

ALEX RAINER, P.I.

The Pruitt Case

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An Alex Rainer, P.I. Mystery

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A Mystery

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*“People carrying something that heavy
eventually need to set it down.
The question is not whether but when
and who is in the room.”*

CHAPTER ONE

The Call



Carla Pruitt calls. She wants to clear her brother's name. Danny Pruitt lost his contractor's license two years ago in a proceeding she believes was rigged. She has been saving for two years to hire me. She got my name from a friend of a friend.

I drive to Tulsa.

She wants to meet at a coffee shop on the south side. I suggest the diner two blocks from my motel instead.

CHAPTER TWO

The Diner



I get there at eight-forty and take the back booth. Clear sightline to the front door and the full length of the counter. Six stools, four occupied. I order coffee and eggs from a waitress named Donna who writes nothing down and brings everything right.

By nine there are nine people in the place. The man two stools from the end of the counter has been there since I arrived. Dark jacket, work boots with dried mud on the left heel. Phone face down on the counter. He is watching the front door.

Carla comes through it at nine-oh-two. Folder under her arm. She sees me in the booth and starts across the diner and then her eyes go to the counter and the man in the dark jacket and her stride breaks. Not a stumble. One step that lands short before she makes herself take the next one at full length. She slides in across from me and picks up the menu with both hands.

She holds it without reading it. Then she sets it down and puts the folder on the table. Forty-two, dark hair pulled back, a

blazer over a plain shirt. The tired she is carrying isn't from last night.

She starts.

CHAPTER THREE

Meridian Place



Danny Pruitt and Gerald Foss formed Meridian Place LLC four years ago. Mixed use development, twelve acres on the north side of Tulsa. Danny has twelve years of commercial construction experience — the subcontractors, the inspectors, the rhythm of how jobs move. Foss brings capital and relationships. The project is permitted and financed in six months.

Equal partners on paper. In practice Foss controls the money and Danny runs the site.

In month fourteen Danny uses twenty-two thousand dollars of project funds to cover a personal shortfall. Eleven days in March. He transfers the money, covers what he needs, and pays it back before the quarter closes. He makes a line item entry in the internal ledger — the outgoing transfer, the return, the dates, a notation explaining the nature of the loan. The money is back. The books are clean.

Three months later Gerald Foss calls for a full internal audit.

While she talks I watch her and I watch the man at the counter. Her back is to the room. Every time she needs to check on him she turns her head slightly to the right — not a full turn, just enough to bring him into her peripheral vision. Each time her voice drops half a note and her hands go still on the folder. Then she turns back and picks up exactly where she left off.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Hearing



The audit surfaces Danny's eleven days. Foss's attorneys build a case. Fraud. Misappropriation. Breach of fiduciary duty. At the licensing board hearing Foss's attorney calls the company comptroller — a woman named Sylvia Crane — and questions her for eleven minutes. The dates of the transfer. The amount. The wire records. Crane confirms all of it accurately under oath. She is never asked about the repayment. She is never asked about the ledger entry documenting the return of every dollar nine days before the quarter closed.

Danny's attorney tells him not to raise the repayment without documentation. The documentation is on a laptop in his office — his copy of the internal ledger with both entries visible. Two days before the hearing the laptop is not on his desk. Not in the storage cabinet. Not in the conference room. Not in his assistant's office. His assistant has been on leave for three weeks. The laptop is gone.

Danny loses his contractor's license. The partnership dissolves. The project stops on twelve acres on the north side of Tulsa with the building nearly complete — foundation in,

structure up, roof on, windows in, utilities commissioned. One step from certificate of occupancy. Gerald Foss walks out of the hearing building. That is the last time Carla sees him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reggie Beaumont



The man at the counter puts a twenty on the formica and stands without waiting for change. He walks to the door. Carla sits perfectly still while he crosses the room. She watches the door from her peripheral vision until it opens and closes. Then her shoulders come down a full inch and she picks up her coffee for the first time and drinks some of it.

She tells me his name. Reggie Beaumont. Eastside Property Group, east side of Tulsa. She has seen him twice before this morning. The parking lot outside Danny's attorney's office the week before the hearing — a man in a car two rows back with the engine running, facing the building. She hadn't known who he was then. Three months ago at a gas station three blocks from her house — at the pump diagonally across from her. He didn't look at her. She drove home and sat at her kitchen table for forty minutes before she could make herself get up.

She opens the folder and puts a photograph on the table.

Eight by ten, home printer, slightly washed out. A groundbreaking ceremony. Hard hats, a ceremonial shovel,

maybe thirty people on raw dirt. Danny and Foss in the center shaking hands. Behind them and to the left, standing slightly apart, a man in a dark jacket. Not looking at the camera. Looking at Danny and Foss.

Carla has circled his face in blue pen.

She pulls the photograph off the project website two years ago. She recognizes Beaumont from the gas station three months later and goes back and circles him. She has been carrying it ever since because she doesn't know what it proves and doesn't know who to show it to.

CHAPTER SIX

Questions



I ask about Sylvia Crane.

Crane has been Foss's project comptroller for eight years. She leaves six weeks after the hearing and is now at a property management firm in Broken Arrow, twenty minutes east. Carla has called her twice in four months. Both times voicemail after three rings. Neither returned.

I ask about the laptop. Company asset, on the equipment schedule. When the partnership dissolves Foss's attorneys demand return of all company property. Danny's attorney tells him to comply. The laptop goes back in a box with everything else. I ask who has access to Danny's office during the audit. Foss. Foss's attorney. And Beaumont, who spends two weeks in and out of the Meridian Place offices conducting what the paperwork calls a physical asset inventory.

I ask who she has told about hiring me. Danny, the night before. And her neighbor Pat — a retired woman named Pat Hendricks who has been following the situation. She mentions it to Pat two days ago without thinking it matters.

She calls Danny while I finish my coffee. Then I leave.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Site



I drive to the development site.

The construction fence is still up, faded until the orange has gone the color of old clay. A laminated sign shows the Meridian Place rendering — glass facades, ground floor retail, illustrated pedestrians with coffee cups. Two years of Oklahoma weather has bleached it until the pedestrians are pale outlines against a pale background.

The building is nearly complete. Foundation in, structure up, roof on, windows in. The shell of a mixed-use development that should have opened eighteen months ago sitting idle and locked up behind orange construction fence. I walk the perimeter.

Danny Pruitt's work is visible in every detail — the precision of the foundation work, the alignment of the structural elements, the quality of the envelope. Whatever Foss finds to use against him, it is not this.

At the far corner I find the mechanical connections on the utility panels. The building has been commissioned — water, gas, electrical all connected and tested. The panel covers are

two years old. The locks on them are not. Manufacturer's coating still intact. Someone has been back recently and replaced these locks.

Foss doesn't kill the Meridian Place project. He takes it.

I photograph the caps and drive to the Suncrest Motel.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Room 9



Room 9, ground floor, end unit. Danny opens the door. He is expecting me — Carla has called — but expecting me and being ready are different things. He doesn't look relieved. He steps back and I come in.

The room smells like burnt coffee and old carpet. A cardboard box on the floor with manila folders sticking out at different angles. A yellow legal pad open on the bed, handwriting stopping halfway down the page mid-sentence. He picks it up and sets it face down on the nightstand.

We sit. Him on the edge of the bed. Me in the chair by the window. He talks.

The shortfall. The eleven days. The twenty-two thousand. The repayment. The ledger entry. The laptop surrendered and never seen again.

The attorney's name is Warren Elias. Danny finds him through a commercial real estate broker he has worked with before — Hal Simmons. Simmons says Elias is the best licensing defense attorney in Tulsa. Elias charges twelve thousand dollars. Danny borrows against his truck.

Elias tells him not to raise the repayment without documentation. When Danny tells him about the ledger entry Elias says it is inadmissible without the physical document. Danny tells him the laptop is gone. Elias says there is nothing to be done. Keep the answers short and factual. Let the proceeding run its course.

Danny hasn't worked a construction job since. Day labor through a staffing agency — warehouse work, some landscaping. Forty dollars an hour when there is work. There is not always work.

Then — Foss calls him two weeks ago.

Personal call. Not through attorneys. Just checking in. How is Danny doing, has he found work, how is Carla. Danny keeps it under a minute and gets off the phone. He hasn't told Carla.

I drive back to the motel with the windows down.

CHAPTER NINE

The Laptop



At the motel I open my laptop.

Warren Elias first. Solo practice on the south side. Licensing defense, administrative law. Seventeen years in practice. Before that three years as a staff attorney at the Oklahoma Real Estate Commission. He knows how licensing board hearings work from the inside.

I search his client history through court filings and bar records. Eleven licensing board matters in the past six years. Nine resolved against the licensee. I cross-reference opposing counsel in those nine cases. Four of them — attorneys from Tanner Reeves and Associates.

Warren Elias. Four losses against Tanner Reeves in six years.

I search Hal Simmons. His brokerage has closed fourteen transactions in the past three years. Three of the fourteen involve properties held by Northgate Land Holdings.

Hal Simmons does business with Northgate Land Holdings. Northgate is Foss. Foss's entity is managed by Tanner Reeves.

Tanner Reeves attorneys have beaten Elias four times in six years. Hal Simmons points Danny to Elias when Danny needs a licensing defense attorney.

Danny pays twelve thousand dollars and borrows against his truck to hire an attorney with a losing record against the firm representing the man trying to destroy him. The referral comes from a broker with a documented business relationship with that man's holding company.

Danny doesn't just lose the hearing. He loses it before he walks in.

CHAPTER TEN

Pat Hendricks



I search Pat Hendricks. A property consulting firm called Hendricks Project Solutions, incorporated four years ago, dissolved after eleven months. In the tax filing under client revenues — a company name I don't recognize. Bridgemark Development Services LLC.

I search Bridgemark. It traces to a parent. The parent to another. Three levels up — Gerald Foss, listed as a principal investor in a commercial real estate project five years ago. Pat Hendricks's work for the contractor on that project lasts six weeks. One engagement. Two steps removed. Five years before Meridian Place.

I cross through Pat Hendricks's name with two lines.

I call Carla. I tell her not to discuss the case with anyone. Then I ask who Danny has spoken to since she told him she was hiring someone.

She calls back twenty minutes later. Danny calls Diane Schuler the night before — his former office manager at Meridian Place. Just talking. He mentions Carla has hired someone. Diane Schuler works for Meridian Place for three

years. When the partnership folds she goes to work for one of Foss's other property management companies. Fourteen months on Foss's payroll.

Danny makes that call at eight in the evening. Beaumont is in his seat at the diner counter before nine the next morning. Thirteen hours.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BOK Tower



I search Northgate Land Holdings. The registered agent is Tanner Reeves and Associates. Fifteenth floor, BOK Tower, downtown Tulsa. Tanner Reeves files the paperwork that takes the project from the partnership. Now they are managing its sale. The fresh locks on those utility panels are for a buyer — whoever Foss is selling a nearly complete mixed-use development to and at what price.

I go through the Tanner Reeves attorney bios. Third partner on the litigation page — Paul Covey. Professional headshot, early fifties, dark suit. Nine years with Tanner Reeves. Before that four years as an assistant district attorney in Tulsa County.

A line from Covey to Tanner Reeves. A second from Tanner Reeves to Northgate. A third from Tanner Reeves to the Meridian Place LLC hearing, where a Tanner Reeves attorney builds eleven minutes of testimony around a carefully selected portion of the truth.

I drive to the north side of the city.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gantry Earthworks



Reed Gantry runs Gantry Earthworks out of a yard on the industrial side of the north loop. His name is on the Meridian Place permit filings as the site preparation contractor. A woman in the prefab office says he is out on a job and will be back by four. I pour coffee from the counter pot and sit in a plastic chair by the window.

He comes back at four-twenty in a pickup that has seen considerable use. Fifties, big through the shoulders, thirty years outdoors in Oklahoma. He comes in and sees me and looks at the woman at the desk and she shrugs. He pours coffee and pulls a chair around to face mine.

His work on the Meridian Place site is the foundation prep — clearing, grading, the early ground work before the building goes up. His contract runs four months, early in the project. He is long gone by the time the building reaches its current state.

I ask who he contracts with. He gets up and comes back with a folder and reads the name out. Not Foss. Not Pruitt. Carter Lyle.

I write it down. He gives me the number.

I drive back to the motel with Carter Lyle on the notepad. Not Gerald Foss. Not Danny Pruitt. A third person inside this operation from the beginning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Carter Lyle



I search Carter Lyle.

Forty minutes before I find anything useful. The name connects to a consulting firm doing project management for commercial real estate developers in Tulsa. Incorporated six years ago. The firm's only listed principal is the consultant himself. His address is a house on the east side. I search the property records. The house is owned by an LLC registered by Tanner Reeves and Associates.

I add Carter Lyle to the notepad. Below it the LLC. Below that Tanner Reeves.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Sedan



I pull the curtain back an inch before anything else in the morning. The parking lot. Three cars that were there when I checked in. One that wasn't. A dark blue sedan parked directly across from my room, nose out, facing my door. Not surveillance. Announcement.

I let the curtain fall and get dressed and make coffee and sit in the chair by the window. At six-forty the sedan starts and pulls out without hurrying and turns north and is gone. I write down the plate number, the make and color, the direction, and the time.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sylvia Crane



I search Sylvia Crane.

She leaves Foss's company six weeks after the hearing and takes a position at a property management firm in Broken Arrow called Meridian Ridge Partners. I search Meridian Ridge. Incorporated three years ago. Clean registered agent. Nothing connecting to Tanner Reeves or Foss.

Her LinkedIn profile hasn't been updated since she takes the Broken Arrow job. Professional headshot. Composed. Eleven endorsements for accounting software. No recommendations in two years.

She has a sister in Tulsa. Mara Crane. Physical therapist, clinic off Riverside Drive. Mara's social media is public. Six weeks ago she posts a photograph — herself and a woman I recognize from Sylvia's LinkedIn. Caption reads *dinner with my favorite person*. Location tag — a restaurant in midtown Tulsa. Not Broken Arrow. Sylvia still comes into the city to see her sister.

I write Mara's name below Sylvia's.

Sylvia Crane sat in a hearing room and answered eleven minutes of questions accurately and completely and walked out without once mentioning the repayment or the ledger entry that documented it. Six weeks later she was in Broken Arrow not returning calls.

People carrying something that heavy eventually need to set it down. The question is not whether but when and who is in the room.

I call her.

I tell her my name and that I am working for Danny Pruitt and his sister Carla. I tell her I have been looking at the Meridian Place proceeding and that I would like to meet with her. That is all I say.

She is quiet for a moment. Then she says she can meet me the next morning in Broken Arrow. She gives me the name of a coffee shop on the main corridor.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Ledger



She is already there when I arrive. Hands around a mug. The look of someone who has already made the hard decision and is now just waiting for the consequences to arrive. She puts a folded envelope on the table. Inside are three pages of photocopied ledger entries. The outgoing transfer dated March fourteenth. The full repayment dated March twenty-fifth. A line item notation in Danny's handwriting explaining the nature of the temporary loan.

The ledger. The case. Right there on a coffee shop table in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma.

I ask her about the hearing. She says she is called six days before by a man she knows from Foss's office. He walks her through exactly what she will be asked and exactly how she should answer. He tells her what to leave out. He tells her if she answers only what is asked and nothing more the whole thing will be over quickly and she can move on. She asks about the repayment entry. He says it is not relevant to the questions she will be asked.

She does what she is told. She answers eleven minutes of questions accurately and completely and walks out of the hearing room and drives home and sits in her kitchen and understands for the first time exactly what she has just done.

I ask for the name of the man who calls her. Carter Lyle. The same name Reed Gantry reads from the folder in his office. The consultant whose house is owned by an LLC registered by Tanner Reeves and Associates.

I ask if she will testify. She says yes. She has been saying no to herself for eight months and she is done saying no.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rita Solis



I drive back to Tulsa and call Rita Solis.

Rita Solis is a lawyer I have worked with before. She practices employment and licensing defense on the south side of Tulsa. I tell her I have a client named Danny Pruitt who lost his contractor's license in a proceeding that was deliberately constructed to suppress material evidence and I have that evidence in hand and I need her to file for reconsideration of the licensing board decision. She asks how long I have been in Tulsa. Three days, I tell her. She says she wants everything I have by end of day.

I drive to the Suncrest Motel and knock on room 9.

Danny opens the door. He looks at me and then at the envelope in my hand.

I tell him to call Carla.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Reconsideration



Rita Solis files for reconsideration the following afternoon. The filing centers on Sylvia Crane's copy of the ledger entry — both the outgoing transfer and the full repayment documented in Danny's own hand, with dates, proving the money was back before the quarter closed. She includes documentation of the financial relationships between Hal Simmons and Northgate Land Holdings and between Warren Elias and Tanner Reeves and Associates, establishing that Danny was steered toward a compromised attorney by a broker with ties to Foss.

The licensing board schedules a hearing for three weeks out.

In the days between the filing and the hearing Beaumont appears twice more — once outside Rita Solis's office, once in the parking lot of the grocery store Carla uses on Saturday mornings. I note the times and locations and plate numbers and give them to Rita who adds them to a file she describes as insurance.

Paul Covey calls Rita two days before the hearing and suggests the matter might be resolved through a private

settlement that would restore Danny's license without a public proceeding. Rita calls me after and reads me the conversation word for word. I tell her to tell Covey that Danny Pruitt is not interested in private settlements and will see them at the hearing.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Four Hours



The hearing lasts four hours.

Sylvia Crane testifies for forty minutes. She is precise and complete and does not look at the Tanner Reeves attorney when he cross-examines her. She answers what she is asked and volunteers what she is not asked and when she is done she sits down and folds her hands in her lap and looks straight ahead.

The board takes forty-five minutes to deliberate. They restore Danny Pruitt's contractor's license effective immediately. They refer the matter of the original hearing to the state attorney general's office for review of potential procedural misconduct.

I am in the parking lot when Danny and Carla come out.

Danny shakes my hand. He doesn't say anything. Neither do I.

I drive out of Tulsa with the windows down.

I drive until the city is behind me. Then I drive some more.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Two Months Later

...

Two months later Carla calls. Rita Solis has filed a civil action against Gerald Foss on behalf of the Meridian Place partnership. The nearly complete building on the north side of Tulsa is a partnership asset. Danny is entitled to his half. Foss's attorneys are negotiating.

She says she thought I would want to know.

I tell her I'm glad.

...

The End

*Alex Rainer
will return.*

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