

A.K. Alexander

Daddy's Home
CHAPTER ONE

Holly Jennings wanted to get this Son-of-a-bitch. She needed to see him stretched out, strapped down on a gurney. She yearned to watch the hypo hooked up to his veins and release the venomous fluid that would flow through his body, causing it to gradually shut down. Better yet, Holly wanted to take her nine-millimeter Glock and put it to his temple and pull the trigger. Blow the monster's brains out.

She slid down the steep incline, brushing off the leaves as she got to her feet, took a pair of Latex gloves from her black bag, and smoothed them over her hands. Even after four years of working the Crime Scene unit for the San Diego P.D., Holly still hadn't gotten used to that acrid rubber smell, and the puff of powder that flared out as the gloves snapped into place. It was like a wake-up call to her body. Here we go again, Holly, grit your teeth. No matter what, no matter how many years experience or how many death scenes with smells so foreign to the average nose—even those not so average like Holly's—that first breath in, along with the visuals of violence was like landing on Mars—so completely opposite of anything normal, like a plunge into the depths of Hell. Then, too, there was always something about each victim, each situation that caught a detective, or herself anyway, off guard. These were, or had been, real people with real lives and within a matter of days, hours—or hopefully for their sakes, seconds—they became statistics. Sickening. Yet, in spite of the shattered bodies and the putrid odors, Holly had to admit it was a job she almost relished.

Holly stepped along the perimeter of the taped-off crime scene, walking in line and with trepidation, hands behind her back—not an easy task while also carrying her bag, but a necessary one. Holly played by the rules. Keep the crime scene intact and don't fall on your ass. The boys are watching. She glanced back and saw both her partner Chad Euwing—who she could screw up in front of and laugh about it over a shot of tequila, and Robb Carpenter who she wouldn't even think about messing up in front of; he'd run straight to the higher ups who would love to demote a skirt if given a chance. So much for equality.

Robb was full of stupid one liners like, “Didn't you miss your nail appointment?” Or maybe, “We're a little hormonal today?” Asshole extraordinaire.

Holly reached the little girl first. She knelt down, and her natural instinct to touch her gave Holly an intense head rush. Shut down the emotions. Do your job. What kind of freak would do this to an innocent child? Only two weeks earlier she'd been in this exact position where a child and his mother had been violently slain. Was she dealing with the same killer here?

She pulled out a small recorder from her coat pocket and pressed the record button. “Time of day-ten hundred; Tuesday-approx 55-60', clear weather-post rain. Victim 1: Female Child. Approx age-4. Blonde hair. Eyes closed. Wrapped in cellophane. Starburst wound at base of left temple-entry (UNSUB is left handed). Looks like someone braided her hair, put ribbons in it—UNSUB?”

She leaned in closely. Scents of decay and death wafted past her, nauseating her. It always did; another thing she knew that she'd never get used to. Hold on. What was this? She pocketed the recorder and took her magnifier from her bag. Gold links. He took a necklace from you, didn't he, sweet girl? She scanned the wrapped body and face closely. There was a smudge of brown, next to her lips. Not blood. What is that?

“He’s a collector,” she yelled up to Chad. “Did we find anything missing on the Collins’ little boy or his mom? You talked to the grand-parents about jewelry?”

“Yeah. No one said anything about any jewelry being gone,” Chad shouted back. “We know what he took at that scene.”

The grave tone in Chad’s voice didn’t go unnoticed. “This one took something from the kid, too. Got your camera?”

“Right here.” Chad held up his 35 millimeter.

“Then come on down. Let’s get some pictures.” She looked back at the child, whose facial color held a greenish-purple tinge. She’d been out here for at least forty-eight hours. Luckily, it had been cold and rainy, preserving the body far better than if this had been a typical Southern California week.

Looking again through the magnifier, she noted that both maggots and beetles were prevalent. You certainly took some care here, didn’t you? You wrapped her up nice and tight. The time and obvious care the UNSUB had taken, wrapping the child up in the plastic wrap had also helped to keep her body intact. Maybe you’re still on her. Your cologne. Your hair. Something you wore. I’ll find it, you bastard. If you left something, anything, I will find it.

The sound of crunching leaves underfoot, as well as Chad’s humming of Sunshiny Day, announced his arrival. She used to hate it when he did that. But humming helped Chad to get through the scene. Every investigator had a tactic. Hers was to get as deeply into the killer’s head as possible when confronted with a victim. She had to detach herself in order to solve the crime. Later, she could think about the victims as they once were—living, breathing human beings.

“The gunshot to the head was at close range. At least she didn’t suffer.” Holly shuddered. “Well, let me rephrase. I don’t think she suffered at the moment of death. Who knows what occurred before hand. Look here.” Chad bent down next to her. “Soot around the wound.”

“He didn’t wipe her clean?” Chad brought the camera up to his eye, focused and starting snapping close-ups.

“No.”

“Like the last kid.” Chad lowered his camera.

“Exactly like the Collins boy. And I don’t think this is about him being in a hurry. There’s more to it. He feels responsible or somehow, in his sick way, empathetic. The gunshot wound offends him. I’ll head over to Psych later and see if we can’t get some help with the profile. My initial impression is that he doesn’t like killing the kids.”

“Then why bother with the kid? Why not find a single female vic? What is it with the kids?”

“Well, assuming that we’re dealing with the same UNSUB, I don’t know. We could be dealing with someone totally different from the last scene. We’ll know soon enough, when we check out the mom.” Chad gave Holly a knowing look. “Here, get a snap of her neck. See that?” Holly pointed to the few lengths of chain around her tiny neck.

“She wore a necklace?”

“Yep and he took it. He carried her down here. Then yanked off the necklace. Any footprints?” Holly asked.

“With the rains we’ve had over the last couple of days? No.” Chad shook his head, and started clicking the camera again. “What’s that caked on the side of her face?”

“I don’t know. But the word cake does come to mind—chocolate maybe. Mark Collins had peanut-butter cookies in his stomach contents. Maybe this bastard gives them goodies first. A real compassionate type, huh?”

“Twisted, Holly. This is one of the more bizarre cases I’ve seen. ‘Here kiddo, let’s have cake and ice cream before I murder you and your mom.’”

“We’re not dealing with your average psycho here.” After Chad was finished snapping away, Holly bagged the bit of chain. “Let’s check out Mom.”

They walked another five feet down and to the right before reaching the woman’s naked body, face down, blue tarp tattered but still taped to her. “He didn’t take any time here,” Chad noted. “Looks like he basically dumped her and got the hell out of here.”

“I think you’re right. My bet is he was extremely angry with her, or whomever she represents to him. He doesn’t care about her. He’s pissed off and she’s the root of his anger. He didn’t bother carrying her down. He tossed her like a bag of trash.”

Chad snapped several photos of the body in that position. He then rolled her over with his gloved hands. “It’s possible she’s a mother figure to him.”

“That’s one train of thought. Or a wife, girlfriend, even a sister. Someone else besides a mother may have raised him. Could be a grandmother. I don’t know. But his hate is deep seated and it’s directed at the women. This isn’t really about the children, by what I’ve seen so far. That is, if he is the same killer who murdered Patricia and Mark Collins.” Holly shook her head. She was frustrated at the dead-end that particular murder investigation had led her to. The killer on that case was meticulous and left nothing at the scene. The similarities, however, were frightening. The Collins case was another single mother and child pair. They’d been taken late at night from their Hillcrest home. No one had seen a damn thing. Patricia Collins was the quiet type, not very social and a dedicated mother. The only lead they’d had was she’d belonged to both the local gym and a dating service, which so far hadn’t turned up anything.

She’d only had one date through the service and the man had checked out completely clean. Holly had the police chief breathing down her neck, and these new murders, if they linked up to the other family, would have him even more in a tizzy. Holly didn’t like dealing with Tom Greenfield in a tizzy.

Holly nodded at Chad who pulled back the blue tarp covering the mother. “Oh, my God!” Holly gasped, bringing her free hand up to her mouth. She had to look away momentarily. Her heart pounded hard against her ribs.

“Yeah. I guess you could say he was pissed,” Chad muttered before firing off shot after shot of film.

The woman looked to be in her early thirties. Presumably the child’s mother, she had been badly mutilated. Anguish and fright splashed across her face, eyes frozen wide open. Holly’s gut said the killer had done the mutilating before he killed her. The woman had suffered quite a bit, whereas he had killed the child quickly. But she’d still suffered emotionally. Had she witnessed the brutality her mother had endured?

“Why would he cut off her breasts?” Chad asked.

The tarp was torn open enough to see the horrid wounds the killer had inflicted upon the woman. Holly shook her head. Stay in his head. What are you so angry about? Why her? Holly sighed. “Anger combined with wanting to either strip her of her womanhood or of her motherhood. I don’t know. He’s one sick fuck.”

“So what do you think? Is he the same one who murdered the Collins boy?” Chad asked.

“He didn’t mutilate Patricia, except for the finger.” Holly stared blankly at the missing ring finger on this victim’s hand. “And uh, yeah. He’s saved himself another ring finger. I’d say he’s the same one. It adds up. Both kids shot in the head at close range. The medical examiner and ballistics will give us a better idea. The difference is in the mutilation here. Our other gal

cooperated with him, maybe thought they would get out of it alive. He only severed her ring finger, and the M.E. believes that was done post mortem. I don't think he did this after he killed this one. I think he tortured her." Holly bent down next to the woman, and picked up the woman's stiff hand. "She fought back, though, before he cut it off. See the blood and skin on the other fingers and nail beds?"

Chad bent down and took Holly's magnifier from her. "We're gonna get DNA off this. Let's hope he has a prior." Holly knew that was slim. Serial killers were usually very careful. You fought him, didn't you? "You did good. We'll get him, I promise you. I'm gonna find him for you," she said in a barely audible whisper.

She glanced back over at the body of the child. "Carpenter!" she hollered up to Robb. "Get down here. What the hell are you doing? We might have some fibers. Bring your kit, and let's get some measurements and sketches drawn up. This scene isn't going to stay preserved forever."

"You okay?" Chad asked.

"I can't stand that asshole. And you know he can't stand me, especially if I'm running the scene. He's still bent that he didn't get promoted to my position."

"You earned it. Ignore him. That really gets under his skin." He winked at her.

Holly was fully aware of her title as Ice Princess around the department. She'd even caught a whiff of rumor about bets being placed as to who could get her in the sack.

She looked at her watch. It was almost lunch hour, and she had a forty-minute drive to make it to Chloe's school. Her daughter's second grade class had plans for their Thanksgiving festivities. Damn. She'd promised her she'd be there. She'd already missed one dance recital and a school play this year. "Can you handle this from here? I promised Chloe I'd make it to her school assembly and Thanksgiving feast. Make sure Carpenter and the boys stay in line. I don't want any mistakes. Our perp is good and careful, but he'll screw up somewhere along the line. When he does, I want him behind bars until they've got him strapped to that gurney. I don't want him out on a technicality because of something we got careless about."

"Count on me."

"Thanks. I know I can. I'd stay and hold the fort, but Chloe..."

"Go, for God's sake. I can handle this."

"Call me if you get anything new. I planned to take the rest of the afternoon off and spend it with her. This morning she sent a big guilty arrow through my heart about how I'm always working. I know I shouldn't take off and Greenfield would skin me alive if he knew, but that might hurt less than my seven-year-olds' therapy payments down the line."

"No problem. Family first. You do what you need to, and I'll plan to meet you at the medical examiner's office in the morning."

Robb Carpenter passed her. "What's the matter, Holly? Your thong up your ass today?"

She kept walking. She heard Chad tell Robb to go fuck himself. Good friend. Behind the wheel of her Jeep, she pulled down the mirror and applied her tawny-colored lipstick, hoping to look more like a mother than a cop. She also put on some mascara, bringing her hazel eyes to life, and quickly brushed her short auburn hair back behind her ears. A little better.

She quickly got onto the freeway and sped down the I-8, heading west, noticing the whites of her knuckles gripped tightly on the wheel. She hated admitting that she'd wanted to leave the scene. It wasn't something she would typically do, although today she did have a good excuse. That poor woman, what she must have suffered... Her breasts. My God! She put a hand up to her breasts. He studies them, knows them or of them, and their situation. What's his motive?

He wasn't some recluse, killing randomly. He had specific reasons for the women he chose. He carved up women just like her--young, single and with a child. It was now up to Holly to track him down before he savagely butchered another family.