

The Eight Pretty Maids Affair

A Sean Kruger Short Story

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April Reed was fifteen years old, but after six months on the streets of Provo, Utah, she looked twenty. It was after nine p.m. and she stood waiting at a bus stop next to a McDonalds, her thin cotton coat doing little to protect her from the falling wet snow.

A pickup truck slowed and stopped at the corner adjacent to the bus stop. The passenger window next to her slid down and the driver said, "Isn't it a little wet and cold to be standing there without a proper coat?"

At first she didn't think she knew the driver, but when he spoke she recognized him and said, "Don't own a proper coat."

"Where you headed, the girl's home?"

She nodded.

"Hop in. I'm driving right by it."

She hesitated. The nuns at the house had warned the residents about a maniac who was preying on young girls. But she knew this man. He was one of the volunteers who did repairs once a month around the house for the sisters. Smiling, she opened the passenger door. The truck's interior warmth flooded over her. She quickly got in, shut the door, and said, "Thanks. I was really getting cold."

FBI Special Agent Sean Kruger showed his ID to a patrolman manning the entrance to the alley. After signing the crime scene attendance log, he ducked under the yellow tape and walked briskly toward a detective with the Provo Police Department.

Detective Tom Sutton was kneeling next to a body. He glanced up and stood to offer his hand. Kruger shook it and said, “Another one?”

Sutton nodded. “Yeah, unfortunately. ME says she’s been here at least a day. Killed somewhere else and dumped.”

“Do you have an ID yet?”

“Harold Bentley, one of the uniforms who responded to the call, says she lived at a home for girls on First Street. One of the nuns who run the place is on her way.”

Kruger nodded. “I think I’ll look around until she gets here.” The alley was in an older part of Provo, where abandoned buildings were the norm. Five minutes later, he noticed something in the wet soil about ten yards from the body. Kneeling, he shouted, “Tire tracks. Looks fairly new.”

Sutton motioned for a lab technician to follow him and he joined Kruger. At the same time, a black Chevrolet Suburban screeched to a stop in front of the alley. As Kruger and Sutton looked up, Kruger said, “Damn. Who called him?”

Sutton said, “Probably my boss, Lieutenant Carson.”

As they watched, four doors opened simultaneously and four men in dark suits exited the vehicle. Kruger chuckled. “I’ve been told they practice exiting a vehicle in unison. Agent Dollar says it promotes team unity and professionalism.”

Sutton saw little humor in the situation. “Yeah, well he’s a pain in my ass. Last two investigations he took over and shut us out.”

Franklin “Mint” Dollar was the special agent in charge of the Salt Lake City FBI Office. He was slender, five-foot-ten inches tall with close-cropped coal-black hair. He

stood outside of the Suburban, buttoned his suit coat and motioned for all his men to follow.

Dollar walked hurriedly toward the crime scene. When he was within five yards, he said, “What are you doing here Agent Kruger?”

Kruger stared at Dollar. “I’m here at the request of Deputy Director Stumpf. The Provo chief of police called him and asked for someone with more experience in these matters.”

“Well—you’re not needed. My team can handle this case.”

“Apparently not, or I wouldn’t be here.”

As the FBI’s senior profiler, Kruger worked independently of the local bureau offices and reported directly to Deputy Director Paul Stumpf. His PhD in psychology, fifteen years of experience, and closure of multiple high-profile cases enhanced his reputation. He was in high demand when a case like this one came along. At six feet one, he had the body of a swimmer, slender and lean. He wore his dark-brown hair slightly longer than bureau standards and used half-readers for his crystal blue eyes. He normally kept a low profile when on a case and stayed out of local bureau politics. But he made an exception with Franklin Dollar. They had crossed paths before.

The muscles in Dollar’s neck tightened as he clinched his teeth. His face grew red and he said, “Just stay out of my way.” He turned and started barking orders to the men following him.

After Dollar was back near the Suburban, Tom Sutton walked over to Kruger and grinned. “I don’t think he likes you.”

“Mint Dollar doesn’t like anybody smarter than he is.”

Sutton pointed to a small figure in a gray habit standing behind the crime scene tape. "There's the nun from the home for girls. Let's find out who this young lady was."

Kruger took a picture of the young girl's face with his cell phone and followed. Sutton introduced him to Sister Judy Coleman. "Sister, this is Agent Sean Kruger. He's a specialist in these types of crimes. We hope you can help us identify the latest victim."

When Kruger showed her the picture, her reaction was immediate. Her eyes grew wide. Her left hand covered her mouth as she made the sign of the cross with her right. Kruger said in almost a whisper. "What was her name?"

Tears welled in her eyes as she stared at the picture. Finally, she calmed herself and said, "April Reed." She hesitated and took a deep breath. "She's from Brigham City. Her parents kicked her out of their home for smoking marijuana in her bedroom. I spoke to them when she first arrived, but they wanted nothing to do with her." She looked at Kruger with sad eyes. "She's only fifteen years old."

Kruger stared at the picture. He shook his head. His own thoughts turned to his son Brian, also a fifteen year old, back home in Kansas City. The thought of not caring about him was unimaginable.

His voice slightly shaking, Kruger said, "Damn. How could they?" He was silent for a moment. "Sorry Sister."

"No need. I was thinking the same thing."

He took a deep breath and said, "Did she give you any trouble?"

"Oh no. She was a sweet child. Friendly and determined to make it on her own. She even worked at a McDonald's part-time. When she didn't come back from work Monday night, I called Detective Sutton."

Kruger saw a tear run down the nun's cheek. He turned and said to Sutton, "Can we talk?"

Sutton nodded and motioned for a uniformed female officer to stay with the nun. They walked half-way back to the body when Kruger stopped. "Weren't the first six victims homeless?"

Sutton nodded. "Yeah, but they weren't staying in a facility like this girl. She's also the youngest. The rest were older and street-wise."

Kruger stared in the direction of the body. "That's our common denominator; homeless."

The next morning Kruger sat in a conference room at the Provo Police Station, reviewing the murder books on the seven victims. Tom Sutton walked in carrying two Styrofoam cups of coffee and said, "You've been at this all morning. Find anything?"

Kruger took the offered cup. "I think so, but I need a second opinion."

"Okay."

"All the victims are women fifteen to thirty five years of age. There's no sign of struggle on any of them. To me that means all the victims knew the assailant in some way and weren't afraid of him. All were sexually assaulted, prior to death, and had traces of diazepam in their system. The mutilations are the same, throat slashed, multiple stab wounds in the abdomen, and their eyes removed. The diazepam was probable consumed unknowingly by each of the victims in a drink. The medical examiner's report indicates all the women had coffee in their stomachs."

"I'm with you so far. So?"

“Who would have access to diazepam and be familiar with homeless women?”

Sutton was silent for a few moments. Suddenly his eyes grew wide and he said, “Someone at a free clinic?”

“Yeah—someone at a free clinic. There’s no mention of one in these reports. It’s important.”

Sutton turned toward the conference room door and started walking. “I’m on it.”

After Sutton left, Kruger sat and stared at all of the photographs of the victims. Just before he put the files away, he paused, and frowned. After reviewing who was at April Reed’s crime scene. He started reviewing the attendance logs for all of the crime scenes. As he reviewed each file, he started tapping his index finger on his lips.

Two days later Kruger was eating dinner at a family-owned pizza shop next to his hotel, when his cell phone rang. He answered on the third ring. Chief of Police Byron Hall said, “How fast can you get to the station?”

“Ten minutes. Why?”

“Dollar brought in a suspect and is claiming he’s solved the case.”

“Who is it?”

“Some homeless guy they arrested hanging around the alley where we found April Reed. Dollar said the guy had a Saint Christopher metal Sister Coleman identified as being April Reed’s.”

Kruger was quiet for a moment. “A homeless guy?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Kruger stood with Chief Hall watching the interview on a flat-screen monitor. It was a live feed from a camera inside the interrogation room. Franklin Dollar's back was to the camera with the suspect facing him across a metal table. The man appeared to be in his late thirties, disheveled with matted salt-and-pepper hair. His beard was gray around the chin, growing darker toward his ears. From his demeanor, he appeared unable to understand why he was being interrogated.

Dollar exhaled loudly and said, "Tell me again—where you were three nights ago, Mr. Grant?"

"Uh... I really don't remember."

"Where do you live?"

The suspect shrugged. "Here and there. You know, wherever I can."

Kruger knew Dollar's patience was growing thin. The interview was already deep into its second half hour, and the information gathered so far was meaningless. Finally, Dollar stood and left the room. Kruger watched as the man crossed his arms on the table and laid his head down on them.

Dollar stormed out of the room and told one of the other FBI agents to file charges against the man for murder. Kruger stepped up and said, "Franklin, may I talk to the man while you're doing that?"

"Go ahead and try. But you won't get anything out of him."

Nodding, Kruger walked into the room and sat down on the chair across from the man. He said, "Mr. Grant?"

The man raised his head and nodded.

“My name is Sean Kruger. I’m with the FBI. May I ask you a few questions?”

The man shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

“Would you like some coffee?”

The man nodded and Kruger left, returning with a Styrofoam cup of the steaming liquid. “I bet you take it black, correct?”

“Yeah.” He took the cup and sipped the hot brew. A small smile appeared.

“That’s good. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. What’s your first name Mr. Grant?”

“My given name is William, but everybody calls me Billy.”

“Can I call you Billy?”

The man stared at the cup of coffee. “Do what you want.”

“Where’re you from, Billy?”

“Texarkana, Arkansas.”

“What brings you to Provo, Utah?”

The man shrugged. “Everybody’s gotta be somewhere.”

Kruger smiled. “True. But why here?”

Billy took a long sip, looked at Kruger. “Heard a rumor they was hiring up here. The rumor was wrong.”

“What do you do for a living, Billy?”

“I’m a brick layer. Not much going on in Arkansas and what few jobs they got are goin’ ta Mexicans.” His eyes narrowed and he said loudly, “They work too cheap. Man like me can’t live on wages like that.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Man like me has responsibilities. A family to care for. You can’t do that on what they pay those people.”

“Do you have a family, Billy?”

He shook his head. “Not any more. She left me. Took my boys back to Mississippi to live with her parents.” A tear started to form in the man’s left eye. He wiped it with the sleeve of his dirty shirt.

Kruger watched the man closely. “Do you have a place to stay?”

Billy shook his head. “Nah. Ran out of money two weeks ago. Since then, I’ve been living here and there.”

Kruger pulled out a picture he had gotten from Sister Coleman. “Have you ever seen this girl before?”

Billy Grant stared at the picture. “No. Who is she?”

Kruger put the picture away. “A girl we’re looking for. Thought you might have seen her on the street.”

“A young girl like that shouldn’t be on the streets. She needs to be at home.”

“That’s what we’re trying to do. Get her home.” Kruger paused for a second, “Where did you get the Saint Christopher metal, Billy?”

The man stared at Kruger. Before he said anything, he looked at his coffee. “Found it.”

“Where Billy?”

The man shrugged. “On the street.”

Kruger smiled, “Where on the street, Billy? It’s important.”

Billy sat up straight, “I didn’t steal it.”

“I know. I just need to know where you found it.”

Wrapping his hands around the Styrofoam cup of coffee, Billy sighed, “A pickup truck pulled out of an alley. Almost ran over me. I saw it on the sidewalk outside the alley. No one was around. So, I picked it up. Thought it might be worth a pack of cigarettes.”

Kruger frowned, “What color was the truck, Billy?”

Shaking his head, Billy hesitated. “Don’t know, it happened too fast.”

Kruger was silent for several moments. “Thank you Billy. That’s all the questions I have.”

Kruger stood, left the room and walked back to where Chief Hall stood next to the monitor. Hall said, “He didn’t do it, did he?”

“No. He didn’t. He’s just a guy who’s had the fight beat out of him by the system.”

“Sean, I agree with you. But Dollar’s already scheduled a press conference for eight o’clock this evening to announce they’ve made an arrest.”

“Can you stop him?”

“Not sure I want to. He’s cut my department out of the investigation, and quite frankly I’d like to see him humiliated. Maybe they’d get him out of Utah.”

Kruger smiled. “Dollar’s a hard man to humiliate. His egos too big. Plus he’s kissed enough ass in Washington that the director thinks he knows what he’s doing.”

At the exact time Franklin Dollar was announcing the arrest of a suspect to a packed conference room of reporters, a sixteen year old runaway named Beverly

Cummins was getting into a Chevrolet pickup a few blocks from the same corner where April Reed was last seen. Late the next day, her nude body was found like the rest of the victims, sexually assaulted and mutilated just like the rest of the victims.

The morning after the eighth girl was found, Kruger drove the forty-five miles from Provo to Salt Lake City and walked into Franklin Dollar's office. He slammed the door shut and said, "Dollar, you're an idiot."

Dollar stared at Kruger. "What are you talking about?"

"The guy you have in custody is totally innocent of these crimes. He can barely read and has the mental capacity of a ten-year-old."

"Doesn't matter. He had the Saint Christopher metal."

"Then why was another girl found last night?"

"Copycat killer."

"The person who committed these murders knows what he's doing. He kills them in one location and dumps their bodies in another. He hasn't left enough evidence on any of the bodies to even give us a DNA sample. The guy you have in jail can barely plan his next meal, let alone a complex crime. Hell, he doesn't even have a way of transporting the bodies. Where's your evidence, Dollar?"

Dollar's face turned red and he said through clenched teeth, "Your damned psycho mumbo jumbo hasn't produced one suspect. At least I've been doing something."

Kruger shook his head. "All you've done is embarrass the agency with this ridiculous arrest. The man isn't capable of a violent sexual crime."

"Oh—the great Sean Kruger, the bureau's clairvoyant protector. I suppose you know who it is. Tell me... Who is it?"

Kruger was tired of the exchange. He walked to the door, opened it, turned, and said, "It's a cop."

Driving back to Provo, Kruger realized his next step would be daunting. He trusted his instincts and knew the predator had to be a cop. Proving it was the problem. His initial hunch had been determined after reviewing the murder books. The first seven victims were found after a 911 call. The eighth one was found when a night employee at a restaurant discovered the body in the dumpster behind the café during a smoke break. There was also something odd about the 911 calls. He had sent them to a buddy in Washington DC for analysis.

The tire track where April Reed was discovered still bothered him. It had never been investigated as thoroughly as he felt it should have been. With Franklin Dollar determined to make a case against the drifter, Kruger decided it was now his responsibility to move the investigation forward.

Two hours after returning to Provo, he was at a Firestone tire store on West Central showing a picture of the tire track to Chris Harris, the store's tire manager. Kruger said, "Can you tell me anything about this?"

Harris looked at the picture and then opened the top drawer of his desk. He pulled out a magnifying glass and studied the picture for several more moments. Finally, he said, "Well..." He paused and looked at the picture one more time. "It's a truck tire for one. My guess is a pickup."

“Can you tell what brand it is?”

The man nodded. “That’s the bad news. It’s an aftermarket tire. There could be millions of them on the road here in the West.”

Kruger’s enthusiasm disappeared. “What’s the brand name?”

Harris smiled, told Kruger the brand, and said, “The good news is, if you find the truck, the tire can be identified.” He pointed to a spot on the photo and said, “See these marks? The tire is out of alignment. The scuffing will be unique to that tire.”

Kruger smiled.

A review of personnel records at the police station revealed that twelve officers owned pickups. It took another twenty-four hours to quietly walk through the police station parking lot after each shift and determine that none of the pickups used the brand of tires he was looking for. Nor did any of the vehicles appear to have new tires.

A call to his buddy in Washington confirmed his suspicions of the 911 calls. All were made by the same person. Each call was made by someone trying to disguise his voice. His earlier review of the murder books had pointed toward one officer. Officer Harold Bentley had been at every crime scene involving the women. He glanced at his watch. If he was to prove his theory, sitting in the Provo Police Station would not get it done. He closed his laptop, placed it in his computer bag, and headed toward his car.

Kruger hated stakeouts. Most were boring, but this one unnerved him. If he was wrong, there was a chance another young girl might die. His rental car was parked half a block from a plain ranch house in a working neighborhood in western Provo. Bentley

rented the home. Kruger had been there since dusk. It was now 10:15 P.M. and there had been no activity around the house he was watching. Finally, fifteen minutes later a dark colored older Toyota Corolla backed out of the drive way and headed east. Kruger slouched down as the car passed. He continued to wait. Thirty minutes later, he exited his car and walked toward the young policeman's residence. At the driveway, he turned and walked toward the detached two-car garage, which was positioned slightly behind the main house.

He checked the windows on the garage door. All were painted over. On the side of the garage facing the house, he found an unlocked door and cautiously opened it. Inside was total darkness. He turned on his penlight. The light revealed a large empty space and a wooden work-bench on the far wall. Nothing in the garage struck him as important. He turned the penlight off and closed the door. Large trees, scrubs and a high fence in the back separated the yard from an alley and kept the backyard secluded. The neighboring homes on both sides were dark. At this hour of night, their occupants were likely asleep.

After pulling on surgical gloves, he extracted two metal instruments from his jacket pocket and proceeded to pick the backdoor lock. Thirty seconds later, the door was open and he was inside. He stood with his back against the now-closed door and listened. The house was quiet. The only sound he could hear was the gurgling of an ice maker. With his hand on his Glock, he whistled softly, and said, "Here boy. Here boy." The house remained silent. No dog.

The only illumination in the house came from a street lamp positioned by the driveway, shining through an unadorned front window. The light revealed a living room

sparsely furnished with an old sagging sofa, a coffee table from the 1950s, and an old tube-style TV sitting on a stand made of cinder blocks. He turned toward the hallway and found an open bedroom door. He turned on his penlight. The small bedroom contained a desk, an exercise mat, and free weights. The larger room across the hall had an unmade mattress on the floor. On the mattress, he saw two sweat-stained pillows, and wadded-up sheets.

The bathroom adjacent to the larger room smelled musty with towels on the floor next to the shower. A plastic cup from Burger King on the sink held a tube of Crest and a single toothbrush. Across from the bathroom was a closed door. Kruger tried the knob; it was locked. The penlight revealed a keyed lock on the outside, which he found a little unusual. Extracting his lock picks again, he had the door open in twenty seconds. The room was dark. His penlight revealed a bare mattress propped against one wall and a window with a dark, heavy curtain blocking any light from outside. The walls were blank, with various bent nails where pictures used to hang. The closet door was slightly ajar. He crossed the room quickly and opened the door wider. The closet contained a large box of thirty three gallon plastic trash bags, a case of clear plastic drop clothes, and a set of surgical knives. He stared at the contents for several seconds and closed his eyes.

Returning to the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator. It was empty except for five bottles of Coors Lite and a Taco Bell sack. The freezer was empty, except for the icemaker. This wasn't a home; it was a crash pad. Kruger leaned against the refrigerator door and tried to make sense of what he was seeing. He knew what the locked room with the surgical knives and drop clothes meant, but without a properly served search warrant, the evidence would be inadmissible in court.

Just as he was opening the back door to leave, a set of headlights flashed on the walls in the living room. A vehicle had just pulled into the driveway. He shut the door and peered out the kitchen window just as the garage door started opening. A pickup truck entered the open garage and disappeared into the gloom. He quickly opened the back door and exited the kitchen, locking the door behind him. Two large arborvitae grew next to the backdoor porch and he hid behind the one farthest from the garage.

As the garage door lowered, the door on the side opened and a large figure emerged, supporting a smaller figure. The smaller figure stumbled and walked drunkenly as they made their way toward the house. After climbing the stairs leading to the back door, the taller figure reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys.

As the man inserted his keys into the lock, Kruger left his hiding spot and yelled, "FBI. Freeze. Get your hands where I can see them."

The man's back was to Kruger. He raised the hand holding the keys and slowly turned around. Tom Sutton stood on the porch, holding the girl upright with his left arm. He said, "How'd you know?"

"It doesn't matter. Lower the girl and let me see both hands, Tom."

"Can't do that."

"Tom, I'm not going to repeat myself. Let the girl go and get your hand's up."

Sutton stared at Kruger, smiling slightly. In one fluid motion, he dropped the keys and pulled a revolver from his belt.

Kruger fired three quick shots from his Glock, all found their mark in Sutton's chest.

The impact forced Sutton against the back door. He stared at Kruger with a surprised look and released the girl. She staggered down the steps and fell into one of the arborvitaes. Sutton clutched at his wounds and sank to a sitting position on the porch. Kruger hurriedly walked the few yards to where the dropped revolver lay and kicked it away. With the Glock still pointed at Sutton, he extracted his cell phone from his back pocket.

Kruger stood against the wall in Byron Hall's office, listening with disgust as Franklin Dollar summarized the prior evening. Dollar and his team had arrived an hour after Sutton was shot. They had immediately taken control of the scene. He said, "I am told by my forensics people there are traces of blood on the walls of the empty bedroom. They're cross referencing the DNA of all eight victims with the blood. We should know something definite by tomorrow at the latest. My team feels the house was used to rape and kill the victims. Sutton used the pickup to transport the bodies to the dumping locations. I'm declaring this case closed."

Hall nodded. "It's embarrassing. The killer was actually working his own crimes. We totally missed it."

Dollar said, "I will finalize the investigation and make the official report." He stood, turned to Kruger and said, "Your services are no longer needed." He buttoned his dark-blue suit coat and headed toward the door. He paused as he opened the door. "I have a press conference scheduled for four o'clock so the TV stations can make the five P.M. news." With that, he walked out.

Hall shook his head and said to Kruger, "How did you know it was Sutton?"

“I didn’t. I thought it was Bentley. He was the first responder on five of the murders and at the scene for the other three. All the victims were last seen in his patrol section of town. He regularly stopped at the home for girls and dealt with the homeless people in the downtown area. The final piece of the puzzle was a prescription for diazepam, which was noted in his personnel file. What I didn’t know was that Bentley rented the house from Sutton. While Bentley was on patrol, Sutton would use the locked bedroom. He gave Bentley a discount on the rent and told him he was using the bedroom for storage. Apparently, Bentley didn’t need the drug very often. Sutton was the one getting it refilled.”

“Basic police work,” Hall said nodding.

Kruger smiled, “Yeah, basic police work.”

Frowning, Hall said, “Are you going to let Dollar take credit for this bust?”

Shrugging, Kruger stood and walked toward Hall’s office door. He opened the door, turned back to Hall. “I don’t care who gets the credit. Sutton won’t be hurting any more women.”