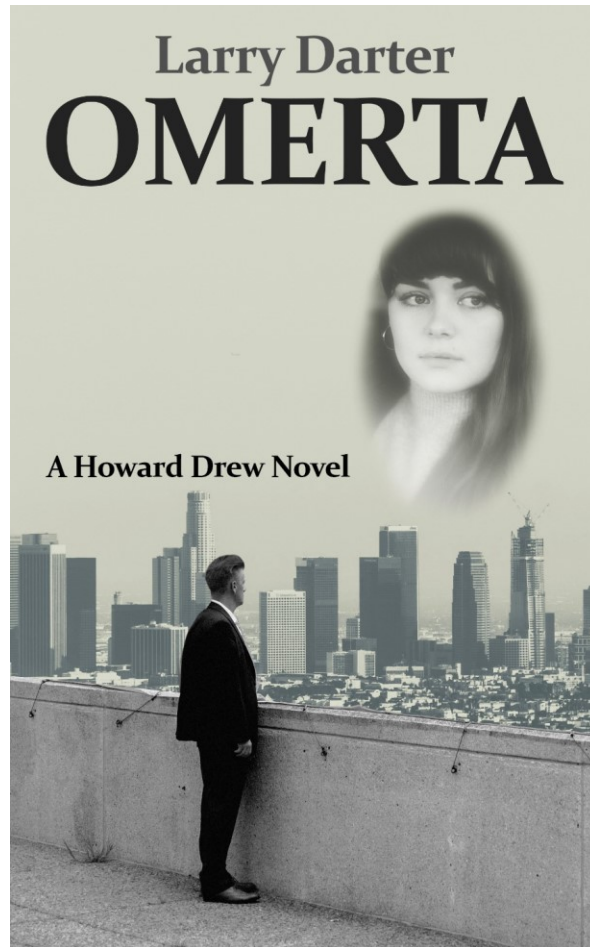


OMERTA

A Howard Drew Novel

by Larry Darter

Excerpt



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It was Christmas Eve. Los Angeles Police Department's West Bureau homicide detectives Rudy Ortega and Howard Drew snaked through the light Sunday traffic in a blue Ford Crown Victoria. Ortega, the driver, exited the San Diego Freeway on Sunset Boulevard. They cruised east through Bel Air, past the estates of Beverly Hills, and then headed up Benedict Canyon Drive, climbing the twisting road past clouds of pink and white oleanders and blood-red bougainvilleas cascading over fences. They passed steep olive-drab hillsides, sheathed in chaparral and studded here and there with live oaks.

The homes in the neighborhood bordered canyon roads, and the backyards skirted towering bluffs, shaded by cypress, sycamores, and an occasional redwood. Benedict Canyon offered the best in Los Angeles living, making it a popular area among successful film actors, directors, and musicians. The commute down to the city was short, and the canyons provided rural-like oases for the residents. The smell of sage wafted through bedroom windows, the houses hovered above the smog, and coyotes roamed the foothills and howled at night.

When Ortega pulled off the road and parked the car at the address in the 1500 block of Benedict Canyon Drive, the detectives found a rustic wood-shingle bungalow which seemed out of place in the fashionable district on the edge of Beverly Hills. It appeared the builders had shoehorned the modest cottage into an inadequate space between the busy road and an overgrown hillside.

Ortega and Drew headed up a cement walkway toward the front door that traversed a weed-choked lawn, bracketed by dried out hydrangeas and emaciated Japanese boxwood.

Rudy Ortega, who would turn fifty-five in the spring, was the second oldest detective in the West Bureau homicide unit and planned to retire before the end of the year. He had spent twenty-five years as a detective, the last seventeen as a homicide investigator. Ortega, a stylish dresser with coiffed silver hair, wore a tailored gray Giorgio Armani sharkskin suit, a white starched shirt, and a blue Stefano Ricci silk tie with printed checks. Ortega was mentoring Drew in the craft of murder investigations.

Howard Drew, a thirty-three-year-old eight-year veteran of LAPD, a recently promoted Detective II, had transferred to West Bureau homicide after three years as a burglary/theft detective at Hollenbeck. Drew wore a more modest Brooks Brothers navy pinstripe suit with a store brand white shirt. He had purchased the suit on sale off the rack at Nordstrom's. He wore his brown hair in the high and tight military variant of the crew cut, with the back and sides of his head shaved to the skin and the top blended or faded into slightly longer hair. Drew had become accustomed to the style during his four years in the U.S. Army while serving in the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division. Howard wasn't a tall man. He stood two inches short of six feet and was on the lean side because he was a dedicated runner. His brown eyes were serious and seldom revealed any emotion.

"This isn't what I expected," Ortega said. "This place is only a mile from the mansion on Cielo Drive, where the Manson family murdered Sharon Tate and her friends."

"It's a dump," Drew said, "especially by Beverly Hills standards."

Sergeant Martin Maxwell and two uniformed West L.A. patrol officers met the detectives outside the front door.

"What've we got, Max?" Ortega said.

"Barnett and Tomlinson responded to a radio call of an open door," Maxwell said.

"They found the front door closed but unlocked. When they entered the residence, they discovered the body of a deceased female victim on the floor in a bedroom. She had a pool of blood under her head. They backed out and called for an RA and a supervisor. SID and the coroner's investigator are already inside."

"Got a name?" Ortega said.

Maxwell nodded. "Fiona Silverman, age forty-eight," he said as he pulled a California license out from behind the buckle of his Sam Browne and handed it to Ortega. "Found her purse on the counter in the kitchen."

"We know who called in the open door?" Ortega said.

"Neighbor across the street," Maxwell said. "He saw one of her dogs wandering down the street. The guy tried calling her, but there was no answer. He walked over and found the back door standing wide open. No response when he called out to Silverman. He became concerned and called it in."

"Your guys find any signs of forcible entry?" Howard said.

"None," Maxwell said. "They found all the windows secured with screens in place. The interior doesn't appear as if anyone ransacked it. The victim's purse has her credit cards and cash in it. Robbery doesn't look like the motive."

"Okay, Max, thanks," Ortega said.

Maxwell nodded. "You got it, Rudy," he said, and then nodded to Drew. "Enjoy."

A female patrol officer, Drew didn't recognize was on the door. Her silver nameplate said, Tomlinson. Tomlinson held out a metal clipboard with the scene log on it. Ortega signed the register and then passed the clipboard to Drew. After he had signed it, Drew returned the clipboard to Tomlinson. "Guess it sucks for you guys to catch a homicide on Christmas Eve," she said.

Tomlinson was late-twenties, or early thirties, with short light brown hair and the kind of blue eyes that turned electric when the owner smiled. Tomlinson was smiling now. She looked like the outdoorsy type, skin evenly tanned. A surfer, maybe. Drew found her attractive.

"It is what it is," Ortega said.

Tomlinson turned to Drew. "I'm Lucy Tomlinson, by the way. I'm new in West L.A. Area." Her smile grew wider, and her blue eyes sparkled.

"Howard Drew."

"I know. You were at Hollenbeck, right?"

"Yes, I just transferred over to West Bureau two weeks ago. Guess we're both new to the west side. I don't recall seeing you at Hollenbeck."

"I know," Tomlinson smirked. "I'm not that memorable."

Drew got embarrassed.

"No, I didn't mean that," he stuttered. "I just don't think I ever saw you there."

"I only saw you a few times in the parking lot. But I asked someone who you were."

“So, you’re saying I’m memorable?” Drew said. “No one has ever mentioned that before.”

They both laughed at the remark. Tomlinson continued smiling and doing the sparkly eye thing. Drew wondered if she was flirting with him. He didn’t always read women well.

“Youngblood, when you can tear yourself away, we’ll get started,” Ortega said. Drew got embarrassed again.

“Oops, sorry for holding you guys up,” Tomlinson said.

“No, it’s okay,” Drew said. “Glad to meet you, Tomlinson.”

“Likewise,” she said. “You can call me Lucy. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

Drew nodded. “Maybe so.” He smiled at Tomlinson before turning to follow Ortega.

The two detectives slipped on blue disposable nitrile gloves and went inside the house.

“An attractive woman,” Ortega said. “She seems to like you.”

Drew ignored the comment, wondering if Ortega had based it on his reaction to Tomlinson. He hoped it hadn’t been that obvious.

They found the living room a jumble of unopened Christmas presents with books and magazines stacked high atop a worn, dated coffee table in front of a brown couch. There were Christmas cards taped to a wall. In the center of the room, there was a computer and printer atop a chipped white table. A plastic ashtray with a few crumpled cigarette butts was beside the keyboard.

Throughout the room, Silverman had hung pictures of a man and woman that the detectives assumed were her parents. Newspaper photos of the same two people at what appeared posh parties covered another wall. There was a World War II-era army photograph of the man. Another wall featured framed pictures of what they assumed were photos of the victim during her childhood and teen years. There was a plastic card table with two mismatched folding chairs in a kitchen corner—apparently where the victim ate her meals.

The detectives found the coroner’s investigator, Don Harrison, in the master bedroom on his haunches next to the body. The victim, barefoot and dressed in a white T-shirt and purple sweatpants, lay on the floor near the doorway. There was a halo of reddish-brown dried blood beneath the victim’s head. Harrison had what looked like a plastic fishing tackle box on the floor beside him. He took a scalpel from the box and made a small incision in the upper right abdomen just above the hip of the body. The criminalist then removed a thermometer and attached it to the end of a curved probe. He passed the probe through the incision, driving it up into the liver.

One SID technician was photographing the scene with a digital camera while two others were dusting various points for prints.

The bedroom was shabby and cluttered, the room of a woman down on her luck. It reeked of the odor of dog urine and mold. Faint winter light shining through the window illuminated a few brownish-red streaks of blood and a single bloody paw print that gleamed with a lacquer-like sheen on the worn hardwood floor. Drew crouched to study the chipped door jamb where flakes of paint dappled the floor.

“Looks like there was a struggle here by the door,” Drew said to Ortega. “Maybe the suspect threw her against it, or she grabbed it while struggling to get away from her attacker.”

Harrison went to work on the dead woman's legs. He grabbed each foot and manipulated the ankles. Moving his hands up to the thighs, Harrison lifted each leg and watched as it bent at the knee. After pressing his hands down on the abdomen, he reached up and tried to turn the dead woman's head. It rotated easily.

"The neck is unlocked," Harrison said without looking up from his work. "Stomach has relaxed, and the extremities have good movement."

Harrison took a pencil from his box. He pushed the eraser end against the skin on the side of the torso. There was purplish blotching on the half of the body closest to the floor. It was postmortem lividity or livor mortis. When Harrison pushed the pencil eraser against the darkened skin, it did not blanch white. That was a sign the blood had fully clotted.

"Lividity is steady," Harrison said. "Given the reversal of the rigor and liver temperature, I put the time of death at anywhere from twenty-four to forty-eight hours ago. Someone killed this woman, probably between Thursday and sometime Saturday. That will have to do for a time of death estimate until we make the cut."

"Cause of death?" Ortega said.

"Single GSW to the back of the head," Harrison said.

"How can that be?" Drew said. "It defies the laws of physics."

"Yeah," Ortega said. "The killer shot her in the back of the head. She should have crumpled forward."

"My best guess is whoever shot her, flipped her over for some reason," Harrison said. "This is how the body was when I arrived, supine with the arms down by her sides. The lividity is on the bottom half of the body next to the floor. Someone rolled her over soon after the killer shot her."

"Maybe that's a clue," Ortega said. "Maybe the killer is someone who cared about her at some point. Wanted to leave her in what they thought was a more comfortable position."

"SID collected one brass spent bullet casing from beneath the body when we rolled it on its side to check for wounds," Harrison said. "It was a nine-millimeter, which is consistent with the size of the entry wound. No exit."

"Find the gun?" Ortega called to the SID technicians.

"No," two of them said in unison.

Harrison wrote some notes on his clipboard, then retrieved an ink pad and a print card from the plastic box beside him. He quickly and expertly inked the fingers of each hand and pressed the fingertips to the card. Once he finished, he waved the card back and forth a few times to dry the ink and then handed it to Ortega.

"I'll bag the hands as a precaution," Harrison said, "until they do the GSR test at the morgue. But given the location of the wound and that no weapon is present, I think it's safe to say this wasn't suicide."

Two body movers arrived a few minutes after Harrison had finished up. They unfolded and opened a black, heavy plastic bag with a zipper running up the center. They lifted Silverman and placed her inside. One of them zipped the body bag, then they hefted it onto a gurney, strapped it down, and trundled the body out of the bedroom towards the front door.

Ortega's mobile phone rang. He dug it out of his pocket and answered the call. After listening for a few moments, he spoke into the phone then hung up.

“Maxwell wants us back out front,” Ortega said to Drew. “Says he has information on our victim we might be interested to know.”

Ortega and Drew went back outside through the front door. Drew glanced at Tomlinson on his way out. She caught him looking and smiled again. The detectives walked out to the street to Maxwell's black and white Ford Explorer. They stripped off the latex gloves as they walked and dropped them on the ground.

Maxwell was sitting inside his SUV reading from the screen of his mobile computer terminal.

"What's up, Max," Ortega said, resting his forearms on the windowsill.

"Rudy, your victim, is Fiona Silverman, the writer, the so-called mafia princess," Maxwell said.

"Mafia princess?" Drew said.

"Yes, her father was a big-time mob guy, John 'Sonny' Silverman," Maxwell said.

"He was a Gambino crime family underboss. He rubbed shoulders with the likes of John Gotti, Salvatore 'Sammy the Bull' Gravano, and Angelo Ruggiero. After her father died, she wrote a best-selling memoir called *Mafia Princess: Growing Up in a Mob Family*."

"How did you find out all that, Max?" Ortega said.

"I enjoy reading about the history of the Italian organized crime families," Maxwell said. "Hobby of sorts. Anyway, I thought her name sounded familiar. I Googled the name when I got back to my shop. Then I remembered I'd read her book."

"Think it was a professional hit?" Drew said. "A mob connection and one to the back of the head."

"Assume nothing, Youngblood," Ortega said. "SID found a casing, remember? Mafia hitters usually use revolvers. Even if the shooter had used a semi-auto, it's unlikely a pro would have left a casing behind."

"Exactly," Maxwell said. "I only called you out here to give you the heads-up on her background. You can bet the media will be on this as soon as the victim's name goes public. The woman was semi-famous."

"Hard to believe after looking at where she lived," Drew said. "Rookie cops own more stuff than she did."

"She must have hit a rough patch," Maxwell said.

"Looks that way," Ortega said. "Thanks, Max."

"No problem," Maxwell said. "See you guys later." The sergeant dropped the Explorer in gear and drove away.

The detectives returned to the house. Tomlinson locked eyes with Drew again on his way past her. They both smiled. While Ortega checked in with the SID technicians, Drew started going through a cardboard box of personal correspondence files they had found inside the guest bedroom. There was also an address book, and a stack of envelopes from the Christmas cards taped to the living room wall. Silverman had bound them together with a rubber band. While Drew looked through the documents, Ortega coordinated with the SID technicians. He told them to collect the ancient desktop computer from the table in the living room after they finished processing the scene.

Drew opened a manila file folder with the word "Lease" hand-printed on the tab. There was a copy of a lease agreement and some canceled checks for past rent payments. Then he found something interesting, copies of several letters Silverman had written to her landlord. In one letter that seemed to be about an eviction dispute, Silverman wrote, "Please never threaten me again, saying if I didn't pay the rent 'something bad will happen to you and your dogs,' or that you'll come up here and 'throw your ass into the bottom of the canyon.' I take such threats seriously." Because of the wording and the use of the quotation marks, it seemed to Drew that Silverman had been quoting threats made by her landlord word for word. In another letter, Silverman cited another threat from the landlord, "Something terrible will happen to you and your daughter and your dogs. I have a key." Drew copied the landlord's name, Joan Keller, and her address in his notebook.

When Ortega came into the room, Drew showed him the copies of the letters Silverman had written and summarized what he had read.

"Sounds like we need to talk with the landlady," Ortega said. "Seems there was some bad blood between her and the victim. We could construe those as credible threats."

"Yes, she is definitely in the frame as a person of interest," Drew agreed.

"Box that stuff up, and we'll take it back to the bureau with us," Ortega said. "The SID techs are about finished. We need to do a neighborhood canvas to see if anyone heard a gunshot or saw anything suspicious over the weekend."

Once the SID technicians had left the house and were loading up their equipment, Ortega signed off on the crime scene. Drew and Tomlinson walked out to her black and white. Her partner, Barnett, was already behind the wheel ready to go. Tomlinson took a blank shake card out of her uniform pocket. She wrote her name and a phone number on it and then handed it to Drew. "Just in case you need anything from me," she said with another radiant smile. "You have a card?"

Drew nodded. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out one of his printed business cards and handed it to Tomlinson.

"Hey partner, we have to roll on a double D," Barnett said out the open car window. Double D was cop-speak for a domestic dispute.

Tomlinson rolled her eyes. "Call me anytime," she said to Drew. Then the attractive female cop got in the passenger side of the squad car. She waved at Drew as Barnett drove away.

Drew had thought about asking her for her number, but he hadn't since sexual harassment was a hot button issue at the LAPD. Tomlinson had solved the dilemma by offering it up. Maybe he would call her after the holidays.

Ortega and Drew started the house to house canvas, hoping to garner information that would help nail down the time the murder had happened. Two hours later, after talking to dozens of people in the neighborhood, they had found no one who had heard a gunshot or had offered any useful information. They had spoken with the neighbor who had called in the open door. He told them he had seen one of Silverman's dogs outside wandering the street that morning. The neighbor said that was unusual. Silverman never allowed her dogs out of the house unless she was walking them. That's what had prompted him first to call and then visit the residence when the call

went unanswered. He had discovered the back door ajar and got no response when he had called out to Silverman. Worried, he had then called the police.

Another neighbor asked the detectives about Silverman's dogs. She said she had seen animal control taking the dogs away and expressed her concern that they might destroy the dogs if no one came forward to adopt them. Ortega, a dog lover, promised the woman he would mention the dogs when they interviewed Silverman's friends and relatives to see if someone might take the dogs.

Ortega and Drew got back in their car after speaking with the last neighbor they thought had lived close enough to have possibly seen or heard something.

"Someone whacked her, left the back door open, and the dogs got out," Drew said.

"So whoever let the dogs out is our shooter," Ortega said. He muttered to himself, "Who let the dogs out?" He turned to Drew, punched him playfully on the shoulder, and parroted the old song titled "Doggie" performed by the Bahamian group Baha Men that had been popular in the late nineties. "Who let the dogs out? Woof, woof, woof, woof." He sang again, "Who, who, *who*, let the dogs out? Woof, woof, woof."

Drew had never heard the song, but he laughed with Ortega anyway since Ortega was such an awful singer. "We just have to answer your musical question, and we'll solve the case," he said.

Ortega nodded. "Well, first, we need to go back to the bureau and go through the paperwork you collected to find a next of kin," he said.

"Got that covered," Drew said. "I found a day planner on the kitchen counter on the way out. There was one of those pre-printed emergency notification pages in the front." Drew took out his notebook. "The victim listed a cousin, Shirley Sutton, as her emergency contact."

"Got an address?" Ortega said.

"Yes, it's on Boughton Place in Studio City," Drew said, pulling up the map application on his phone. He put the address into the app. "It's south of Maxwellton Road, which runs off Laurel Canyon Boulevard."

"Okay, then we'll do the death notification first and get it out the way," Ortega said. The detectives headed north for Studio City.

End of sample