

A sunset over a city with palm trees in the foreground. The sky is a mix of orange and yellow, with the sun low on the horizon. Several tall palm trees are silhouetted against the sky. In the background, a city is visible on a hillside, with houses and a large stadium-like structure. The overall mood is warm and atmospheric.

LARRY DARTER

LA DEADLY

A HOWARD DREW NOVEL

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LA Deadly

A Howard Drew Novel, 4



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First edition

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Chapter 1

It was the third day of the battle. Sergeant Howard Drew and his squad moved down a side street toward the courtyard of a two-story building and came under heavy attack. A brutal gun battle began, leaving two of Drew's soldiers shot and trapped in the open. Drew dove behind the dead body of an Iraqi enemy insurgent as one of his team leaders, Specialist Conner Atkinson, hurled himself behind a lone tree in the center of the courtyard. As the gunfire subsided, Drew and Atkinson heard the screams of the wounded men. Atkinson sprang into action and darted across the kill zone as enemy fire raked past him. Drew, laying down suppressing fire, watched as Atkinson sprinted forward, leaned down, and in one fluid motion, grabbed a wounded soldier, threw him over his shoulder, and darted across the courtyard toward a door at the front of the building. Before Atkinson reached it, the door swung open. A figure clad in a black abaya stepped out. Drew's brain registered the tan suicide vest strapped over abaya as Atkinson continued running toward the open door with the wounded shoulder. In horror, Drew swung his M4 carbine toward the female insurgent as a guttural scream of warning erupted from his throat. The shrill ring of his cell phone yanked Drew out of the nightmare. He sat bolt upright in bed and reached for the phone with a shaky hand, the all too familiar panicky feeling in his chest. The trembling, quavering voice sounded unfamiliar to his ears, as though it belonged to someone else. When he spoke into the phone, the word hello had sounded whimpering and hysterical.

"Detective Drew?"

For a moment, Drew felt too embarrassed to speak further. He wondered

if the caller had recognized the fear in his voice.

“This is Captain Kenneth Mann. Is this Detective Drew?”

Sweat trickled from Drew’s forehead and armpits. His breath was thin and ragged, and he seemed unable to think clearly or focus. The name meant nothing to him at first. Then he remembered who Mann was—Robbery-Homicide Division’s commanding officer. Drew looked at the glowing blue numerals on the LED display on the clock beside the bed, 2:21. After a moment, he worked out it must be 2:21 A.M. since there was no sunlight coming through the bedroom windows. With one hand, Drew gripped the phone he held to his ear while he instinctively rubbed his chest with the other where his heart still hammered inside.

“Detective Drew?”

Another moment of silence went by. Drew’s eyes were closed.

“Detective Drew, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here,” Drew croaked after gaining control of his breathing.

“Detective, I have an assignment for you,” Mann said impatiently. “Are you able to respond to a call out?”

“I can respond. Sorry, I just woke up.”

“Well, I’m sorry if I woke you. But I’m sure you’re accustomed to it.”

Drew suppressed a snort. *Accustomed to it—why would I be?* Drew hadn’t received a middle of the night call out since leaving West Bureau. Assigned to the Open-Unsolved Unit, Drew investigated murders that had happened years, sometimes decades ago. There were no call outs, no homicide scenes to report to, or dead bodies to examine in the middle of the night.

“No, problem. What is it?”

“Lou Moreno will brief you at the scene. Call your partner and get here without delay.”

Now awake, Drew recognized Moreno’s name. He was the lieutenant commanding the RHD Homicide Special Section. Drew wondered why Mann was summoning him and Li to a scene belonging to Homicide Special.

“What scene?”

“Vitello’s, an Italian restaurant in Studio City. Do you know where it is?”

“Yeah, on Tujunga Avenue. Why—”

“Moreno will explain everything. Find him when you get there.”

“What about Lieutenant Howard? He should—”

“We will inform him we’ve temporarily reassigned you and your partner to Homicide Special, Detective. We’re wasting time. Get your partner and get down there. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Then Moreno will expect you.”

Mann hung up without waiting for a reply. Drew stood up and headed to the kitchen to make coffee, wondering what was going on. The address Mann had given him was in the North Hollywood Division’s area. If Mann had a body there and RHD was handling it, not the Valley Bureau detectives, that probably meant media sensitive or celebrity involvement. Drew couldn’t imagine why command wanted him and Li there.

Drew glanced out the patio doors at the twinkling lights of LA after dropping the pod into the machine and pushing the brew button. While waiting for the Keurig to do its thing, Drew leaned with his back against the kitchen counter, feeling a sense of relief. He had no clue what awaited him at Studio City, but it would certainly save him from re-visiting the nightmares this night. Drew wanted a smoke. He looked for the pack of Marlboro cigarettes he habitually left on the counter before remembering there was no pack. Drew had quit smoking again recently. He picked up the phone, found Amy Li in his contact list, and pushed the call button.

Li’s sleepy voice answered after three rings.

“Amy, it’s Howie,” he said. “We caught a murder.”

Chapter 2

Drew and his partner agreed to meet at the scene to save time instead of driving downtown to the PAB to pick up a city ride. On the way to Studio City, he tuned his car radio to KRLA. He picked up a breaking news report on a homicide investigation underway at Vitello's Italian restaurant on Tujunga Avenue. The reporter on the scene said a large LAPD presence at the restaurant was investigating the circumstances of a body found in a car outside the restaurant. She concluded her report saying a wide cordon of yellow crime scene tape kept her from getting a closer look, and LAPD media relations hadn't yet made any statements to the press. Drew tuned out the broadcast once it returned to the usual news-talk programming.

Drew took Wilcox Avenue to the 101 and cruised north on the freeway in minimal traffic given the early morning hour. He exited at Tujunga Avenue and arrived at the restaurant about fifteen minutes after leaving his apartment. As he looked for a parking spot, Drew saw an unusually large number of police vehicles parked throughout the area, patrol cars and detective sedans. He also noted the crime scene and coroner's vans that were present. After parking, Drew sat in his car and waited for Li to arrive. He had been to Vitello's a few times, a restaurant that had served contemporary Italian fare in Studio City for over fifty years. Vitello's was not only a favorite of everyday locals and tourists, but of LA's celebrity residents. The restaurant hosted a popular jazz nightclub upstairs for those in the mood for live music.

Five minutes after Drew arrived, Amy Li walked up to his door and tapped on the window. Drew got out. He held up the yellow crime scene tape, and they crossed under it. The detectives gave their names and badge numbers to

the uniformed officer with the crime scene log. They then walked down the street past the restaurant's parking lot to where the preponderance of suits stood around a black Dodge Challenger.

Amy Li was a short, trim, Asian-American woman whose parents had immigrated to the United States from Mainland China a few years before her birth. Like Drew, she had been a bureau detective before transferring to Open-Unsolved a couple of weeks before Drew. They had been partners since joining the unit.

Drew spotted Lieutenant Moreno and headed that way with Li.

"Lieutenant? Drew and Li. Captain Mann told us to report to you."

"That's right," Moreno said. "Thanks for coming out. Here's the deal. With vacations and the staffing issues since the budget cuts, my guys are already getting hammered. Staffing is down. Murders are up. As long as the defund the police lunacy continues, it will probably get worse before it gets better. As of now, you two belong to Homicide Special and answer to me. Got it?"

"Got it," Drew said.

Moreno nodded. "Captain Mann also loaned us Jenkins and Ross from Open-Unsolved. That's the team for now. Since you two have the best clearance rate in Open-Unsolved, I'm making you the lead, Drew."

"Okay, what have we got?"

"The body in the car is Jasmine Gray, the wife of Harrison Banks. After dinner, they returned to the car. Banks realized he left his .38 snub-nose revolver—which he has a permit to carry—in the restaurant. Banks ran back inside to retrieve the weapon he had left on the seat in their booth, and she waited in the car. When he returned to the car, he says he found his wife slumped in the front seat and noticed blood coming from her nose and mouth."

Drew understood why Homicide Special had the investigation. Harrison Banks was a movie and television actor, although now pushing seventy, mostly retired. But Banks remained a fairly well-known celebrity.

"Shot?"

"Yes, twice. We found two spent casings—both nine-mil—one on the ground and one on the seat inside the car."

“So, the revolver wasn’t the murder weapon.”

“The lab will check it out, but a smell test says Banks’ hasn’t recently fired the revolver and there were no spent rounds in the chamber.”

“Okay, so where are we at, Lieutenant?”

“The North Hollywood detectives have talked to Banks,” Moreno said. “Now he’s at North Hollywood in an interview room with his attorney.”

“Why does he need an attorney?” Drew said. “Is he a suspect?”

Moreno shrugged. “You know how these things go. The attorney with him now isn’t a criminal lawyer. He’s an entertainment attorney, a friend of Banks.”

Drew was immediately suspicious. *Why did Banks have an attorney? Someone had just murdered his wife. Why wasn’t he still here at the scene with the North Hollywood detectives, trying to help them find out who killed her?*

“I’ll keep Jenkins and Ross here for now. They can impound the car and get it over to Hertzberg-Davis for processing. When you finish here, I want you and Li to go to North Hollywood to interview Banks. We’ve got uniforms canvassing the area for witnesses and looking for the murder weapon.”

“Got it, Lieutenant.”

“Keep me in the loop with regular updates, Drew. Banks and his wife have been fixtures in the tabloids recently. It seems theirs wasn’t one of Hollywood’s great love stories. This one will get a lot of media attention. The tenth floor will expect daily updates, so I’ll need daily updates from you. Got it?”

“Understood, Lieutenant.”

“Good, then get to it. Then get over to North Hollywood and see what’s what.”

Drew nodded. He and Li headed over to the Dodge Challenger to examine the murder scene. It was after 3:00 A.M., but reporters, photographers, and television camera people thronged behind the yellow crime scene tape. Several patrol cars, overhead LED light bars pulsing, blocked off the street.

Crime scene people and cops stood around Banks’ parked black Dodge Challenger on the street about a block from the restaurant, next to a large dumpster filled with chunks of stucco and strips of lumber. The dumpster

stood beside an almost completely demolished house encircled by a chain-link fence. Drew figured someone would soon rebuild it on a grander scale. The ranch-style houses lining the neighborhood streets had carefully pruned shrubs and well-kept lawns. It was a cool night with the full moon and stars veiled thinly by a film of fog.

Drew and Li studied the ground around the car, littered with a bloody towel and ribbons of bloody gauze bandages the paramedics had left behind. Drew took his Pelican flashlight out of his hip pocket and held it up above his shoulder, illuminating the inside of the car. Both front windows were down. Paramedics had already transported Jasmine Gray's to a local hospital where a doctor had pronounced her dead on arrival.

"I see a glove in the car," Drew said to Li.

"A glove? What kind of glove?"

Li peered inside the car.

"I think it's O.J.'s glove," Drew said.

Li chuckled.

"Well, if it doesn't fit, they must acquit," she said.

The two detectives studied the car's interior. A single brass spent bullet casing lay on the passenger seat next to a small pool of blood. Reddish stains streaked the gray seat upholstery.

Li pointed to obvious vomit dappling the car's exterior from the driver's door to the taillight.

"Looks like someone got sick."

"The husband was throwing up," a nearby patrol officer said.

Drew didn't see Jenkins or Ross anywhere around. He expected they were interviewing witnesses from the restaurant or searching for the murder weapon.

"I've seen enough," Drew said to Li. "You ready to head over to North Hollywood?"

"Yup," Li said.

The detectives walked back to their cars. Once they crossed underneath the crime scene tape, reporters and their camera people rushed toward them.

"Detectives, can you tell us anything about the victim?"

Drew held up a hand to ward them off, and the detectives kept walking.

“No comment, you’ll have to get with media relations,” Drew said over his shoulder.

“I hope this doesn’t turn into an O.J. thang,” Li said.

“I hear you, sister.”

Drew and Li got in their cars and drove to North Hollywood Division on Burbank Boulevard.

Chapter 3

Harrison Banks' rise to fame was somewhat unusual. He began his career as a successful child actor but enjoyed little success as a young adult actor. With few acting prospects, he enlisted in the military and served a four-year stint. After his enlistment expired, he returned to the entertainment industry and found regular work as a stuntman. But Banks never lost his desire to become a successful actor. While working as a stuntman to support himself, Banks attended acting classes and improved himself professionally. Later, he landed a supporting role in a movie that did better than expected at the box office. The movie was about two ambitious LAPD patrol officers, partners working in South LA. The pair ran afoul of a drug-dealing street gang, and the gang members assassinated them. Because Banks outshined the lead actor in the film, he received supporting roles in several other pictures. Then a television network signed him to play the lead role in a television police drama where he portrayed a quirky Chicago homicide detective. The show was a hit that ran nine seasons, and the role cemented Banks' celebrity status.

When Drew and Li arrived at the North Hollywood station, North Hollywood Detectives Todd Sharp and Matt Lowe greeted them in the squad room. They were the first detectives to respond to the scene and had just interviewed Banks. Tyrone Jenkins and Robert Ross arrived a few minutes after Drew and Li. The detectives gathered around a conference table in the squad room to discuss the investigation.

Sharp told the RHD detectives that he and Lowe had interviewed Banks for about an hour while two other North Hollywood investigators questioned some residents in the neighborhood near the murder scene.

“Harrison Banks and Jasmine Gray had a short and troubled marriage,” Sharp said. “According to Banks, Gray was a star stalker who made her living as a grifter and selling nude pictures and sex videos on internet websites. He said she met lonely suckers on the internet and conned them out of cash.”

“A real sweetheart,” Lowe interjected. “I don’t know if you keep up with the Hollywood gossip, but the tabloids paint the same picture of Gray as Banks did.”

“Anyway,” Sharp said, “Banks started seeing her. He knocked her up, and she gave birth to a daughter—Britney—about eleven months ago. Banks and Gray fought over custody because he considered her an unfit mother, and she wanted to use the kid as leverage to coerce him into marrying her. Eventually, a few months ago, they married.”

“Sounds like a wonderful family,” Ross chuckled.

“Banks told us they drove to Vitello’s for dinner,” Sharp continued.

“But what seems weird is instead of parking at the restaurant, Banks parked his car a block away on a dimly lighted street next to a construction dumpster.”

“Yeah, I noticed that,” Drew said.

“Banks has a carry permit,” Sharp said, and he had a .38 snub-nose with him. He said it was digging into his side at dinner, so he took it out and laid it on the seat in their booth. Then, after dinner, he paid the check, and Banks forgot to pick up the piece before they walked out. He says he realized he’d left the gun behind when they got back to the car. He told his wife to wait in the car, and he jogged back to the restaurant to get the pistol. When he got back to the car, he found her slumped over in the seat bleeding from her nose and mouth.”

Another North Hollywood detective walked into the squad room.

“Banks and his attorney are getting antsy,” the detective announced.

“Tell them we’re transferring the case downtown,” Lowe said, “and we’re briefing the downtown detectives.”

The recently arrived detective nodded and left the squad room.

“You recovered a spent bullet casing on the street besides the one on the car’s passenger seat?” Drew asked.

“Yeah, both nine-millimeter,” Sharp said. “The shooter popped her once in

the right side of the head and once in the body. We assume with a nine based on the casings, but that's not totally confirmed, of course."

"Where is the revolver?" Li asked.

"On my desk," Lowe said. "When the first patrol units arrived, an officer took it from Banks for safekeeping. She gave it to me after we arrived."

Drew nodded. "We need you to write a chain of custody summary," he said to Lowe.

"Sure, no problem."

The detective, who had come in earlier, interrupted again.

"Banks is ready to go. He's in the hallway."

"Okay," Drew said. "We'll finish this later. Li and I will go talk to him."

The detectives walked out of the squad room and found Banks and his attorney standing in the hallway outside the interview room. Banks wore denim jeans, a tight black T-shirt, and black cowboy boots. He had shaggy, unnaturally jet black hair which gave his pale skin, tautly stretched from a facelift, a ghostly pallor. Banks looked exhausted and a little sheepish as he stared at the floor.

"I don't want to be sixty-seven years old, but I am," Banks muttered disgustedly, standing in the hallway beside his lawyer. "I'm tired and just want to lie down."

Drew and Li scrutinized Banks' clothes, hands, and boots, looking for blood specks, but saw nothing.

"Can we question your client before you take off?" Drew asked the attorney.

"Not tonight," the lawyer said. "But maybe in the morning."

"We need to search his house," Drew said.

"Not without a warrant," the lawyer said. "Jasmine Gray lived in the guest house behind my client's residence. You can search it if you wish."

"Okay," Drew said, feeling frustrated knowing he couldn't detain Banks unless he arrested him. "Go home and get some rest," Drew said to Banks. "We'll talk in the morning."

Banks nodded, and the detectives watched him and the lawyer saunter down the hallway toward the exit.

"That's not how a man acts when someone has just murdered his wife," Li

said. "Banks wasn't distraught. He didn't ask how his wife died. He showed no curiosity at all about the case."

"No, he was more concerned about getting to bed than helping find his wife's killer."

The detectives returned to the squad room.

"Banks' attorney is permitting us to search the guest house where the victim stayed," Drew said to Jenkins and Ross. "You guys head over there now and search it before he changes his mind and makes us get a search warrant."

"How about Banks' house?" Jenkins said.

Drew shook his head. "The attorney said no. We'll have to get a warrant for it."

Jenkins nodded, and he and Ross left the squad room. Li and Drew sat back down at the conference table.

"What else have you got?" Drew said to the North Hollywood detectives.

"We did a gunshot residue test on his hands as soon as we got here with him," Lowe said. "But expect nothing on that. Banks puked on himself after he discovered his wife in the car. Witnesses inside the restaurant said when Banks returned the second time, he shouted someone did something to his wife and for someone to call an ambulance. Then he went into the restroom to clean the puke off. I'm sure he washed his hands."

Sharp resumed the briefing.

"Jasmine Gray was from Tennessee and traveled back and forth," he said. "When I asked Banks when they married, he gave us that bullshit crying without tears. Then he couldn't stop telling us how dirty she was. He seemed to love talking about it."

"How many did you interview at the restaurant?" Drew said.

"Three, all employees," Sharp said.

"Did you run him for guns?"

"Yeah, he has three or four registered," Lowe said. "I'll have to check my notes."

"The patrol guys at the hospital want to know what to do with her clothes," Sharp said.

"If they are still on her, we can't take them," Drew said. "The coroner will

handle it.”

“I’ll let them know.”

“The .38 revolver was unfired?” Drew said.

“We gave it the smell test,” Lowe said. “I’d say no. There were no spent rounds in the cylinder and none on Banks. I checked.”

“Amy, while I’m thinking about it, call the coroner’s office and tell them to hold all press releases for now,” Drew said.

Li nodded and went to a nearby desk to use the phone.

“When we talked to the restaurant’s co-owner, who greets customers at the door, he said Banks returned only once—when he was in a panic shouting his wife was hurt and needed an ambulance. The co-owner said he never saw Banks return for the gun.”

“That’s interesting,” Drew said. “The story about leaving his wife in the car and going back for it won’t stand up. He needs someone to say they saw him do it before using it to say he didn’t shoot her. Everything circumstantial is pointing right at him.”

“It was a dark street where he parked the car,” Lowe said. “Not much light from the moon because of the fog. He told us she was paranoid, but leaves her there in the car alone a block from the restaurant with both windows down. He’s full of shit. Either he did her or got someone else to do it.”

Drew smiled ruefully, shaking his head. “Well, we’ll take the tape from your interview. We’ll never get another statement from him.”

Sharp laughed. “That’s for sure.”

“Gray was on probation for a scam she pulled in Little Rock, Arkansas,” Lowe said. “Banks told us it was probably the mob she was running with that killed her.”

“He never cried?” Drew asked.

“No,” Sharp said. “He pretended to that one time, without tears. And he never once asked what happened to her.”

Sharp drummed his fingers on the table. “Good luck on this one. He did it, but he’s a character. It might be hard to prove it.”

“Like with O.J.,” Lowe said. “Fucking celebrities.”

“Maybe not that hard to prove,” Drew said. “Killers are dumb. The only

smart ones are on television.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Lowe said. “That asshole was on television.”

The three detectives laughed.

Li returned to the table and confirmed she had notified the coroner’s office not to release anything to the press.

“Let’s head to the PAB,” Drew said to his partner. “We need to listen to the interview tape so we can ask Banks some questions Sharp and Lowe didn’t cover already. And we need to write a search warrant for his house and get a judge to sign it.”

“Okay,” Li said. “We all done here?”

“Yeah,” Drew said. “I think so.”

Drew thanked the two North Hollywood detectives, collected the .38 revolver and the interview tape, and then he and Li left for downtown.