

I Think They Burned Her

ADA ALEX GRECO

A PREQUEL

Roger Canaff



I
Think
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Burned
Her

ADA, Alex Greco – A Prequel

By Roger Canaff



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COPPERHEAD ROAD

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2:25 a.m.

The ringtone shattered a dream about his son, dead now almost seven months. Alex opened his eyes and saw the iPhone skittering toward him on the tiny nightstand. The blueish glow of the screen illuminated his surroundings and the reality of where he was. It settled into him like lead, and he let out a sigh— almost a gasp— of sadness. Then he grabbed the phone and mumbled his last name.

“Greco.”

Silence on the other end, then a distant retching sound. Alex didn’t think he’d heard a person throw up on a telephone call before, but that’s what this sounded like. There was a “phwaa,” like someone clearing his mouth. Then panting.

“Alex,” he heard after that. The voice was vaguely familiar. “You there?”

“I am,” he said rubbing his eyes. He cleared his throat and looked at the clock on the nightstand. “I’m sorry, who is this?”

“It’s Raphael Aris. I’m the other lateral. We met in orientation a few weeks ago. I’m so sorry, I didn’t know who else to call.”

“Oh. No, it’s okay, what’s wrong?”

“I’ve got the beeper,” he said. That meant he was on homicide duty, still called “beeper duty” after the pager that used to summon ADA’s to crime scenes back in the day. “I... I’m at a scene. It’s a baby girl. I think they burned her. I’m so sorry. I don’t think I can see this through.”

“Is she dead?” he asked, sitting up in bed. Beside him, Dana or Deanna, he could not remember the name exactly, stirred in her sleep and fell quiet again, curled up against the wall. The bedroom in his fourth-floor tenement apartment wasn’t much larger than a jail cell. He had crammed a queen-sized bed in by shoving it, without a headboard, into the corner of the room.

“The baby is dead, yeah.”

“Suspect?”

“Mother’s boyfriend. I think he’s the child’s father, I don’t know. She won’t say much. When we got there, the boyfriend had already left. I went in with the squad guys. The mother had the baby covered up. EMT’s pulled the blanket off and... oh, man. Alex, I’ve got a daughter that age. I don’t think I can do this. I should have called the supervisor, I know, but—”

“It’s fine, Raffy,” he said, remembering him fully now. “Tell me where you are.” Alex used the nickname Raphael had used to introduce himself to Alex a few weeks back. They had been in orientation together, two “lateral” hire ADA’s, meaning experienced prosecutors hired by the Bronx District Attorney’s Office to fill senior positions. Alex came from an office in Northern Virginia where he prosecuted mostly child abuse. Raphael was from Miami, Florida, where he prosecuted high-level gang cases.

“I’m in the four-two,” Raphael said, meaning the 42nd Precinct. When cops and prosecutors referred to one of the eleven Bronx police precincts, they expressed them as two numbers side by side, so that the 42nd was the “Four-Two,” and so on.

“Is it a project or a row house?”

“Morrisania projects. I’m outside in a playground area. The body is on the third floor.”

“When you say, ‘they burned her,’” Alex said carefully. “You mean like chemical burns, or boiled water?”

“Boiling water. Had to be. Her feet, her legs and the lower half of her bottom. They’re hot pink. Like they dipped her in.... oh, God.”

“Give me the address,” Alex said. “I’ll be there in thirty and I can relieve you. No one has to know why.”

“But I’ve got to make a report in the morning, right?”

“Yes. We both will. We can explain it. We’ll say we were in touch earlier tonight on something else and you called me on this one because you know I’ve seen these cases before, and your kid is sick or something. Believe me, whoever is supervising tonight will be happy they didn’t have to go out on it.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Raphael said. “I’m really grateful. I mean, we barely know each other, but I thought I could trust you.”

“You can,” Alex said, fishing for his wristwatch. “I’ll see you soon.”

He stood in the dark to dress and almost struck a cello case propped up in the narrow space between the bed and the opposite wall. *What the fuck? Oh, shit, that’s right, she plays the cello.* Dana, or Deanna, was a student at Julliard, the conservatory up by Lincoln Center. *Grad student*, he clarified to himself, as if that made it less absurd. He was 37. She was maybe 23. They had met at a bar on Ninth Avenue, around the corner from his apartment a few hours earlier. She was the fifth woman who had shared his cramped room since the first weekend he had arrived in New York City. That had been early June. It was now early September.

The summer had been a blur of grief, random sex, and culture shock. Not eight months earlier he had shared a king-sized bed with his wife, soon to be

ex-wife, the woman who had been his high-school sweetheart and only lover. Their four-year-old son Jordan had slept in a room down the hall in their three-level townhouse with two cars in the driveway. Now, Jordan was dead and that entire life was behind him. The awful and sudden journey from that reality to this one was startling, like an old house swept away in a flash flood.

“Bobby?” she said to the wall as he was pulling his slacks on from the day before. Her brown hair was a tangle over the sheet that wrapped her body. He smiled at her and whispered.

“It’s Alex, hon.”

“Oh shit.” She rolled over and pulled a pillow over her face. “I’m *so* sorry.”

“It’s okay, D—. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m a slut.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Where are you going, anyway?” She tossed the pillow aside and looked him, her brow knitted. What little light there was crept in from the one window in the room, above the cello case. The window looked out over an alleyway and a tiny garden behind the building. In the dim glow she looked pale and sweet, with a long neck and graceful, sloping shoulders. Below that were tangerine-sized breasts with dark little nipples.

“It’s a work thing, I gotta run. Go back to sleep. The door will lock behind you in the morning.”

The apartment building that housed the dead little girl was a twenty-story, massive rectangle of brick and iron dotted with plain, square windows. In front were several Four-Two police cars, a firetruck and an ambulance. Bored looking cops stood in front of the building’s main entrance, an institutional set of dull steel doors with wire mesh windows. A few young people, black men mostly, stood around in groups and stared upward at the third-floor apartment where tonight’s activity was. Alex spotted Raphael quickly, sitting on a bench to the side of the project playground and looking utterly dejected.

“Alex, thank you,” he said. “I feel terrible about this.”

“Don’t.”

“It’s just... my daughter. She’s exactly that age. Shit, she’s Puerto Rican, too, I mean. She *looks* like her.”

“It’s okay. What was the baby’s name? Did you get it?”

“Ariana.”

“And it’s her mother you were talking to?”

“Yes. Her name is Celeste. She wouldn’t say much to me.”

“Think she’s in shock?”

“No idea. She just seems blank to me.”

“Okay. I’ve got it from here. If there’s anything you think of on the way home, text me, okay? Or call.”

“Thank you again. For understanding.”

“Of course.”

“You got kids?” Raphael asked with a smile, like he fully expected an affirmative answer. Alex opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. He forced a smile.

“I don’t,” he said. “But I understand.”

“Who’s this?” a cop asked as Alex approached the building entrance. Next to him were two other uniforms, one black and one Asian. They seemed to look up to the older one, who was chunky and red-faced and had a sleepy, mean look.

“Alex Greco, DA’s office,” he said, flashing his badge.

“Where’d the other one go?” the cop asked, but there was something bright in his voice, like he already knew.

“He’s not feeling well,” Alex said. “We talked about the case when they called it in. I’ve been out on these before.”

“I’ve never seen you.”

“I’ve been at this office for about two months. It’s not where I started.”

“So, where’d that other guy go? Home to cry?”

“He’s got a kid the same age,” Alex said under his breath. “Give him a break.”

“You look green to me. You gonna puke, too?”

“You know, we’re on the same side,” Alex said.

“You’re not on my side,” the cop said, shaking his head and looking him up and down. “You’re all the same. Defense attorneys in training.”

“I’ve been a prosecutor for twelve years.”

“Then you weren’t even good enough for the other side.” He folded his arms and smirked.

“Lieutenant!” Alex called out. He had seen the “white shirt,” which was cop-speak for police brass, walking toward them at an angle. The lieutenant was dark-skinned and bald. “Can you ask Officer Cantwell here to let me by?” He

held his badge up. Now Cantwell's eyes shot over to the lieutenant who barked like a drill instructor.

"What? Cantwell, what's the problem?"

"No problem, sir," the cop said, stepping aside. The mean look had vanished like smoke. "Just checking his ID. Never seen him before."

"You new to the DA's office?" the lieutenant asked.

"I am."

"Did he give you grief?"

Alex looked at Cantwell, who was staring straight ahead, and then back to the lieutenant.

"No, he was just being cautious. You going up?"

"I am. Follow me."

The apartment where the child had lived, been tortured and then murdered, smelled like cigarette smoke and old food. It was crawling with crime scene investigators, tired-looking detectives, and various supervisory level NYPD. There were also two people, a male and a female, from the Medical Legal Investigator's office. They were about to seal the baby into a hideously small white body bag on a gurney in the living room. Alex could still see the baby's face, sinking into the shadows just above the zipper.

"You the DA?" one of the MLI techs asked.

"I am."

"Want to see her before we zip up?"

"Just for a second, thanks," he said, and kneeled down on his haunches beside the gurney so that his tie almost touched the floor. Alex always wore a shirt and tie to a homicide scene, though there was no strict requirement for it. Part of it, as he saw it, was out of respect. When he dressed for work, he wore a tie. This was also work, and it wasn't only living victims who deserved to see him look professional. But there was something else in the gesture, something just below conscious thought. Dressing like a courtroom lawyer to greet the dead was out of respect for the dead, but it was also out of a superstitious respect for death itself. Alex had no desire to offend it when in its presence.

The baby's face was lovely, coffee-colored, round and plump with long, curved eyelashes. But Alex's trained eyes could already see tell-tale signs of child abuse, particularly for a child who was still an infant and not ambulatory, meaning she wasn't yet crawling or toddling. There was a thumb-sized, murky scar on her left cheek, and the ghost of older marks on her forehead.

“Thanks,” he said to the techs. He looked up at one of the detectives who he hadn’t met but assumed was probably catching the case. He was typical for NYPD, almost TV-like with a ruddy-face and swept-back hair. “How old was she?”

“About three months,” the detective said. Then he turned toward two women seated on a couch Alex hadn’t noticed before as his focus had gone completely to the body. “That right, Celeste? About three months?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Celeste said. She looked to be mid-twenties, thin and pale with big, dark eyes. She was smoking and the fingers that held the cigarette rested against her cheek. “She was born June sixth.”

So that’s the mother, Alex thought. Raffy was right about the blank look. *And the baby’s birthdate. June sixth? Almost exactly when I got here. This little girl’s entire life lasted about as long as I’ve been in this city.* There was something vaguely foreboding and nauseating about that. He stood and introduced himself to the detective, a guy named Pat Murphy. Murphy told him Celeste’s last name was Diaz.

He also learned from Murphy that the suspect was the child’s father, a man named Roberto Colon who wasn’t on the lease but had been living with Celeste and the child since her birth. Child protective services, known in New York City as the Administration for Children’s Services or ACS, had twice before dealt with the family on suspicions about Colon and his treatment of both Celeste and Ariana. Colon also had a record for domestic assault against another woman. When Alex asked about Colon’s whereabouts, Murphy rolled his eyes and motioned toward Celeste.

With those details in hand, Alex walked over to the couch. Celeste continued to stare straight ahead. The other woman, seated beside her, looked younger, college age, maybe, with quick, intelligent eyes. They moved back and forth between Alex and Celeste.

“Ms. Diaz?” Alex said. Again, he hunkered down, this time so as not to be standing over the person he was speaking to.

“Yeah?” She answered without looking at him. The cigarette burned between her fingers.

“Ms. Diaz, my name is Alex Greco. I’m from the District Attorney’s Office. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks.”

“The detectives will have a lot of questions for you,” he said. “At some point I might also, and I apologize in advance for all of this intrusiveness. For now, I just want you to know I’m a part of the team here, the group of people who will work with you to get justice for Ariana. We’re here to support you--”

“Excuse me, are you a lawyer?” the younger woman said, interrupting him. Celeste continued to stare straight ahead, glancing down only to crush out the cigarette in an ashtray.

“I’m a prosecutor, yes.”

“Right. A lawyer. So, could you not speak to my sister, then?” Her eyes bore into Alex’s. She sat with her legs and arms crossed in jeans and a sweater.

“I’m sorry. Can I get your name?”

“No, you cannot.”

“Well, I’m not here to do anything but support your sister and the rest of your family. I’m just introducing myself.” He turned back to Celeste, who fidgeted a little but otherwise did not move. She was in sweatpants and a T-shirt and sat with her knees together. “Ms. Diaz, do you understand what my role is here?”

“Excuse me, what did I just ask you?” the sister said. Alex paused and checked himself. Whatever attitude she was throwing at him, he would gain nothing by hurling it back. That said, he had a job to do.

“I’m not speaking to you,” he said to her, calm and low. He turned back to Celeste.

“Don’t talk to him,” the sister said. She got up and walked toward the kitchen.

“Is it okay if I call you Celeste? You can call me Alex.” Celeste just shrugged. “Celeste, can we just talk about Ariana? I know she was still a baby, but she was a person. I’d love to know a little about her, and what she was like.”

“You don’t want to talk about Ariana,” Celeste said. She looked directly at him at last. The eyes were still blank, but to Alex it didn’t seem like she was in shock. He could only guess, but he had seen quite a few crime victims that way. This looked different. It looked more like just who she was. “You want to talk about Roberto?”

“The child’s father? Well, if you want to, sure.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. Her eyes seemed to search his face. Every movement she made and syllable she spoke was slow, but deliberate. “You want to arrest Roberto. You want to burn *him*.”

“Excuse me?”

“People get burned,” she said, as if the fact was mundane. “Babies get burned. Maybe we all burn, you know, at some point.”

“Celeste, your daughter was burned. This isn’t just conversation. A child—your child—is dead.”

“Right. And now, you want to burn Roberto for it. You don’t even know him.”

“If he killed your daughter, I want to bring him to justice, yes.”

“You don’t know what Ariana did, either.”

“What Ariana did? I don’t understand.”

“You don’t,” she said. “See? You don’t understand me. Or Roberto. Or anything.”

“If Roberto harmed and then murdered Ariana, I will need to work with you to hold him responsible for it. Do you understand?”

“I really don’t want to talk to you.”

“I’m not sure what you’re afraid of, Celeste.”

“Who said I was afraid?” They were both silent for a moment, staring at each other. Then the corners of Celeste’s mouth, which had been as flat as an ocean horizon, turned slightly upward. Her eyes never left his. Alex felt his blood go cold. He stood up.

“I *will* call a lawyer,” he heard from behind him. The sister again. She was angrier now, and the local accent was slipping out. *Lanyah*.

“Go ahead,” Alex said, turning to her. He wanted to say more, but knew it would be useless, and worse, unprofessional. She sat down again next to Celeste. He headed downstairs for a breath of air and a quick cigarette. Seeing the one in Celeste’s hand had gotten him jonesing. He passed the same group of cops from before, including the oddly confrontational one, and walked to the curb. The night air was cool and dry.

He had learned years before that in a child homicide case it was key to get the family, the so-called “non-offending caregivers,” on his side as soon as possible. Emotions were all over the place when abuse or neglect culminated in a 911 call and a child got hospitalized or pronounced dead. Rumors and opinions flew, sides quickly taken. For something that seemed so cut and dry, families were often torn to shreds over who to side with, who to blame, and who to shut out. He also knew what he was up against, and what he often represented in a place like the Bronx. He was white, male, tall and presentable-- the very picture of privilege and the image of the oppressor. Still, he had worked well with poor families of color in Alexandria, a place that was a far cry from the Bronx but not Gold-Coast Connecticut either.

With this case and Celeste, though, he felt unbalanced. He was no stranger to shock, denial and early grief, but Celeste seemed more than just distracted. Or even conflicted. He was getting a different, dark vibe from her. Something disturbing. Something almost... complicit. He shook his head and crushed out the cigarette with his heel.

A few minutes later, the two lead detectives, Murphy and another, stout and

round-faced one named Tibbs, met with Alex to discuss the wrap-up of their time at the apartment. They seemed like good guys, hard-working and thorough. There were a few search and seizure questions, and also some about obtaining medical records once they got to the hospital. Celeste had consented in writing to a search of the apartment. Her cooperation going forward, however, was far less certain and Murphy and Tibbs had concerns about it, getting the same vibe Alex had gotten from her. He listened to their chatter on phones and radios, the search for Roberto Colon and the pinball-like, zig-zagging messages between levels of police command. Then the gurney holding the tiny, cursed body of Ariana was being wheeled out of the apartment and into the chalky light of the hallway.

When they had wheeled the body of Alex's four-year-old son Jordan out the front door, Alex was still in shock and his father-in-law Jonah was calling the shots. Alex stood, numb with horror, in the entranceway of his and Dara's well-appointed townhouse in Alexandria, Virginia. EMT's were the bearers of Jordan's little body. Unlike baby Ariana, now sealed in a bag, they had only covered him from head to toe. The figure of his only child, outlined in plain, white cotton, the peak of his nose, the curve of his belly. A vision he knew he would never escape until his own dying breath.

The truth, that Dara had snapped in a paroxysmal moment and pushed their profoundly autistic son down a stairwell to his death, was unknown to anyone outside the circle of Alex, Dara, and Jonah. In the EMT report, Jordan had rushed blindly into the open basement doorway and then tumbled down a flight of stairs to the concrete below. That was the story that Jonah, with his silver tongue and natural commanding presence, was selling to the responders with remarkable poise and delivery. They were nodding at his explanations even before he had finished making them.

Dara was still in the basement where she had run to find her son dead at the bottom of the stairs, paralyzed with grief and guilt. Alex, nearly mute with shock, was following Jonah's orders and mostly staying silent. He would eventually come to understand why he had called Jonah just moments after hearing Dara's first scream and discovering what she had done, even before calling 911. Jonah lived a few minutes away, was there in an instant, and seemed ready to handle things in a way that suggested he almost expected some horror like this from his daughter. Alex knew it instinctively: Jonah, with his money and influence, his unflappable mien and his undeniable ability to bend other men to his will would save them all.

Legally, at least.

Alex's father-in-law was self-made and rich, and there was a reason for that. He was also well-versed in covering for his daughter, a lovely and kind but also troubled and volcanic

woman never equipped to deal with a child like Jordan. He knew what to do from the moment he walked into their house and assessed the situation, his sharp eyes moving over the scene, the kitchen table with the spilled cereal bowl, the open door to the basement, the quivering figure of Dara on the concrete, screaming until her throat was raw.

The path from that moment, the end of Alex's life as a devoted husband and father to whatever he was now in this groaning, circus-sewer of a place, had been short, and traveled with dizzying speed. There were other paths he could have taken, but Jonah seemed to know how to handle that too.

Jonah split his time between Alexandria and New York City and had many connections. He helped fast-track Alex through the New York state bar and then into the DA's office. As the marriage crumbled fast, so did Jonah move to wrap up the investigation of his grandson's death and move his son-in-law, oddly beloved, to a new life. Jonah knew best, and after a few months in his new environment, Alex knew it too. He would forever be in the man's debt.

And it had begun, all of it, with that hellish vision of Jordan's body passing before him, out of their home and into an ambulance on a lovely tree-lined street in the clean, ordered city Alex had been born and raised in. The city he had grown to love Dara Schwartz in, from childhood, first his neighbor, then his best friend, then his wife. The city he never imagined he would have to flee.

Closely guarded by the unnamed sister, Celeste emerged from the apartment after the baby's body had been wheeled into the steel elevator down the hall. The detectives were directing patrol officers and taking notes. The Crime Scene Unit guys in their dark blue tactical uniforms were reviewing their work, thumbing through photos on heavy, black cameras. Alex was right outside the door in the bland, bleach-smelling hallway. The sister caught his eye and glared.

"Stay away from her," she said.

"I'll see you at the hospital, Celeste," Alex said with a neutral tone, as if he hadn't heard the sister.

"No, you won't," the sister said, leaving Celeste and walking back to him. She pointed a long, slim finger at him, her eyes on fire. "You don't get to run this."

"If you're talking about the investigation into your niece's death, then you're wrong. I get to run it, and I am."

"You don't think I know your system? You're a grunt, sent out in the middle of the night. You replaced that little *totito* who threw up on his shoes. You really think we're afraid of you?"

Alex again checked himself before opening his mouth. There were three choices when it came to difficult “civilians” in his work, whether suspects, witnesses or family members: things he wanted to say, things appropriate to say, and things he could get away with saying. He had never lowered himself to blurt out what he wanted to say, and he wasn’t going to now.

That said, he knew that neither Celeste nor her sister would ever willingly help him. He knew something else, too, something that had occurred to him in the seven or so minutes it took to smoke a cigarette. Alex smoked because he enjoyed it, but really it was a Faustian bargain: A slow, suicidal process that revealed more to him than any other.

“I don’t know what your sister is afraid of,” he said, mirroring her eye-fucking stare. “Maybe nothing. But I know what you’re afraid of.” He paused for effect and then nodded toward Celeste. “Her.”

“You don’t know Celeste,” she said. Her lower lip was trembling, but minutely. She was tough. “You don’t know us. You have no idea what it’s like to go through—”

“I do though,” he said, cutting her off. He kept his voice just above a whisper. “He was my only child.” Now the sister’s steely eyes grew wide and her mouth went still. Alex pointed toward the apartment door. “Wheeled out of my front door the same way. His name was Jordan.” She swallowed audibly.

“Okay, so?”

“So, Celeste scares you. I know about that kind of fear. Being afraid of someone you love. Someone who could have done something, been a part of something, really, really terrible.”

“You know nothing. Not even my name.”

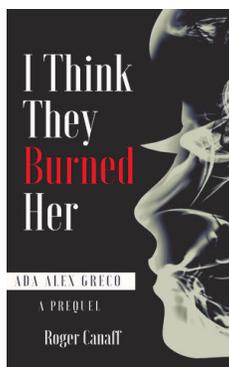
“I don’t care what your name is. I know your niece’s name was Ariana. Maybe I am just a grunt sent out in the middle of the night, but know this, whoever you are. I’ll remember everything your sister said to me and how she said it. I’ll be ready to testify to it when she becomes a suspect along with whoever else she’s trying to protect. It’s Ariana I’m here for. Not your sister. Not you. Not your family.”

“What did you do to him?” she asked, stressing the word “do.” Her eyes were softer now, less wild, more wily. “Your son?”

“It’s not what I did.”

“You know, I don’t think I believe that,” she said, searching his face much like Celeste had done earlier. She smiled, a tight, mean grin. “I think this is about you. About what you think you need to do to make up for something.” He grinned back.

“When Roberto and your sister are in prison for what they did to Ariana, you can ask them if it matters.”



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