

Hounds of the Hollywood Baskervilles

© 2023 Elizabeth Crowens

Chapter 1

Flea Circus

Hollywood, 1940

Babs bundled Miss Marple in a beach towel. Otherwise, she would get clawed. Her disgruntled partner flinched from fleabites while holding a box of kittens. She looked around the vet's waiting room to see if she recognized anyone, but all she noticed were an unknown house frau with a French-cut Miniature Poodle, a uniformed nurse with a Cocker Spaniel, and a frumpy elder with a Shirley Temple hopeful hugging her Saint Bernard.

The front door flew open, revealing a tall, thin, but athletic gentleman with his chestnut hair slicked back. His striking profile rivaled classic sculptures, except for the sweat which dripped down his forehead. Under one arm were photostat flyers. Under the other, a folded-up copy of *Daily Variety*. Both featured photos of dogs.

Guy poked Babs in the ribs to get her attention. "Recognize him?"

She observed the newcomer, who explained his dilemma in haste to the assistant, but most of what Babs could see was from behind. "Who?"

"Rathbone... Basil Rathbone."

"The actor who plays Sherlock Holmes?"

"*Shush*. Don't advertise it to everyone on Sunset Boulevard."

In a whisper, he disclosed the highlights of the actor's resume. "That, and *Captain Blood*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, and more, not to mention quite a bit of theater. If we keep it discreet, maybe we can find out why he's here."

Basil approached the lady with the cocker and asked if he could scratch him under his chin.

"Such a handsome boy. My Leo looks a lot like him, except his coat is a deep red rather than brown."

He pointed to the bulletin board with listings for lost pets and adoptions and handed the front desk assistant his entire stack. "I'll have more printed. Please give them to all of your clients. If I can't find my poor Leo, I don't know what I'll do."

Babs saw this as an opportunity to get acquainted. She sprang from her seat, clutching the hissing fuzzball wrapped like a jellyroll. "Maybe I can help in your search."

Basil narrowed his eyes. "Do I know you?"

"Babs Norman." She attempted to extend her hand for a proper introduction, but struggled with the snarling feline. "Cast as an extra in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*."

"Ah...with Errol Flynn, in the days when the studios always had me play the villain."

She gleaned from the subtle shift on his face he didn't care for his co-star.

He eyed her with sudden skepticism. "Refresh my memory. What scene were you in? Almost all parts were male."

"When Sir Robin of Locksley revealed to Maid Marion that he saved the lives of desperate villagers. I played a peasant wife, but my back was toward the camera."

"What a shame," Basil said.

Babs blushed. "I *used* to be an actress, but not anymore."

"What do you consider yourself now?" Basil asked.

The vet's assistant came between them. "Miss, maybe he desires privacy." He ignored Babs and asked Basil. "Sir, have you filed a report with the pound?"

"I tried, but I have little faith they can help. Everyone laughed and said, 'Sherlock Holmes has lost his dog!'"

Babs cleared her throat to get everyone's attention. First, she addressed the rude assistant.

"Excuse me, but you interrupted us before I could answer his question." Then she turned to Basil. "The reason I'm no longer an actress is *now* I'm a private investigator. The gentleman next to me is my associate, Guy Brandt."

Basil dismissed the employee's well-meaning intervention. "Such an odd transition from acting. What compelled you to get into that business?"

She lowered her head. "It's a long story." He didn't need to know the truth about her father's murder. "I also have an acute talent for finding things, whether they are people...or pets."

"You have an actual private investigator's license?" Basil asked.

"In my purse." She tried to fish it out while wrestling with the cat, who broke free from her grasp. Between Guy and another staff member, they corralled the anxious tabby into a handheld cage.

"I'm so sorry." Babs looked around at the bedlam of barking dogs. "This stray doesn't want to nurse her kits, and I think she has—"

"Fleas." Basil scratched his arms. "Looks like we're both having kittens."

She also felt an oncoming rash. "Come again?"

"Ha! It's a peculiar old English expression. People believed a witch's curse caused painful pregnancies, but instead of a child, they thought the woman had kittens inside her, clawing to get out. Since I'm not expectant, it shows my uncomfortable position in more ways than one."

Babs flushed; aware this was an awkward introduction for a potential client. Meanwhile, staff members brought the kittens into the back for examination.

She plucked her ID and her business card out of her purse. “*B. Norman, Investigations*. In case you need proof.”

He put down his copy of *Daily Variety* to accept her card. Babs swiped his tabloid, attracted by a photo of another dog on its cover.

“Someone else’s dog is missing.” Babs read the article out loud. “Skippy, the wire-haired Fox Terrier known as Asta in the *Thin Man* movies, has vanished. Production is supposed to start on the next film featuring the lovable detectives Nick and Nora Charles. A one-thousand-dollar reward. No questions asked.”

Guy whistled. “That’s one hefty jackpot.”

Basil looked at her business card one more time. “Well, if it’s any consolation, I’ll match that for the return of my red cocker. My wife will think I’m insane. I was offering one hundred.” He showed them his flyers. “For you, as professionals, I guess I’ll make an exception, since now it looks like I have serious competition from producers with studio funds. Is that enough of an incentive?”

“Our agency is on Hollywood Boulevard, close to La Brea,” she said with a confident smile.

“Let’s say I stop over tomorrow on the way to the studio. Perhaps I should trust your expertise if you say you’re so good with animals.”

Babs nodded and forced herself to contain her excitement. “Sir, do you mind if I borrow your newspaper?”

“Keep it,” Basil said. He handed her both his copy of *Daily Variety* and several of his flyers.

After he left, she turned to her partner. “Who says we can’t go after both Asta or Skippy and Leo?”

The vet returned with the verdict. “There’s no doubt your adult cat has a case of fleas, which might have also infested your furniture. The kittens are another matter. They’re too young to eat food on their own. The obvious issue you overlooked is the adult is not their mama, because she’s a he. Not so obvious with his long and thick matted fur. That’s why he wouldn’t nurse the little ones.”

Babs turned red. “I can’t believe I was so caught up in the moment that I overlooked something that simple.”

“A coincidence, I’m afraid. You must’ve put two and two together when you found this fellow near a box of abandoned kittens,” the vet explained. “The newborns will need around-the-clock attention, and Old Tom will need a few flea baths before he’s ready to go back to anyone’s home.”

Babs grimaced. She looked at Guy and then back toward the vet. “Can’t play nursemaid while running a business.”

“Don’t worry.” The vet reassured her. “Leave them here. My staff will handle it. We’ll find good homes for all of them.”

* * *