the muted jingle of gold and grinned. Woodburn slid the bag across the table. Ray took it with a satisfied nod, and opened it to glance inside. He could see the eight gold twenty-dollar double-eagles nestled inside. He closed the small sack, depositing it in his jacket pocket. He downed his scotch, and looked at Woodburn. Leo watched as Ray sat back again, hating this 'dramatic effect' thing Ray seemed to love so much, and waited. He knew Hastings was still holding out.

"There is one more thing," Ray whispered conspiratorially as he glanced around furtively. "This is just a rumor, mind you. I heard it a couple of times though from a couple of different people. You're gonna have to move real fast on this if you're planning

on taking Gowland's business the easy way." He paused again for effect, Woodburn realized. He was getting impatient.

"This Wednesday," Ray continued after glancing once more at the empty tables around them, "is the last time you'll be dealing with Gowland all on his own."

"Why's that?"

"Cause there's this rumor that says he's meeting with someone on Thursday morning, real early. I haven't gotten a name, but I think it's probably gonna' be the head man of the gang his territory bumps up against on the far west side. That would be Phineas Starkweather's bunch.

"Both operations are about the same size and strength, and what with the recent killings and...hostile takeovers of other smaller gangs, they're going to talk about uniting, making themselves into a bigger operation. Rumor has it it'll mean more money for both of them, and better protection. And from what I've seen and heard, Phineas is a much harder man than Gowland...and that takes some doing."

"Thank you for that," Leo said. "Anything else?"

"Nope," Ray responded and stood. "That's all of it. Be seeing you."

Woodburn nodded, and waited for Ray to leave. He watched the door of the tavern close behind him. He waited another thirty minutes before leaving. His driver was waiting for him across the street, the sedan's steam engine hot and ready to roll. He crossed the road, and got in the back seat. His driver wordlessly pulled from the curb, and they drove off into the early morning blackness.

Woodburn knew Ingles and Jameson would be waiting for him, already dressed and awake; it was how they worked. He lifted the speaking tube that connected the passenger compartment with the driver, and told him to move as fast as the law allowed; he was eager to get this information to his friends. He sat back in the leather seat and smiled a satisfied smile. Though he could no longer see Ray, he knew he'd be sidling down alleys and doing double-backs even now that the meeting was concluded. He was just that way. Woodburn shook his head in amused wonder. But the news Ray had brought was well worth all that drama.

The black sedan rode sedately down the dark pre-dawn streets of Los Angeles. Woodburn made it his business not to do anything that might attract the attention of law enforcement, especially now of all times. The first hint of dawn was just beginning to color the sky to the east with a faint peachy hue, the blackness of night retreating before the coming radiance of the sun.

"We're like the morning sun," he thought. *"We're just beginning to come into our own."* Woodburn sighed, feeling that all in all he'd done a good night's work.

The black sedan turned the corner from Seventh Street onto Wilshire Boulevard, and continued smoothly toward the quiet residential neighborhoods west of the downtown area. By the time they reached the home of Gilbert Ingles, the eastern sky was turning yellow and orange.

They'd all arrived in Los Angeles aboard the same airship they'd used in the European war between France and Prussia. After the fiasco in New York, managing to lift off only minutes ahead of a large and very angry group of organized drug dealers, they'd set up shop in the previously abandoned home of Ingles' parents. Gilbert didn't know where his parents were living now, or even if they lived at all—nor did he care.

He'd known the house had been empty for a number of years, but it was paid for, so there was no mortgage for anyone to foreclose. The place had just stood there, vacant all those years. It was a large house, with enough land to ensure privacy from neighbors, and also had a barn and other outbuildings. But money wasn't an issue; at least not yet. The gangsters who had pursued them to the airfield had supplied Ingles and his men with a little over two hundred thousand dollars. Most of it was in currency, fortunately. Some was in gold ingots, and not quite a quarter of the value was, for the time being, tied up in bundles of opium, morphine, heroin, and cocaine.

This house was a convenient place to resume operations, Ingles had reasoned. Most of the big-time gangsters in Los Angeles lived in fancy apartments or in the tall hotels downtown with lots of security. Nobody would think to look for gangsters hiding out in this sleepy neighborhood of white picket fences, children playing on the well-manicured lawns, and small furry dogs barking as they chased thrown balls. It was perfect, at least for the time being.

Woodburn's driver drove the sedan up the cobblestone driveway, and parked behind the house. He shut down the steam engine, and both men climbed out. Woodburn walked to the back door, and knocked. This just might have been the only house in the immediate neighborhood with perpetually locked doors. He waited a moment, and then he heard the key go into the lock from the inside. The door opened, a bright rectangle of light. Leo and his driver stepped inside, and the door closed behind them, and was once again locked.

Gilbert Ingles, Patrick Jameson, and Ambrose Miller, were in the living room drinking coffee when Leo walked in. The three men glanced up and smiled. They could tell from the look on Woodburn's face that he'd gotten something important from his contact.

"Take a look at these, gentlemen," Leo said. "I'm gonna get a coffee myself, and I'll be right back."

Ingles and Jameson looked at the several pieces of paper lying on the table. Three showed addresses in Raymond Hasting's handwriting. A fourth, obviously in Leo's own hand, said simply Starkweather.

When Leo returned to the living room, he told them what had transpired at the Half Moon. The three men listened without comment. When he was finished, Leo sat back. Now was the time for questions.

"Could he be setting us up?" Ingles was the thinker of the group, the man who always planned ahead, always having a 'Plan B' just in case. And he could be totally ruthless when required.

Leo shook his head. "You should've seen his eyes when I handed him the gold. Greedy bastard lit up like a corner gaslight. He's not going to be a problem, I'd bet my life on it."

"We all might be," Ingles responded. "Tell me, what do you think about this Starkweather business he mentioned? You get the feeling that he's flourishing a little? Trying for more money?"

Leo shook his head once more. "He gave that up free of charge, after I'd already paid him the amount we'd agreed upon."

Jameson rubbed his chin in contemplation. "Sounds like we got our work cut out for us. Gowland may be a small operator, but he's got double the men we do. And you know,

Gil, we can't just keep hiring on everyone when we take over a gang. What do we do with the...excess?"

"Simple," Ingles commented with a grin. "When we make a move on somebody, we see to it that when we raid, those extra men always go through doors first, up flights of stairs first, and things like that." He shook his head. "Always being the first one can be hazardous, you know."

Ambrose Miller spoke next. He'd been Ingles' engineer on the Aerocorps zeppelin they'd flown for the Union army during the Civil War, and afterward as well, once they'd gone mercenary. They'd been together for quite a number of years now, and they were very close friends.

"One thing we should keep in mind as well is this." He tapped the ash from his cigar into the glass tray sitting on the coffee table. "The coppers and the papers know who a lot of the gangsters are; most of 'em have arrest records. The powers that be will naturally associate those men we need to get rid of, with their former gang affiliation.

"With a small effort, we can get the expendable ones somewhere on their own turf once it belongs to us, and just kill 'em ourselves. We can leave some guns or knives at the scene, maybe even a little morphine or cocaine. The newspapers, heck, even that guy Hamilton Perren and his rag, will just assume that they killed each other as they were trying to take over their own gang. I bet we could even make it look like one of them killed their boss so he could take over."

"That's an interesting idea, Tom," Ingles commented, admiration in his voice. "We'll put that plan into effect on our next endeavor. Nobody will ever suspect us. But in dealing with Gowland, we don't have the luxury of time, apparently. We got to move on his organization, and fast. I want surveillance to begin today. I want that man dead this Wednesday. Got it?"

They all nodded, and rose to begin assigning their men to the various tasks that covert observation entails; there would be overall recon, locating blind spots in the enemy's position and security, and finding hidden observation points. They didn't have much time, and the clock was ticking. They needed to move on this right away.