

CRUDE INTENT

AN ALEX SHERIDAN THRILLER

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PROLOGUE

A clean-cut young man wearing a long black coat and woolen gray scarf, looking more like a law clerk than the courier he is, scales the formidable steps of the Denver Courthouse. Snowflakes swirl like moths through the pastel sky as thunder growls in the distance. The massive courthouse doors open into a vast hall where armed guards monitor guests passing through a security scanner. The young courier removes his coat and scarf and places them with his cell phone and briefcase in plastic containers. A burly guard casually inspects the briefcase and waves the courier through the security scanner.

The young man pulls his coat and scarf back on and crams the cell phone in his pocket. He surveys the hall, eyes searching, then heads for the nearest red exit sign, leather briefcase in hand.

The door opens on a dingy staircase to the second floor, where portraits of state Supreme Court justices loom. He hurries through the silent gallery as if to avoid their penetrating eyes. He pauses when he comes to a door with a brass plaque engraved with the name “Judge J.R. Thompson.” He fishes through the briefcase to retrieve a fat manila envelope, then pushes through the mahogany door and enters an office where a striking young woman sits at a large maple wood reception desk.

The desktop is void of clutter, with only an iPad resting on it. A wingback chair sits in a corner of the room next to a glass coffee table. The table surface holds several neatly placed legal journals and business magazines. Fresh lilies are arranged in a vase at the table’s center, and

classical music plays softly in the background.

“This is for Judge Thompson,” says the courier, handing the receptionist the envelope.

She smiles at him. “Are you a law student?” she inquires casually.

“Yes, at Boulder. You?” he asks.

“Me, too. I’m clerking for the summer.”

The young man notices that she has deliciously smooth olive skin and striking amber eyes. He hesitates, chews the corner of his lip, and hands her a delivery receipt to sign.

“Maybe I’ll see you around the library,” he says, hesitating for just a moment before disappearing into the hallway.

“See you in the library.” The young woman calls after him, then gets up from the desk and knocks softly on the judge’s interior office door.

“Come in.”

The judge’s deep voice is reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher’s. The clerk delivers the envelope to the judge as carefully as she would pass food to a jailed inmate.

“Can I get you fresh coffee?” the clerk asks.

The judge’s gaze remains fixed on the papers on her desk. “No, thank you.”

The clerk backs out cautiously.

Alone in her private office, Judge Thompson looks at the envelope. A few files lie next to the papers on her desk, but otherwise the room is impeccably neat. She opens a desk drawer, locates a wood box, and removes a large, elegant letter opener with semi-precious stones adorning the handle. With the miniature dagger, she carefully slices the envelope to reveal a wad of cash wrapped in blank white paper. The shredder hums as she quickly feeds the envelope into its teeth. Deliberately, she returns the letter opener to its case and puts the cash inside a large white envelope.

The tall, distinguished-looking judge walks over to an oil painting of the English countryside and moves it aside to reveal a wall safe. Right, left, right—in seconds, the safe unlocks. The judge’s elegant hands tremble slightly as she opens the vault and stuffs the envelope inside. She closes the safe and returns to her desk.

Nearby, the courtroom is empty except for a few defendants, a

court reporter, a stout security officer, and a lawyer fidgeting with files. They are all waiting for the judge, whose vacant chair dominates the courtroom.

Behind the bench and through a door are the judge's chambers, where Judge Thompson remains at her desk. A knock on the door interrupts her concentration, and she frowns.

"Come in."

A short, dark man with wire-rimmed glasses and a balding head walks in and places a file on her desk. His suit is smart.

"Your client has barely served the minimum time," observes the judge, striving to keep her voice level. They both know the history of the case.

"His record is commendable," the lawyer replies softly.

"Premeditated murder is not commendable," she says, without veiling her sarcasm. Tension thickens between them.

"I assure you, Judge, he is contrite and not a danger to anyone."

The judge notices the man's nervous twitch and incessant blinking. "He is a murderer," she says. Looking down, she reluctantly opens the file, picks up a pen, and signs a paper in it.

"Who has shown exemplary rehabilitation," the lawyer counters.

The package that arrived earlier is neither acknowledged nor discussed, but its presence is felt by both.

"Your letter to the parole board is critical," he adds calmly. Inside his immaculate suit, sweat soaks his shirt. "The governor will take care of the rest."

"If he is back in my court again, it will be for life."

"I understand. Thank you."

No eye contact or trite pleasantries are exchanged. The judge closes the file and hands it, with the signed paper inside, to the lawyer. He quickly takes it and exits.

Judge Thompson pulls a small bottle of prescription pills out of her desk drawer, swallows two, then washes down a third with tepid coffee. After letting out a heavy sigh, she puts her hands on the desk for support and stands carefully. The anxiety is worse. She adjusts her robe and heads into her courtroom.

CHAPTER 1

Alex Sheridan opened the door to the downtown Denver office building, waved warmly at the security guard, and strode confidently across the marble lobby to the elevator labeled for floors twelve to twenty-four. The glass-and-granite tower was one of the most prestigious buildings in the city.

Inside the elevator, a television flashed cable news highlights from around the world. The stock market lunged up and down like a bungee cord, and oil was priced at more than one hundred dollars a barrel. Give it time, Alex thought; it would soon reverse course and come crashing down.

She watched the screen and, just before the doors closed, a well-dressed young man stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the twenty-third floor, one floor below Alex's office. Their eyes locked.

"Are you Ms. Sheridan?" he asked, excitement in his voice.

"Yes." She reached out and shook his proffered hand.

"I really liked the article in oil and gas magazine," he volunteered.

"Don't believe the media." She smiled, then glanced at her vibrating cell phone as an unknown number flashed on the screen. Pressing a button, she ignored the call.

A leader and maverick in the oil and gas business, Alex had recently been described by a journalist as a tycoon. One of her friendly adversaries in the oil and gas business was quoted in a profile story saying, "Her peers respect her—she is shrewd and smart, tough and honest as any

man in this business.” Alex Sheridan knew more about putting an oil deal together than most. In the industry, her word was gold, a rare and admirable quality.

She noted the young man having a difficult time keeping his eyes off her as he took in her long dark hair, lean muscular body, and head-turning features that camouflaged one of the best business minds in the industry.

He blushed as he realized she had caught him staring. “How is your project coming along on the Western Slope?”

She smiled, impressed that he was following her company.

“Challenging, thank you,” she replied, “What part of the business are you in?”

“We’re a new startup on the twenty-third floor,” he told her. “We buy minerals and rework old wells.”

With the advent of horizontal drilling and fracking, underground formations that had previously been inaccessible now produced record quantities of oil and natural gas. The drilling cracked open deep-level formations, allowing the oil trapped inside to flow to the surface. Fracking, a controversial technique, forced a mixture of fluids, sand, and water under extreme pressure into a shale formation, making it possible to extract oil and gas from the shale in massive amounts.

The technologies had unlocked vast reserves, creating an energy boom and, overnight, the United States had more oil and natural gas reserves than any country in the world.

“Good luck, and let me know if we can do anything to help,” she said earnestly.

He nodded his thanks, then the door opened and he was gone, only the scent of his aftershave lingering.

A few moments later, Alex exited the elevator that opened directly into her world, an expansive office occupying the entire twenty-fourth floor. Dramatic black-and-white photographs, a visual history of her professional life, adorned the walls. A photo taken at a large field in the Permian Basin in West Texas showed her sitting on the back of a pickup with several weathered men in cowboy hats. She wore a frayed baseball cap and a muscle T-shirt, revealing a sculpted body that looked as if it belonged to a ballet dancer. Another photo showed her on an

offshore rig in the Gulf of Mexico, with huge waves crashing against the platform as the team held on tight. In yet another, she and a striking blonde woman, with shovels in hand and broad smiles, were breaking ground for a building in downtown Denver.

A breathtaking view poured in from the floor-to-ceiling windows, and exquisite purple and pink clouds hovered on the spiny mountain peaks like floating cotton candy. In the conference room, maps lay unfurled on a gigantic boardroom-style table. Maps and seismic charts pinned to the walls showed the expanse of Sheridan Enterprises. In addition to the Colorado ventures, operations included wells in the Barnett Shale, production in numerous counties in Texas, and leases in Wyoming and the Dakotas.

A door slammed in the front office, startling Alex. The door to her office flew open as Colt Forester burst in like a hurricane. He was working-man handsome, smudged with grease and dirt, and wore a Texas-sized smile.

“You scared me,” Alex said, smiling.

Closing and locking the door to her office, Colt pulled off his worn tee shirt and work gloves, and tossed his sunglasses on a table. Tousled hair and a two-day-old beard made him irresistible. He strode across the room toward her while unbuckling his belt. His hard-muscled arms enveloped her as he kissed her fiercely.

“I missed you,” he said in a husky voice.

“Where have you been?” Alex pulled her mouth loose from the kiss, looking perplexed. He had been on the road for more than a week without a word.

“Drillin’, baby. Fightin’ with that well in the Permian Basin.” He placed his stainless-steel watch on the end table by the sofa, then kissed her again, groping like a hungry bear.

“We’ve got major problems over at the Thompson Divide,” Alex protested, as he pulled her to him and slid his hands down the back of her pants.

Located just outside the Aspen Valley, the Thompson Divide on the Western Slope of Colorado was erupting with controversy.

“Protesters are trying to shut us down,” she told him. “I think it’s far more serious than prior well projects.”

Protesters were active and vocal in their determination to stop the drilling. A big red circle on the map indicated the importance of the multimillion-dollar project. Emotional fury around fracking and drilling had gained momentum and potentially threatened the business.

“That,” he whispered in her ear, his lips and hands all over her, “can wait.”

Ignoring her objections, he pressed hard against her, grabbing her perfect bottom. She could feel his full erection as he expertly slid her tee shirt over her head. She mumbled something futile, but his roguishness was too seductive. He took her hand and led her to the large sofa, where he feverishly kissed and nuzzled her breasts.

“Seriously, Colt,” she protested, but her struggling was half-hearted. “They are trying to shut everything down. It’s urgent!”

“I am so going to make your day,” Colt promised, as he knelt in front of her.

“Fran will be here soon,” she warned, referring to her reliable assistant, but her resistance was weak.

“I locked the door,” he told her. He pulled at her jeans, then kissed her stomach until she quit fighting. She ran her hands through his unruly hair, conceding the conquest as she felt the need for him rising like a tsunami. The familiar terrain was intoxicating. Alex’s heart ignited as Colt pulled her close to him on the sofa. They held the kiss as Colt discarded his jeans. Alex, breathless, stroked him into an erotic frenzy. Colt broke into a sweat, smothering her with his mouth.

He was all over her, gentle and forceful at the same time, burying himself in her, touching her with velvet hands, saturating her with his wildness. She moaned with ecstasy, reveling in the passion. For some time, he lay pressed to her, stroking her hair. Theirs had been a precious, yet bumpy love affair for many years.

Finally, Colt rolled off her, smiling with satisfaction. They giggled playfully.

“You think you can just barge in here and take what you want?” Alex cried in a mock display of indignation.

“I do,” Colt said, patting her cheek. “Do I detect a complaint?”

Dropping to her knees, Alex searched under the sofa for her thong.

“Voila!” Colt mischievously dangled the thong, holding it high in

the air.

“Give that to me,” she demanded, snatching at it.

“Say please,” he said, giving her another love pat.

“Stop it!” She swatted at his hand as she tried to smooth her tee shirt.

“I could charge you with breaking and entering.”

“Not if you climax,” he laughed. “That *was* a climax when you squealed, wasn’t it?”

Alex leaned over and kissed him softly. These were magical moments. She adored this carefree man-boy who danced through life on the tail of the wind. From the moment they met years before, an electric attraction and powerful love force infected their lives.

“I’m going to try to make myself presentable.” She disappeared into an elaborate dressing room that housed every conceivable necessity, from makeup to athletic gear to guns.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” she called out happily, brushing her hair and wiping away smudges of mascara. She vividly recalled their first meeting over a complex oil deal. It led to a love affair and business partnership neither had expected.

“Can’t,” he said, “You love it too much.”

He was right, she thought. Theirs was a love that had survived great adversity.

“Thank goodness you’re back,” she said, walking over to the large mahogany desk that dominated the end of the room opposite the sofa. “There is so much to do on the wells.”

Colt’s phone rang a country tune as she reentered the room. He stood against the great western landscape outside the office’s enormous windows, looking as solid and monumental as a Michelangelo sculpture. The sight of Colt’s sculpted body, forged from handling pipe and steel, intoxicated her.

“Yeah, I’ll be down there in the morning. You’re first in line. The rig’s on the way.” He hung up.

“What did you just promise?” Alex demanded, hands on her hips and jaw set hard. Standing behind the desk with her temperature rising, she could hardly believe what she’d just heard.

“I had to squeeze in another project, but it won’t take too long,” he replied casually.

Alex exploded like a scud missile. “You’re committed to go to the Thompson Divide, to our project.”

He shrugged. “It’ll keep.”

“You know it’s urgent!” Alex fumed at the feeble excuse for a broken promise. She picked up some papers and waved them at him. “They are going for an injunction.”

He didn’t look at her. “I would have lost this other deal if I hadn’t…”

“So you screw me and our project.”

Colt grinned, his eyes on her. “You weren’t complaining a few seconds ago.”

“You’re risking my project and shoehorning someone else in,” she continued stubbornly.

It was his predictable pattern to slip information in after the fact, and it was not the first time he had welched on a commitment.

“Now it’s all *your* project?” Colt shot back. He cinched his belt buckle hard but diverted his eyes.

Alex tightened her lips, frowning at him. “It will be if you don’t hold up your end of the deal.”

“Have at it. There’s probably another operator you can screw!”

The cruel words hit Alex like a pipe bomb to the heart. A part of her soul crumpled as she watched Colt snatch up his things with the fury of an angry bull.

“You gave your word, Colt.” She tried to soften her accusation, but his word was losing its meaning.

“Relax, Alex, you’re overreacting.” His tone was condescending.

“Your word means nothing anymore.” The poison arrow shot out and hit its mark.

“And you’re a control freak!” he shouted.

“Get out. *Now!*” Alex ordered. “Just get out!”

Colt stormed out and slammed the door, leaving a jet stream of rage in his wake.

Alex had seen an ugly pattern of excessive drinking, feeble excuses, and broken commitments accelerate over the past year. Unreliability oozed through their life like sludge through a pipe. She was sure Colt was underestimating the seriousness of the situation at the Thompson Divide. She had to change course and diffuse the volatile situation

Elizabeth Jeffett

herself, but she vowed silently to remember this moment and not count on Colt Forrester again.

Now it was up to her to figure out what she could do to head off the trouble on her own.