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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
ONE GOOD DEED

DREAM TOWN

AN ARCHER NOVEL

**DAVID
BALDACCI**



Dream Town

MACMILLAN

*To Tiffany and Bruno Silva
and the Landing Love Project,
for helping so many in need*

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CHAPTER

I

IT WAS NEW YEAR'S EVE, 1952.

Aloysius Archer was thirty years old, once a decorated soldier, and next a humbled inmate. He was currently a private detective with several years of intense experience trolling the darker side of life.

He was riding in a 1939 bloodred Delahaye convertible with the red top in the down position because that was how he liked it. He had bought the car a little over three years before with lucky gambling winnings in Reno. It had also very nearly cost Archer his life. He still loved the car. Any man with a pulse would. And so would any woman who liked a man with a nice car.

He was currently heaving over the roller-coaster humps of Los Angeles. The city was decked out in its finest livery for the coming of the new year. That meant the bums of Skid Row had been goose-stepped off the streets by junior coppers who did what they were told, the hookers had been ordered not to solicit on the main thoroughfares, and most everyone had put the lids on their trash cans and brushed their teeth.

The town had brought in about four million strings of lights, an equal number of balloons, and enough confetti to choke the Pacific. And every actor and actress with a studio contract, and even some without, would be showing their toothy mugs in all the right, and wrong, places. While the town definitely had its seamy side, the City of Angels had all the tools and incentive to do showy and shallow better than any other place on earth.

It could be a wonderful place to live, if you had money, were famous, or both, which Archer didn't and wasn't. Over the years,

he'd worked a slew of tough cases, and had come to know the town and its denizens maybe better than he would have liked.

It was a town that took every single dream you had and then merrily ran it right through the world's biggest meat grinder. And when the famous were famous no more, the meat grinder treatment was even worse, because those people had tasted what life could be like if enough ink was spilled on you and sufficient butts sat in seats to watch you emote. When that ride was over, it was like being dropped from the top of the Empire State Building to land in a squatter's shack in Alabama.

Los Angeles had two million souls sprawled over nearly five hundred square miles. Some people were crammed into slums, tract housing, and shadily built tenement death traps, like staples in a stapler, while the wealthy and famous had room to both flex and hide. All this in a city founded on the remnants of a village settled by the Tongva, an indigenous Indian tribe, who called it Yaanga, which translated to "poison oak place."

Well, they got that right, thought Archer. But for a private eye, LA could be a fascinating study of human beings, and all their many foibles.

He turned left and then right as he moved from dirty LA to rich LA and then to dirty-and-rich LA. He passed a prowler car and saw two of the LAPD's "finest" sitting inside and sipping on coffee in vending machine cups. They stared at Archer as he passed, probably wondering whether he'd stolen the car or was delivering it to some Hollywood mogul or a desert sheik who'd bought a piece of the city's myth, along with a fancy ride.

Archer eyed the prowler in his mirror, hoping it would stay right where it was. To his mind, the LAPD was one of the largest criminal enterprises in the world. And they did it with a smile, and a gun, where appropriate. Or with beatings that didn't show.

Archer had had a police baton or two land on his head, and he'd also spent time in the tank on bogus charges merely for asking questions deemed impertinent, meaning ones directed at finding the truth, because the truth often found LAPD badges mixed in with the other crooks.

These coppers were probably taking a coffee break before heading to a string of ghetto street corners with their dozen-block-deep slums in the rear, to make their quota of busted heads for the week like the good little foot soldiers they were. They were just one crew in a pitched battle for the soul of the city. And there was no doubt in Archer's mind which faction was winning. If LA were a human body, the criminal elements were the capillaries: small, everywhere, not often seen, but absolutely vital to overall life.

His destination was Universal Studios. He only knew one person there, but it was an important person, at least to him. Liberty Callahan had left Bay Town more than two years ago. That was where Archer lived and worked with Willie Dash's "very private" detective agency. Callahan had gone to Hollywood to make her dream come true in the land of make-believe. As far as he knew, she was still working on making the town believe in her.

He'd met Callahan in Reno, where she was a dancer and hooper at a dinner club. They'd traveled to Bay Town together and nearly gotten killed several times along the way. There was nothing like confronting death to cement a friendship.

There was a great deal of private detecting to do in LA. People here seemed to keep killing and robbing and cheating and blackmailing one another to an astounding degree. But when you had a lot of money in one place, some folks were always tempted to take it from both their lawful and unlawful owners.

He passed buildings that were intricately cut into the city's steep grade and looked lopsided and unrooted as a result. The roots here were always shallow, never deep. Deep required commitment, and there was none to be had here, at least that Archer could see.

Tall, double-stemmed streetlights in the shape of goalposts, which made them look like they were being held up at gunpoint, illuminated the LA night. The NBC sign blinked back at him from Sunset and Vine, while a few blocks south stood the swaggering arch of Paramount Studios. A block over the other way on Hollywood Boulevard, tourists from all over were lined up in front of Grauman's Chinese Theater to stare at handprints set forever in cold, unforgiving concrete.

He kept steering his ride east and glanced at the Hollywood sign ablaze in the hills. A disconsolate actress had climbed up on the sign's letter *H* back in 1932, when it still spelled out HOLLYWOODLAND. When she got to the top, she jumped to her death. Archer imagined the meat grinder had gotten to her. She'd probably chosen *H* because that was the first letter in *hell*.

He pulled up to the main gate at the studio and presented his driver's license to the guard there, a beefy type who looked hot and bothered, although the temps were in the chilly fifties at this time of night. The man's hair was thin and grizzled, his face was fat and wide, and his body matched the face and not the hair. He looked like he'd end up with a coronary if he actually had to hoof it after a gate runner. His holstered .45 slapped against his meaty thigh as he walked around the car, eyeing it like a pretty girl in a swimsuit contest.

"Steering wheel's on the wrong side, bub," was his final judgment.

Delahaye was a French company, but this particular Delahaye, a Model 165 cabriolet, had been built for an Englishman, and the wheel had, of necessity, been shifted to the right.

"Not from where I'm sitting," Archer replied.

Beefy looked at his clipboard. "Who you visiting again?"

"Liberty Callahan. She's a friend."

The man grinned. "Lucky man."

"I take it you know her?"

"Gal's got what you call *personality*."

"Among other things."

"She's on Stage Three, just follow the signs. You can park right down there," he added, pointing the way after handing Archer back his license. "She's shooting a Roman gladiator picture." He gave Archer a look that guys give each other when they're thinking about what women could do for them that nothing else can. "She wears one of them *to-gas*."

"I'm sure she wears it better than anyone else."

The man gazed at Archer, his brown button eyes greedy and hopeful in their lust. "When the sun catches it just right, you can see right through the damn thing."

"As I'm sure she can you," Archer said, driving off.

ARCHER PARKED THE CAR and followed the signs to Stage 3. Along the way he passed the casting office, where hopefuls would spend their lives sitting in intentionally uncomfortable chairs waiting for something that would never happen. The red light was on outside the soundstage, so he leaned against the weathered parchment-colored stucco walls and waited. He spent the time looking down at his brown wingtips and wondering whether he should have chosen the midnight-blue serge suit over this brown pinstriped woolen one. He commenced to twirl his fedora between his fingers, an indication of nerves. He hadn't seen Callahan in months. Every time he came to visit the lady, he expected her to have changed somehow. She clearly had the Hollywood bug, which was a virus no medicine could cure. But she had always been the same woman, at least to him. Even so, there was always tomorrow.

Or tonight.

A buzzer rang and the light went off, and soon the foot-thick door popped open, and the Roman legionnaires started trooping out.

Callahan was among the stragglers, and Archer's face lit up when he saw her. Sometimes it seemed that the only redeeming quality in this whole city came down to this woman, at least for him.

She was tall, in her bare feet only four inches under Archer's six-one. Curves in all the right places, naturally blond hair that danced liberally over her bare shoulders and made his blood race with each bounce. Her face had all the finishing touches that could make men leer for years at a time. Her smile was immediate when she saw Archer, her hug tight and sincere. The kiss she planted on his lips alone made the trip worth it.

They were not a couple. They had slept together exactly once; this was back in Bay Town more than three years ago. But then, mostly by silent agreement and a few mumbled words over too much alcohol that had, surprisingly, given them sufficient clarity, they had decided that their friendship was worth more than occasional sack time with no clear runway ahead. She was the most beautiful woman of his acquaintance, and she often intimidated the hell out of him, which only heightened the attraction. Shrinking wallflowers had never rocked Archer's boat or heart.

He had begun to feel things for her that every man hoped to feel about a woman one day. But maybe those feelings had been there for a long time, only their weight had compressed him into silence. He was thinking of maybe one day soon breaking that silence.

"You made it," she said, as though he had braved mighty seas to reach her instead of driving eighty miles due south on smooth roads.

"I can't say no to a pretty girl. It's a weakness."

He offered her a Lucky Strike and lit her and himself up, and they walked down the concrete alley toward the dressing rooms. Cowboys and Indians, and two Martians reading the next day's call sheets, passed by them.

"How's Willie?" she asked.

"He's Willie. And Connie is Connie. And Bay Town hasn't fallen into the Pacific yet, though it may be only a matter of time."

Connie Morrison was Willie Dash's ex-wife and current secretary. They needed each other far more now than when they were married. Willie was a first-rate investigator and had taught Archer more in three years than a man had any right to expect.

"How's the movie career coming?" he asked because she would want him to.

"The production I'm on now is strictly B-movie stuff. I mean, the budget is so low we only have twelve legionnaires; they have to shoot them at really tight angles, and then over and over again to make them look like twelve hundred. And we don't even have any real lions on set. They just use stock footage of them pawing the air and roaring to edit in, and then shoot the gladiators reacting. The MGM lion is scarier. I mean, it's pathetic."

“Gotten any good parts lately?” he asked, again because he felt he had to.

“Well, you know that last year I *did* have a decent role in *High Noon* with Coop. But you don’t know I did a screen test for *The Quiet Man* last year but didn’t make the cut. I would’ve loved to meet Duke Wayne, but they filmed it in Ireland. And if you’re gone from this town too long they forget about you.”

“Anything cooking right now, other than gladiators?”

“Hitchcock is going to be filming *Dial M for Murder* in the summer. It’s based on a play. My agent is arranging an audition. But if that doesn’t work out, word is that after Hitchcock finishes *Dial M* he might direct another picture called *Rear Window*. It’s supposed to start shooting in November.” She looked at him inquisitively. “You heard of it?”

Archer puffed on his Lucky and shook his head. “I don’t read the trades. I have a hard enough time reading my mail and my own mind.”

“It’s sort of a voyeuristic mystery story. Anyway, there’s a nifty female lead character, described as tall, blond, and assertive—you know, professional with her own career, but still looking for the right man to give her a ring and babies.”

“Sounds like the part was written for you, except for the ring and the babies.”

He gave her a look that perhaps hoped to compel a deeper answer to his statement than was warranted under the circumstances, only the lady didn’t bite.

She did a little twirl in her toga and almost collided with a Viking coming the other way. Archer pulled her safely out of the range of both his ax and lecherous glare.

“Anyway, when the time is right my agent will try and get me an audition for that one, too, and then maybe a screen test if the role they want me for is big enough. And if I land that part and one in *Dial M*, it could really be a springboard. I mean, being in not one but two Hitchcock films in the same year!” The next moment her hopeful look faded.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, noticing this.

She glanced at him, and in that look he saw something in the woman Archer had thought he'd never see: resignation.

"Nothing," she said. "It's just . . . hard sometimes. You work your guts out and get rejected a hundred times to land one lousy part. It . . . gets to you after a while. But I guess there's always tomorrow."

He nipped a piece of tobacco off his tongue as he felt the Hollywood bug inserting itself between them like a border wall. "Fingers crossed," he said encouragingly. He didn't think Hollywood was a good place for her, but he also knew how much she wanted to be a star here.

"But I've been working steadily. I'm not a star under contract, so I got three pictures going at two different studios, including this gladiator pic for Universal. I'm at Warner Brothers next in a spy flick involving *atomic* secrets. Then I go on location in Arizona in a romantic comedy, again for Warners. And my name is getting around and the money is really good, and I'm not even a midlevel actress yet. They can pull in three grand a week. I only make half that." She paused and glanced at him, excitement once more dancing in her eyes. "And Archer, I just bought a nice two-bedroom bungalow off Melrose near the country club, *and* I have my own car."

Archer perked up at this. "What kind of car?"

"A *Volkswagen*. It's green with a split-screen rear window. You ever seen one?"

"Not since I was fighting my way through to Berlin."

Her features turned somber and he didn't think it was his comment about battling Nazis.

"But I turned thirty last month and the clock is ticking. I'm not Kate Hepburn. My face won't look good playing spinster aunts or being a mom with grown kids. I'll just look old. And I don't want to end up a small-lot dust-off with a baby spotlight on me for my one line in a lousy picture that'll probably never make it out of the editing room. Or spend my remaining pennies on studio coaches and no-class agents to get me back in the door, while people talk crap about me right in front of my face." She looked at him. "If you see that happening, shoot me, Archer."

He took all this in and said, "Well, if it makes you feel better, I pull in a fraction of what you make when crime is really good, but I do get

most Sundays and Christmas off.”

“I know I should appreciate what I have, but I worked my rear end off for it. And the story of the casting couch is no myth, let me tell you.”

He looked at her sharply. “You didn’t—”

“What I did, Archer, is between me, myself, and I.” She looked wistful, which she almost never did. “But I hear TV is really taking off,” she said. “Maybe I should think about trying that.”

“I saw an episode of *Dragnet* the other night at Willie’s place. It wasn’t bad.”

“I heard they work with the police department to make it authentic.” She glanced sharply at him. “Hey, Archer, you’re a *real* gumshoe. You could be Joe Friday’s new sidekick. You’d make a lot more money. And we’d both be actors.”

The way she said it was a bit sad, thought Archer. It was as though she just wanted a friend to be out there fighting for a career right alongside her.

“But I wouldn’t have nearly as much fun. So, what’s the plan for tonight?”

“Dinner at Chasen’s, then drinks at the Coconut Grove, then we head upstairs to the penthouse suite and ring in 1953 with the bubbly and some VIPs.”

“How’d you score the penthouse at the Ambassador Hotel?”

“The director on this garbage movie, Danny Mars, that’s how, Archer. It’s his wife, Gloria’s, pad. His *third* wife’s. Gloria has her own money, inherited from back east. And, in case you’re wondering, no, I am *not* going to be wife number four.”

“Glad to hear it because four is definitely not your lucky number.”

The thought of her marrying another man had made Archer’s heart skip a beat.

They walked along arm in arm. They passed what Archer thought looked like Rin Tin Tin taking a piss on a poor bum trapped in a cheap suit of studio armor.

He and Callahan kept right on marching to 1953.