

Murder Cops Hunt the Darker Angels of Our Nature

LARRY DARTER

DARKER ANGELS

A HOWARD DREW NOVEL

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Darker Angels

A Howard Drew Novel, 3



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Chapter 1

A mail room clerk dropped off the letter while Howard Drew and his partner, Amy Li, were sitting at their desks in the Open-Unsolved Unit, finishing the paperwork on the Slater filing. The day before, they had spent four hours in an interview room with television actor Alan Slater, a low-level celebrity, discussing the 2019 murder of an actress named Sienna Mills, Slater's onetime girlfriend. The LAPD criminalists laboratory had matched DNA extracted from semen found in the victim's vagina to a sample of Slater's DNA that Drew had obtained surreptitiously. Slater had long been a suspect in the case that Drew and his former West Bureau partner Rudy Ortega had investigated back in 2019. But the case had gone cold when Slater provided a seemingly unshakable alibi and had refused to provide a DNA sample on the advice of his attorney. Obsessed with the case, Drew had continued working it off the books. After secretly putting a GPS tracking device on Slater's car, Drew had stalked him relentlessly until finding the actor at a favorite bar. When Slater left the bar, Drew had collected Slater's cocktail glass from the bar and submitted it to the crime lab. Criminalists extracted DNA from saliva Slater had left on the glass and lifted his fingerprints. With the DNA match in hand, Drew had persuaded his supervisor Lieutenant Howard to let him and Li reopen the Mills' case. While re-interviewing two witnesses Drew and Ortega had interviewed in 2019, Drew got additional information that negated Slater's alibi for the evening someone had strangled Mills.

The lab had initially made the case, but the DNA match wasn't an automatic slam dunk. It came down not to science but to what Drew and Li got from Slater in the interview room. The first hours of the interrogation were

grueling as Drew confronted Slater with the DNA evidence and the testimony from witnesses that showed he had fabricated his alibi. During the fourth hour, Slater finally broke and gave it all up. He admitted to killing Mills in a fit of rage during a heated argument.

When Li stepped out of the squad room for a restroom break, Drew picked up the letter he had ignored when the clerk left it on his desk. It had a DOJ return address and Drew knew it was a DNA cold hit. He pulled out the letter and recognized the case number. It was a 2000 open-unsolved he and Li had reviewed six-months previously. They had found a pair of women's slacks in the evidence box with a small bloodstain on one cuff. When they checked the murder book, they found no mention of the slacks by the original investigators and no sign they had submitted the slacks to the lab for testing and analysis. There was no DNA, no fingerprints, no leads—nothing that met the unit's criteria for reopening the case. But the detectives had sent the garment to the Hertzberg-Davis Forensic Science Center's Serology/DNA Unit for analysis before returning the box to the archives. Evidently, the lab had extracted DNA from the bloodstain and uploaded the profile into CODIS, the Combined DNA Index System, for searching against state and federal databases of known offenders. The automated system had generated a single match, or in the parlance of the Open-Unsolved Unit, a cold hit. Drew's mind dropped out of the Slater case.

"What's that?" Li said, looking over Drew's shoulder. "A cold hit?"

"Yeah," Drew said, "from that 2000 case we reviewed six-months ago."

"The one we submitted the slacks to the lab from?"

"Yes, and the lab must have extracted DNA from the bloodstain."

"Outstanding," Li said. "Only six months. That was a fast turnaround."

"The offender's profile was already banked in the system just waiting for someone to submit a matching profile from a case."

"Well, once we file the Slater case with the deputy DA, it looks like we better dive into that murder book."

"Yeah," Drew said. "Looks like it. From what I remember, it's the murder of a high-class call girl that happened in Studio City."

Li nodded.

“Yup, she was Russian or Ukrainian, right?”

“That was back during the ‘whore wars’ after Heidi Fleiss went to prison,” Drew said.

“What? The whore wars?”

“Yeah, according to my old partner, Rudy Ortega, that’s what they called it. With Fleiss out of the game, Russian organized crime moved into the vacuum and took over the high-priced prostitution racket in LA. Ortega said it became a real cut-throat business.”

“Well, that was way before my time.”

“Yeah, mine too,” Drew said. “But I found it an interesting story when Ortega told me about it.”

“Guess we’re about to learn all about it,” Li said.

The phone rang, and Drew picked it up. “Open-Unsolved. Detective Drew. How can I help you?”

“Brad Baldwin. Are you finished with the Slater filing?”

Baldwin was the deputy district attorney handling the case.

“Not yet. But almost.”

“I’ve got a hearing in fifteen minutes, and then I’ll be back in my office. You think you can get it over here by three this afternoon?”

“We’ll be there.”

“Great, see you at three,” Baldwin said before hanging up.

“We better get the Slater filing finished,” Drew said. “Baldwin is expecting us at three.”

“Okay,” Li said, stretching before sitting down at her desk. “I’ll finish it, Howie. Your head is already somewhere else.

Drew grinned and typed on his keyboard, entering the person’s name from the DNA cold hit letter. He ran the name Roman Sorokin through the box. An NCIC record showed Sorokin had only one offense on his criminal history, a 1987 PC 287 arrest and conviction. Unfamiliar with PC 287, Drew looked up the statute and found the offense was oral copulation with a minor.

Doing the math, Drew found that Sorokin, now fifty-five, had been twenty-one in 1987. He entered Sorokin’s name and date of birth in the LAPD database and found the digitized 1987 arrest report. Reading the report, he

learned the details of the arrest.

In 1987, two Hollywood patrol officers responding to a citizen's lewd conduct complaint located Sorokin's vehicle in a residential neighborhood off Hollywood Boulevard. When the officers approached the vehicle, they found Sorokin inside with a female. Sorokin was behind the wheel with his pants around his ankles, and the female was performing oral sex on him. After further investigation, the officers learned the female was a sixteen-year-old prostitute and that Sorokin was a twenty-one-year-old adult. Sorokin told the officers the female had told him she was eighteen, and he had taken her word for it. Instead of getting any sympathy from the cops, they arrested and handcuffed Sorokin and hauled him to Hollywood Station, where they booked him on the PC 287. Drew made a mental note to drop by the Archives and Records Center on North Hill Street to review the court case file on Sorokin's offense.

Next, Drew ran Sorokin through IntelliCheck, a commercial background check database the department subscribed to that investigators used to research and locate suspects. Drew found Sorokin's current address and also learned that he owned a construction company. After a web search, Drew found the company's website. It seemed Sorokin was a major player in Los Angeles residential construction industry, and his company had built numerous residential high-rises in and around downtown Los Angeles. According to the website, Sorokin had founded the company in 1996 when in his thirties. It had since become highly successful.

"Okay, Howie, I've finished the paperwork," Li said. "Ready to head over to the CCB?"

"Yeah," Drew said, shutting down his computer.

The detectives left the PAB for their meeting with Deputy District Attorney Baldwin. On the way, Drew filled in his partner on what he had learned about Sorokin, the suspect in their newest open-unsolved.

Chapter 2

Because of the notoriously slow elevators at the Criminal Courts Building, Drew and Li were over ten minutes late for their appointment. When they arrived, there was a backup of people waiting for the elevators. When one arrived, people jockeyed for position to get on, which always annoyed Drew.

In reception in the district attorney's office on the seventeenth floor, Brad Baldwin stepped through the doorway from the corridor leading to the inner offices with a dark-complected Latino in an expensive gray suit. Drew thought the man looked familiar but couldn't place him. Baldwin shook hands with the man saying, "I'll look forward to seeing you Saturday evening, Guillermo. And thanks again for the invitation."

The Latino man went out, and Baldwin turned his attention to Drew and Li.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "I had a visitor drop by and had to see him."

"No problem," Drew said, not mentioning the detectives had just walked in.

"You got it?" Baldwin said.

"Yeah, right here in my briefcase," Drew said.

"Then come on back, Detectives."

Baldwin headed back through the door he had come through. Drew and Li followed him into the internal hallway. They took the long corridor and two right turns before arriving at Baldwin's office. Usually, prosecutors shared offices, two or more to a room. But Baldwin had enough seniority to get his own office, though it was a small space. He went behind his desk and sat down. The detectives took the chairs in front of the desk.

“Thank you for coming, Detectives,” Baldwin said. “Slater’s attorney is ready to deal, and I want to file the charges before the end of the day. Then we can see a judge on Monday to get them to sign off on it.”

“What kind of deal?” Drew said, passing the file across the desk.

Baldwin offered a slight smile. “Don’t worry, Detective,” he said. “I’m not giving away the farm. Slater will plead guilty to voluntary manslaughter in exchange for our office recommending eleven years in state prison.”

“I guess the victim gets some justice,” Drew said.

“It’s the best we’re going to get,” Baldwin said. “Slater claims he strangled her in the heat of passion during a heated domestic argument. We have no evidence of malice aforethought or intent. If we file second-degree murder and go to trial, the jury might still return a manslaughter verdict, and Slater could get only three or six years. This way, we get the maximum, eleven years.”

“Okay,” Drew said.

“At least Slater’s acting career is toast,” Li said encouragingly.

Baldwin nodded somberly.

“Excellent work, Detectives,” he said, paging through the files. “I’ll hope to get another good case from you soon.”

“You might at that,” Drew said. “We got a DNA cold hit today on a 2002 murder out of Studio City.”

Baldwin looked up from his reading. “Seriously? And you have a suspect?”

“Right now, all we have is the name from the DNA hit,” Drew said. “There are no latents, no murder weapon. We’ve got a lot of legwork ahead of us to see if the DNA stands up.”

“Who was the victim?”

“A high-class prostitute,” Li said. “We looked at the case six months ago, but it didn’t meet the criteria for reopening until the DNA hit came in.”

“Out of curiosity, what was the name on the hit?” Baldwin said. “Just between us kids.”

“Roman Sorokin,” Drew said.

Baldwin’s eyes widened. “The developer? That Roman Sorokin?”

“Yeah, when I checked it out, I found out he owns a construction company.”

Baldwin leaned back in his chair and whistled. "Roman Sorokin is one of the most powerful men in LA."

"That doesn't mean he gets to kill someone and get a pass," Drew said.

"No, but you better nail down every detail if you go after him," Baldwin said. "He's connected."

"Connected?" Drew said. "Like with the mob?"

"No, the city council. Did you see the guy I was talking to in reception?"

"Yeah, the Latino guy. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him."

"That was Guillermo Escobar," Baldwin said. "The council member who represents District 14. I can't believe you didn't recognize him. He is president of the city council and only the most powerful politician in Los Angeles. And he's running for mayor in the next election."

"Okay," Drew said. "And you told me all of that because?"

"Roman Sorokin is Guillermo Escobar's biggest campaign contributor," Baldwin said. "And I understand Escobar is Sorokin's patron saint. My guess is if you go after Sorokin, the LAPD is going to get pressure from city hall."

"Shit," Drew said. He had heard that Escobar was popular with the department's brass because he supported the police."

"You can say that again," Baldwin said.

Drew looked at Li. "High jingo, partner."

High jingo was a slang term among cops for a highly political case that might involve the top people at the LAPD. The term came from a jazz tune composed by Lee Konitz that Art Pepper often performed. It was also the name of a 1982 album featuring both musicians.

Li nodded, remaining tight-lipped.

"Well," Drew said, looking back at Baldwin. "We will follow the evidence wherever it leads."

"Good luck with that," Baldwin said. "I mean, I agree with you. But I have a feeling if Escobar gets involved, your bosses will shut the investigation down."

"Is Escobar a friend of yours?" Drew asked, recalling the parting conversation in reception.

"Friend might be too strong a word," Baldwin said. "He wants the backing of the DA's office for his mayoral run. He invited a few of us to a political

fundraiser he's having this weekend."

Drew nodded.

Baldwin raised his hands in surrender. "Don't worry, Detective. Because of the sensitive nature, I certainly don't intend to share any of this conversation with Escobar."

"Good enough," Drew said. "After what you've told us, we want to keep this on the down-low until we see if we can make Sorokin for the murder."

* * *

After leaving Baldwin's office, Drew suggested they take the stairs instead of enduring the elevators again.

"Howie, it's sixteen floors," Li said.

"I know, but it's going down, not up," Drew said. "I want to make it to the Archives and Records Center before they close. I want to get a copy of the court records from Sorokin's PC 287 conviction to read over the weekend."

"Can't it wait until Monday?"

"I don't want to wait," Drew said. "I'll get it out of the way so we can start on the murder book first thing Monday morning."

"Oh, all right," Li said, following Drew reluctantly through the fire door to the stairs. She was glad she had worn sensible shoes.

Chapter 3

At home at his apartment, Drew popped the CD of country musician Riley Green's recent EP, *If It Wasn't for Trucks*, into the Bose player. Drew had developed a taste for country music during his time in Iraq when the soldiers in his unit had played little else. When he thought about country music, words like authentic, relatable, and sincere came to mind. Drew thought Riley Green, the 2020 ACM New Artist of the Year, sang with a special warmth and conviction that steeped each verse of his songs in rugged familiarity. These weren't just surface-level country songs. Green had mastered the art of the everyday, blue-collar, working man's country music. After grabbing a bottle of Modelo Especial from the refrigerator, Drew sat down at his dining table with the copies of the court files from Roman Sorokin's PC 287 conviction. The music and the beer helped him relax when working at home, which was his ingrained habit. It wasn't like he had anything better to do since his girlfriend Lucy Tomlinson had moved out the previous month.

Technically, the relationship wasn't over, but Drew had no illusions things weren't headed that way. Lucy, a P2 at West LA when Drew met her, hated patrol work and decided she couldn't wait another two or three years to make detective. Instead, she had applied to ATF, and the federal law enforcement agency had hired her. At the moment, Lucy was at the ATF's National Academy in Glynco, Georgia, attending the 12-week Criminal Investigator Training Program. After that, she would complete the 15-week Special Agent Basic Training course, after which the agency would appoint her as a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosive special agent. Knowing it was highly unlikely that Lucy's first post would be back in Los Angeles and that

he had no intention of leaving the LAPD and moving, he felt sure a formal breakup was looming on the horizon. Drew wasn't thinking about any of that now as he dug into the court reports. In the background, Riley Green belted out the lyrics of "Behind the Times" in his unique voice that seemed the vocal equivalent of full-grain leather and fine-grit sandpaper.

Having already read the arrest report, Drew was interested in learning the circumstances around the disposition of the case. PC 287, the penal code designation for oral copulation with a minor, was known in California criminal law as a "wobbler," an offense that could be charged either as a felony or misdemeanor depending on the specific circumstances.

Since the victim was sixteen-years-old and Sorokin had been twenty-one, the offense had qualified for charging as a misdemeanor. Drew soon learned that was what the DA's office had done. Drew assumed Sorokin had hired a good attorney to avoid the felony charge, which carried a potential penalty of three to eight years in state prison. As part of a plea agreement, Sorokin had voluntarily seen a psychiatrist who later advised the court there seemed little danger that Sorokin would commit a similar sex offense in the future. While it shouldn't have made any difference, Drew felt sure that the victim being a juvenile hooker had also affected the DA's decision to go with the misdemeanor instead of the felony charge. Still, the misdemeanor conviction required that Sorokin register as a sex offender for ten years and to submit a DNA sample. That was why his profile was in the state DNA database and had produced the hit when Drew and Li had submitted the bloodstained slacks from the evidence box to the crime lab for testing and analysis.

Drew had an unsettling feeling. *Why hadn't the original investigators submitted the slacks to the lab back in 2000 when the murder occurred?* It might have only been an oversight or, at worst, negligence by the original investigators. But after the conversation with Brad Baldwin, Drew was already worried there might be a darker explanation.

Putting the court records aside, Drew switched on his laptop to look deeper into council member Guillermo Escobar's background. Pulling up the official City of Los Angeles website, Drew navigated to the city council page. There he found Escobar's bio.

Guillermo Escobar was the son of a migrant farm worker and a meatpacking plant worker. He immigrated with his parents to the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles at the age of 3. Later, when his father qualified for a machinist job, the family moved to the Larchmont neighborhood. Escobar attended Fairfax High School before attending UCLA as an undergraduate. He received a master's degree in Public Affairs and Urban Planning from Brown University and a Juris Doctor from the University of California, Berkeley School of Law. He first became a member of the Los Angeles City Council in 1996 at thirty and became the city council president in 2015. As council president, Escobar held the juicy job of deciding which council members got plum assignments like the Budget & Finance Committee and who got stuck with Education & Neighborhoods. There was no mention in the bio that Escobar planned to run for mayor in the next election.

Drew did a web search on Escobar and found hundreds of *Times* articles featuring the council member. It seemed Escobar's focus was on expanding affordable residential housing in downtown, Boyle Heights, El Sereno, and Northeast LA, the neighborhoods in the ethnically diverse 14th District. Reading the articles, Drew discovered that Escobar had run interference with city planning for Sorokin Construction and Development and helped to get approval for many of its high-rise residential developments. Several articles charged that Escobar even got city planning to reduce the usual number of units designated for low-income families in many Sorokin projects to make them more profitable for the company.

"Fucking hypocrite," Drew said aloud.

Other articles described Escobar as a smart, charismatic politician capable of building consensus among the other council members to get his district's priorities approved. The last article was a piece from the society pages that announced the fundraiser Brad Baldwin had mentioned he was attending the following evening. According to the article, Roman Sorokin was hosting Escobar's function at the Beverly Hilton.

Drew shut down the computer, wondering just how deep the connection went between Escobar and Sorokin. There seemed a time overlap with the 2000 murder case since Escobar was on the city council back then, and

Sorokin was already in the construction and development business. Had they been acquainted back then, Drew wondered? That was something he intended to find out. Drew also wanted to see Escobar and Sorokin up close. Drew decided he would crash the fundraiser Saturday evening.

* * *

The Beverly Hilton was a historic luxury hotel known for its great location, elegant accommodations, and year-round star-studded events. It had indoor and outdoor venues well suited for hosting events from corporate gatherings to weddings to political fundraisers. Drew had never been inside the hotel until now. After self-parking in the garage, he walked through the main lobby and made his way through the crowds on hand for various events. He followed the signs to the grand ballroom where the Escobar function was taking place. Drew noticed many hotel security staff members in blue blazers posted throughout the lobby, scanning the crowd. Drew surmised that Escobar's fundraiser had drawn some of LA's most elite to the thousand-dollar-a-plate dinner.

Drew walked down a long corridor with entrances to the various banquet rooms on the second level until he arrived at the grand ballroom. Outside the open doors to the ballroom, a life-size full-color poster on the wall showed Guillermo Escobar shaking hands and smiling with admiring supporters. The slogan printed on the poster read: The Right Man at the Right Time for Los Angeles Mayor.

Several women sat behind a long draped table below the poster, ready to check guests in and collect their contributions for Escobar's campaign. Standing on either side of the open doors were two more muscular hotel security guards in the blue blazers.

Not having an invitation, Drew stood to the right of the welcoming table and observed. He had arrived early and hoped Escobar and Sorokin weren't already inside. If they were, he would have to wait until the event ended to get a look at the men.

About ten minutes after he arrived, Drew saw Escobar and Sorokin coming up the corridor together, approaching the ballroom. But instead of turning into the ballroom, they continued past it. Drew followed them at a discrete distance until they turned down a short hallway leading to an outdoor promenade. The men stepped out onto the promenade that overlooked Wilshire Boulevard, still packed with wall-to-wall traffic as usual. The hotel sat at the intersection of two major traffic arteries, Wilshire and Santa Monica Boulevards.

Escobar and Sorokin both lit cigarettes and talked while they smoked. Drew couldn't overhear the conversation but didn't need to hear it. He had only wanted to get a close-up look at the men, take the measure of their bearings, and see how well-acquainted they seemed. He was like a coach scouting the opposition.

Escobar turned and looked directly at Drew, who had approached a little close to the promenade.

"Can I help you?" Escobar said.

He had Busted Drew, and he needed a story to explain his presence. He couldn't just walk away because the men might sic security on him.

"I was only looking for a place to have a smoke," Drew said. "I didn't want to intrude on your conversation and was waiting until you gentlemen left."

"It's no problem, my friend," Escobar said. "Please join us if you wish."

"Thanks," Drew said, patting his pocket for a non-existent pack of smokes. He had given up the habit again recently.

"Well, wouldn't you know it," Drew said, feigning embarrassment. "I forgot to pick up my cigarettes before leaving home. I've been waiting for nothing."

"Here have one of mine, my friend," Escobar said, laughing heartily.

Drew took a cigarette from the offered pack, and then Escobar produced an expensive-looking silver lighter and lit the cigarette for him.

"I'm Guillermo Escobar," he said, extending his hand.

After shaking, Drew said, "I know. That's why I'm here, the dinner."

"Ah, you're a supporter?" Escobar said with a wide smile.

"Yes, I'm impressed with your commitment to providing affordable housing in LA," Drew said.

“And you are?”

“Drew, Howard Drew.”

Drew could tell by the look on the city council member’s face that he had searched his memory for his name but came up empty.

“Have we met, Howard?” Escobar said.

“No, Mr. Escobar,” Drew said. “I’ve never even seen you in person before now. Just on television and in the papers.”

“Well, I’m pleased to meet you,” Escobar said. “This is my good friend, Roman Sorokin.”

Drew glanced at Sorokin, who nodded but didn’t offer to shake hands.

“Where is your badge, Mr. Drew?” Sorokin said suspiciously.

The question startled Drew, thinking Sorokin had made him for a cop. Then he realized Sorokin meant the adhesive paper badges the women at the welcoming desk were handing out when guests checked in.

“I haven’t checked in yet,” Drew said. “I wanted to have a smoke before going inside.”

“This is a by-invitation-only event,” Sorokin said coldly.

“Yes, I know,” Drew said, patting his chest where his inside jacket pocket was. “Thank goodness I didn’t forget that. Got it right here.”

Sorokin seemed to relax. Then he turned and flicked his cigarette butt over the railing.

“We better get inside, Guillermo,” Sorokin said.

“Yes, of course,” Escobar said, flicking away his cigarette butt. “Perhaps I’ll see you again in the banquet hall, Howard.”

“Sure,” Drew said. “And I appreciate the invitation, Mr. Escobar. I think you’ll make a great mayor.”

“You’re very kind,” Escobar said with a wide smile. “But what can I say, my friend? You speak the truth.”

The men excused themselves and walked away toward the main corridor. Drew sighed with relief. He hadn’t planned to get that close of a look at the men. Drew wanted to hold on to his strategic advantage for as long as possible. He knew who they were, but they didn’t yet know who he was. After flicking the cigarette over the railing, Drew headed back toward the parking

garage.

