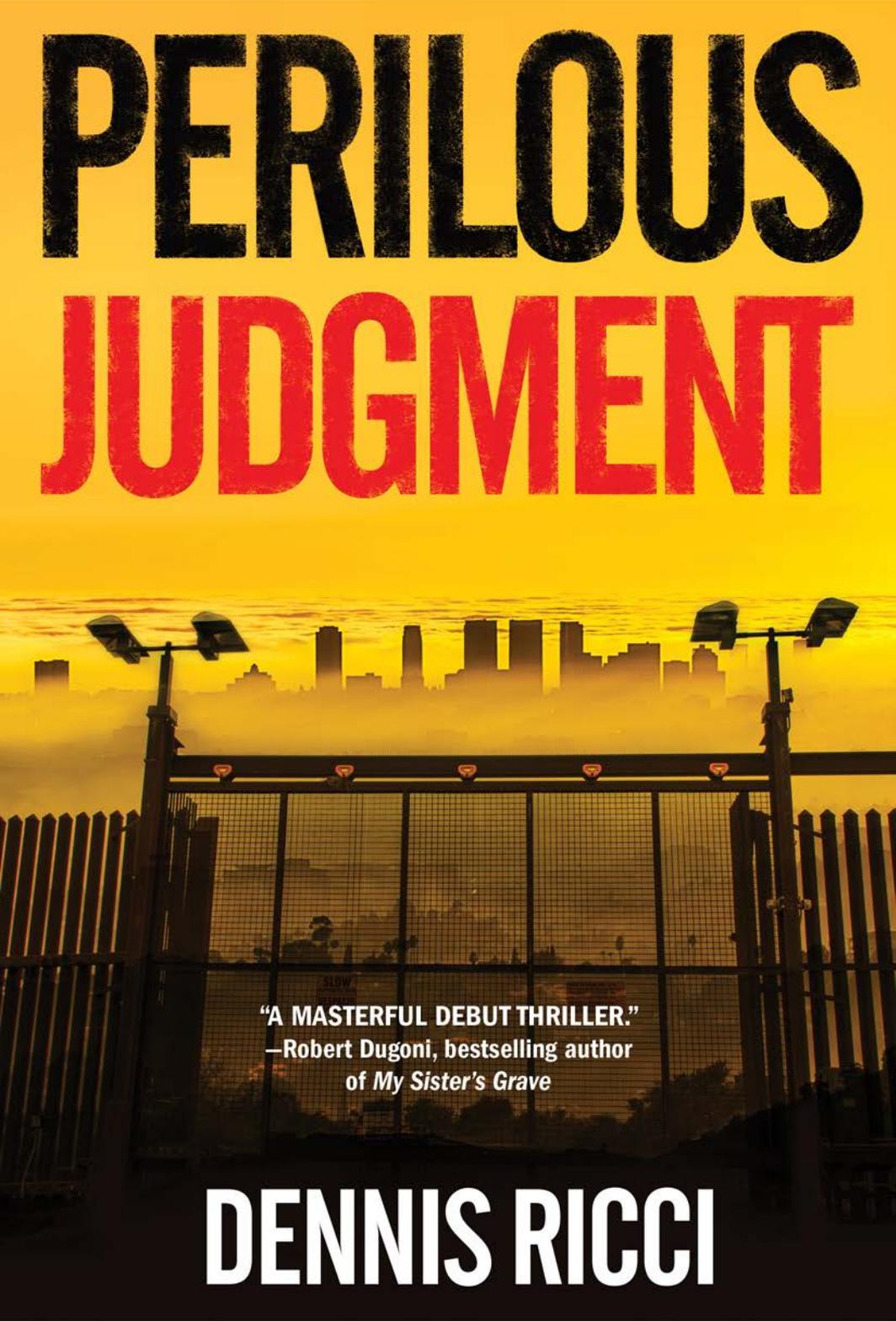


PERILOUS JUDGMENT



"A MASTERFUL DEBUT THRILLER."
—Robert Dugoni, bestselling author
of *My Sister's Grave*

DENNIS RICCI

PERILOUS JUDGMENT

A REAL JUSTICE THRILLER

DENNIS RICCI



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Jesus, my Lord

You alive in me makes all things possible.

Jill, my Beauty

*Your patient love and encouragement helped me persist
through trials and obstacles. I couldn't have finished this
story without you.*

One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Never do anything against conscience, even if the state demands it.

—Albert Einstein

PART I

POWERS THAT BE

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.

—William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Chapter 1

Monday, February 15

United States Courthouse, downtown Los Angeles

1:52 p.m.

US District Judge Edward Lamport marched into his chambers and swapped his robe for a bulletproof vest.

“So, another threat on my life,” he said to Deputy US Marshal Campbell McCormack. “Why the rush to armor me up?”

“Sorry to interrupt your court session, Your Honor.”

“I agreed to such things two weeks ago. After the Ernesto Marroquín threat. You didn’t answer my question.”

McCormack gave him a stern look. “When you turned down our offer of twenty-four-seven protection.”

Edward heard a bit of his younger self in McCormack’s irreverence and let it go. “When did you learn of this new threat?”

“Within the last hour.”

Edward ran fingers through his hair. “FBI called the threat from Marroquín midlevel. I thought that was a stretch. He’s incarcerated, appealing his death sentence. How would having me popped help him?”

McCormack avoided eye contact. He handed Edward a plain navy-blue nylon jacket. “Our raid jacket, without the insignia. See how this fits over the armor.”

Edward zipped the jacket to chest level and checked himself out in the mirror on his wardrobe door. He patted his waistline and grimaced. “Makes me look like I need to drop twenty.”

“We have three concealable vests on order that’ll fit under your shirts.”

“Good thing I like mine full cut.” Edward removed the jacket and draped it over the back of his desk chair and loosened the vest.

“The first death threat didn’t come from Marroquín,” McCormack said.

Edward stared at the deputy. “What are you talking about?”

“Marroquín’s LA drug ring has gotten more aggressive since his conviction. The threat came from his successor.”

“Someone still on the street?” McCormack’s revelation amplified Edward’s vulnerability—and blind spots. “You were going to tell me this when?”

“FBI waited until they were sure. Got word this morning. It’s front burner now. They’re working with LAPD to hunt him down.”

Edward paced his chambers. “So who made today’s threat?”

“Someone from Las Reconquistas.”

“That Mexican group who wants to take back the southwest US?” Edward shook his head. “You sure it’s not some crazed publicity seeker?”

“Timing’s no coincidence. It’s why we recommend the body armor. And that you carry a pistol.”

Edward put up a hand. “No way. Why do I need a gun if you guys’ll be with me around the clock?”

“Because your last, best line of defense is you.”

Edward studied the deputy’s boyish face. “How long have you been in the Marshals Service?”

“Ten years, Your Honor.”

“And how long in your current post?”

“Eighteen months.”

“So you know how hard it is to get a concealed-carry permit in Los Angeles County, even for federal judges.”

“Marshal Hunter is working with the LA County Sheriff’s Office to expedite.”

Edward crossed his arms. *McCormack is confident. I like that.* “You had this all figured out before you barged into my courtroom.”

“Our job, Your Honor. You and I have a date right now at a nearby gun range to get you acquainted with—”

“No can do. I have another hearing in fifteen minutes.”

“Chief Judge Marrone has notified the parties that it’s been postponed.”



Edward and McCormack slipped into The Downtown Gun Club through a nondescript side door. The shooting range was tucked away in a brown stucco building near the LA Wholesale Produce Market, about a mile south of the federal courthouse. McCormack, who frequented the place and had made friends with the owner, had arranged for a private session before the club opened to the public at three p.m.

Edward removed his jacket and unstrapped the bulletproof vest.

“I need you to keep the vest on, Your Honor,” McCormack said as he laid his black range bag on a counter opposite the row of fourteen shooting lanes. “You need to get comfortable firing the weapon while wearing your armor.” He removed a black pistol encased in a holster and held it up. “Glock twenty-seven. In our opinion the best concealed carry. The holster’s called a pancake.” He pulled the pistol out and set it on the counter. “You slip it over your pants at the hip.” McCormack demonstrated how to place the holster over his waistband and then

handed it to Edward. “We’re going to practice drawing from the holster today. Next time we’ll do it with the concealable vest and the suit jackets you wear to teach you how to break your coat—clear your jacket out of the way and draw the gun in one fluid motion.”

Edward knew little about McCormack, but he’d sensed straightaway that the deputy had taken personal ownership of his protection. What had been foretold last year at “baby judges school” had come true—Edward was more vulnerable now to losing his life in service of his country than ever before. His work as a prosecutor in years past had put him in dangerous situations, but this was different. A force he couldn’t see. He blew a deep breath, strapped the vest back in place, and slipped the pancake holster over his waistband at his right hip.

The shooting lanes were about six feet wide and separated by plastic dividers a foot taller than him. The targets were maybe twelve feet away.

“I didn’t picture this place would be so cramped,” Edward said.

“You don’t need to be a marksman, Your Honor. We want you to be comfortable with close-range shooting.”

“That’s an oxymoron if I’ve ever heard one.”

Of course Edward needed to protect himself. He had a responsibility to his wife, Jacqui. To his colleagues on the bench. To the people who depended on him to render justice.

But his family had a deadly history with guns. Which was what had driven him into the criminal justice system in the first place.

And the threats on his life had ripped him away from his most important case. The Justice Department had filed suit last November against the State of California to block Proposition 68, a law passed by California voters that required every resident to carry a special ID card in order to get government services. Its backers had sold it as an invitation for illegal immigrants to come out from the shadows and as sound fiscal policy. Exit polls had shown that more than one in five Latinos who’d voted in the election had voted *for* the law.

Opponents had derided it as backhanded oppression. They accused Proposition 68 supporters of having intent to drive undocumented Latinos out of California.

Edward had thought Prop. 68 was a terrible idea and voted against it. Didn't matter.

His job was to decide whether the law was constitutional, not good policy.

His demonstrated ability to separate his personal feelings from his professional duty had won him praise during his Senate confirmation. He'd confessed to the Judiciary Committee that deportation cases had been hardest on his heart when he was a US Attorney. But the people he'd prosecuted had entered the United States without permission. They'd broken the law. Some were criminals and opportunists, but most had only sought to flee poverty and hopelessness.

Didn't matter.

His job was to ensure that those who came to America illegally were not allowed to stay.

He had learned to disassociate.

He didn't like that about himself.

He snapped his attention back to the business at hand. "I've never used one of those. Wouldn't want to shoot myself by mistake."

McCormack handed him the gun. "Polymer frame, steel slide and barrel." McCormack snapped a magazine into the handle and handed it to him. "Nine rounds in the clip. Keep 'er pointed down. There's no bullet in the chamber yet, but it's good practice."

Edward took the pistol and rotated his wrist right, left. "Lighter than it looks." He handed the gun back to McCormack, barrel sideways. "I trust you'll be the one to maintain this bad boy."

"We'll have a regular check, Your Honor. But you'll still need to know how to keep it clean. The Glock twenty-seven has simple mechanisms." McCormack held the weapon at chest level. "There's a magazine release, slide lock, and a small button to release the slide rail to clean the barrel.

That's it." He popped out the clip and pointed to the trigger area. "There's no safety, but the weapon won't fire as long as the slide lock is engaged and the trigger is back in this decocked position." He thumbed the slide lock forward and pulled back on the slide. "Now you see the trigger is forward." He moved the gun closer to Edward. "See this small trigger on top of the main trigger? The main won't move unless you depress that small one, but it's a light touch. Your best safety is to keep your finger out of the trigger guard until you're ready to fire."

"Hmm . . . I can plop this baby next to my nameplate when my courtroom's in session."

McCormack shook his head and smirked. "Your Honor, we're here to acquaint you with safe and correct firearm use. We'll need to spend some time at a tactical range before you get your own." He handed the loaded clip back to Edward.

Edward slid the magazine into the handle and slapped it into place and holstered the weapon. He stepped between the sidewalls of the shooting lane, and McCormack ran him through the basic stance, arm position, and grip. Feet shoulder width apart, left foot a few inches back from the right, knees flexed. Arms extended, elbows bent. Right hand on the grip, left hand wrapped around the right, thumb on top, parallel to but underneath the slide. "Firm grip with your left hand, keep the right hand relaxed."

"Reminds me of breaking down a golf swing," Edward said.

"It's called the Weaver stance. As long as your feet are under you and your knees are bent, you'll have a good base if you need to hold the weapon closer to your chest."

Edward slipped on a pair of electronic ear protectors that allowed him to hear McCormack. He drew the Glock and settled into firing stance. He aimed at the bull's-eye on the target.

"Looking good, Your Honor. Now rack the slide to chamber a round."

Do what to the slide? "Plain English, please."

“Sorry. Pull the slide back until the trigger pops into cocked position.”

He did as instructed and then sighted the target. He couldn't steady his hands. He wouldn't have time to steady them or even think about them if confronted at close range.

“When you fire, think press, not pull. A smooth press on the trigger.”

He nodded and pointed the gun at the spot on the target that represented a person's heart area.

Press.

His shot struck the lower abdomen area of the target. “Not a complete miss, eh?” he said with a nervous laugh. He upped his concentration, raised the pistol, and this time sighted only with his right eye. He fired another shot.

Outer target ring.

Concentrate. Aim. Press.

A hit in the heart area.

“I'll let you out of here when you can get nine for nine, and then three double taps,” McCormack said with a gruff voice.

“What the heck is a double tap?”

“Two shots to the thoracic area, preferably the heart, and one to the head.”

“You're on. I won't let myself out until I can do it four times.”

Edward emptied the magazine and hit the heart on three of the remaining seven rounds. He stepped back three paces and emptied another clip. Six hits out of nine shots.

“Tell your friend to keep the public out of here until I tell you I'm ready,” Edward said.

“I'll get you another box of bullets.” McCormack stepped to the ammunition counter.

Edward ejected the magazine and fumbled with the loader until he figured out how to press the bullets against the spring-loaded mechanism.

He loaded the last nine rounds, slapped the mag into place, racked the slide, and returned to stance.

Press. Chest.

Press. Neck.

Press. Head.

Got him.

McCormack returned with a fresh box of round-point target rounds.

“Gettin’ the hang of this quick,” Edward said. He reached for the box of bullets and loaded three magazines.

“You figured out loading the mags pretty quick,” McCormack said.

“I’m a fast study. Hey, no one takes those Las Reconquistas people seriously, right?”

“No law enforcement agency had until the protesters showed up across the street from the courthouse. Las Reconquistas members have made themselves conspicuous in the crowd.”

Edward set the pistol and one of the loaded magazines on the counter and turned toward McCormack. “These death threats make no sense. The jury sentenced Marroquín to death, not me. Fearmongering about Prop. Sixty-Eight is irrational.”

“None of that matters,” McCormack said. “We take every threat seriously until it’s eliminated.”

Edward slapped a magazine into the Glock and resumed his practice. The gun felt a little heavier with each shot. He hit one double tap out of three tries on his next mag, and two on the next.

“You’ve done enough for today,” McCormack said. He extended his hand and gestured toward the pistol.

“One miss could be life or death. I need to know I can do it.”

“Your Honor, I don’t—”

“One more time.” Edward yanked on the target holder line and clipped on a fresh sheet. He sent the target back into position and this time set his feet just beyond the edges of the dividing walls. He shook fatigue out of his arms and settled into stance.

Aim. Press.

Miss.

He cursed under his breath.

Edward varied his shooting distance and made six thoracic hits on the next eight shots. His shoulder muscles began to protest. “My respect for weapons training has gone up a few notches.” He popped out the magazine and handed it and the Glock to McCormack.

“There’s still a round in the chamber,” McCormack said. He racked the slide to release the bullet, packed the pistol into its case, and slipped it into his range bag. “We’ll break the weapon down back at the station.”

Edward and McCormack thanked the proprietor of the gun club and headed for McCormack’s black Crown Victoria. Edward pulled his cell phone from his pocket and saw he had missed two calls and a text. He slid into the backseat and listened to the first message. It was Jacqui—she’d be late getting home this evening but would still have dinner ready as planned. He returned her call, got her voice mail, and let her know all was well.

The second missed call and text came from the same number.

It was international.

No voice mail. The text read, *Please call. I need your help*, and included a photo thumbnail he couldn’t make out.

Strange.

He brought the phone closer and tapped the image. The picture was grainy and the colors were faded. It was—

Whoa.

A photo of him. And a woman.

Not just any woman.

Alana Walsh.

His first love. The woman he’d been sure was his forever. Until . . .

He stared at the image. Looked like a photo of the photo.

He laid his phone on the seat next to him. Screen-side down.

We were never supposed to have contact again.

He'd thrown out every trace of their relationship twenty-five years ago. Long before he and Jacqui had met. He'd accepted agony—he would never see her face again—and then had buried it, deep, where no one could access it. Himself included.

Now there she was. The long-repressed hurt of losing her rushed back like it had happened yesterday. He suppressed the urge to groan.

“Everything all right back there, Your Honor?”

Edward was quiet. Memories and images and emotions swirled through his being.

“Something wrong?”

“Huh? Sorry, lost in thought.”

“I asked if everything was all right with you, Your Honor.”

“I'm fine. Something personal came up.”

Chapter 2

United States Courthouse, downtown Los Angeles
3:49 p.m.

Edward managed to stay present with McCormack as he went over how to de-chamber a round from the Glock and disassemble it for cleaning. They left the Marshals Service station on the first floor of the courthouse and headed to Edward's fifth-floor chambers. Edward forced himself to work through some documents to satisfy the law enforcement bureaucracy. McCormack stepped to one of the tall, narrow windows in Edward's chambers on his way out. "Crazy what's going on down there."

Edward joined him and scanned the raucous throng of hundreds crammed into Bowron Square across the street. A line of blue-uniformed Federal Protective Service policemen wearing helmets and vests and pistols on both hips stood guard in front of the courthouse. Several dozen officers from the Los Angeles Police Department dressed in full riot gear guarded the sidewalk around the square. The street was closed to all traffic except official vehicles. Handwritten placards in Spanish and English that said "STOP THE GREED" and "PROPOSITION 68 IS IMMORAL" faced off against others that read "CUT OFF THE

ILLEGAL SPONGES” and “GET IN LINE LIKE MY PARENTS DID.” Brown and black and white faces populated both sides of the divide.

“That’s not going to make your job any easier,” Edward said.

“Or yours, Your Honor.”

“If I let that crowd influence me, we’ll have even bigger problems on our hands.”

McCormack turned to Edward. “How soon will you rule on Proposition Sixty-Eight?”

Edward moved away from the window. “Not soon enough for them. It’s a complicated contest.” He stepped toward the door, hoping McCormack would catch the cue that it was time for him to leave.

“I haven’t paid attention to the issues,” McCormack said. “Prop. Sixty-Eight requires *everyone* living in California to get a state services ID card. So what’s the beef?”

You picked a great time to be curious, McCormack. “Opponents claim it will force illegal immigrants to go underground.”

McCormack crossed his arms. “So what’s the process?”

Edward put hands on hips and took a step toward McCormack, straining inside to keep his composure. “Say you’re from Mexico and you’re here without papers. You go to a state office, probably DMV, to register for the ID. If you don’t have proof of citizenship or legal residence, then you mark ‘undocumented’ on the form. Sorting people out that way allows California to track how much it spends to give benefits to people who aren’t in the US legally.”

“But it doesn’t turn anyone away.”

“Correct. This court settled that question twenty years ago. States may not deny public services to illegal immigrants.”

“I don’t envy you,” McCormack said.

Yeah, no kidding. Edward turned back to his chambers door and opened it. “Will you excuse me, please?”

McCormack nodded and headed out, closing the door behind him.

Edward yanked his phone from his pocket and Googled Alana's number. It was from Hermosillo, Mexico.

She'd stayed home.

He drew a long, quiet breath and exhaled slowly. His conscience allowed him a few moments to linger on their romance, and then he crammed his memories back into their hiding place. Where they belonged. Where he needed to keep them.

What had happened between Edward and Alana's father made it certain she couldn't have shared that picture with anyone. He was shocked it still existed. They were young and passion-filled and they'd lost control and . . .

"How dare you ruin my Alana's life this way?" her father had said through a boiling rage. "You make her pregnant and bring shame on her and my family!"

Those words had been bad enough. But what came next . . .

"I forbid you to ever see Alana again. Go home, you Irish pig! I don't care if you come from the San Patricios. You disgrace their legacy."

After laying Edward out, he'd turned to Alana and grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her. The most hurtful words he'd spoken over her still echoed. "You will not bear a bastard child in my home. I'll send you away to a convent. You have dishonored God and your father."

The bile Edward had tasted in that moment returned. Not because of her father's irrational anger. Not because he still hadn't forgiven him.

But because Edward Lamport had caved.

Instead of fighting for Alana, he'd chosen appeasement. Signed away his paternal rights to their child in exchange for Alana's father not banishing her to that convent. Afterward, her father had vowed Alana would marry Guillermo Alvarez, the son of his business partner.

Edward could have fought him. Could have put his plans on hold, done whatever he needed to do to win her father's approval. But he didn't. He'd thought he was being honorable. Justified it as best for Alana and their child.

And he lost them. Forever.

Now, here she was. Where his cowardice had determined she couldn't be. Where now there wasn't room.

He was supposed to move on with his life as if Alana and their baby had never existed. But he hadn't. They were very much in his heart.

No one else knew. Not even Jacqui.

Out of the blue, Alana had found him.

How would she have gotten his personal cell phone number? His cousin Pato Lamport still lived in the area, as far as he knew, but neither Edward nor his father had received a Christmas card from him this year.

Maybe Pato had sent the text.

Enough questions.

I'm twenty-two all over again.

He drew a deep breath and called the number from his desk phone.

Three rings.

"*Diga.*" A female voice.

"Is this Alana Walsh?" Edward said in Spanish.

"Alana Walsh Alvarez."

Her father made good on the shotgun wedding. "This is Edward Lamport."

"Hello, Eduardo."

Alana had called him that, though he'd preferred Ed. Her voice didn't sound like he'd remembered. "Been a long time."

"Thank you for responding to my message."

Edward had no idea what to say next. So he kept quiet. Awkward silence was better than blurting out something stupid.

"I never thought we would speak with each other again," she said in a hushed tone.

"Nor I."

Alana might as well have been standing next to Edward. He felt her presence somehow. She needed help—but what could he possibly do after all this time?

Unless it was about their child. The one he'd abandoned yet longed to know . . . wondering all these years if it was a boy or girl, if Alana had kept the child, or given it up for adoption, or . . .

He asked, "How did you get my number?"

"From Pato Lamport's sister-in-law. We go to church together."

"You know where Pato is? We haven't heard from him in more than a year."

"He moved to Ciudad Obregón last fall. The *narcos* took over his neighborhood."

"My father will be relieved to know he's all right." Edward gazed again at the photo she'd sent to his phone. "I'm surprised your father let you keep that picture."

"I hid it where he could never find it."

It meant that much to her.

"Your message said you needed help. What kind of help?"

"Our son needs it."

She . . . had a boy. I have a son.

He washed down a rising lump with a sip of water. "Our son." Another sip to keep it down. "What's his name?"

"Carlos."

Carlos. Charles. *A name that means strong, manly.*

He and Jacqui had planned to name their first baby Edward Charles. Or Charles Edward. But they'd never had the chance to choose. She'd miscarried after four months. And three more times over the next four years.

He wanted to see Alana. His conscience said no.

He ignored it.

"What kind of cell phone do you have?"

"iPhone."

Perfect. "Would you mind if we switched to FaceTime?"

"*Sí, por supuesto.*"

Yes, of course.

“Give me a few minutes to set up.”

Edward had told Jacqui about his relationship with Alana when they were dating. But he’d never told her how things had ended. And why. He’d vowed to Alana’s father he wouldn’t tell anyone, ever, that he’d fathered her baby. For her sake.

Alana’s reappearance forced the issue.

He needed to tell Jacqui.

No. You can’t tell her. Think of what it would do to her.

How could she accept such news? So what if it had happened before he and Jacqui had met?

Jacqui had desperately wanted children. Knowing that another woman had borne him a son would devastate her.

Wait and see what kind of help Carlos needs.

Yes, he would wait to hear the full story before he decided whether and when to tell his wife that his first love had reentered his life and that he was a father.



A video call was a good idea. The years had changed Alana, as they had him.

She wore the patina of her life well.

Her smile was delightful. Still. “Eduardo.” She fingered the gold chain around her neck. “You look . . . very well.”

She was being kind. Life in the criminal justice system had aged him beyond his years.

“What kind of help does Carlos need?”

“Carlos reminds me so much of you. He’s a very brave young man.” Her voice quavered.

He reminds me so much of you.

Ha. If she meant that literally, then Carlos was running from something he’d done for which he hadn’t taken full responsibility.

“You haven’t answered my question.”

Alana delayed a few more moments. “Carlos works for Bancomex, second-largest bank in Mexico. As do I. He’s so smart. After his year in National Military Service, he finished his bachelor’s degree in three years. He went straight to EGADE for his MBA.”

She still hadn’t answered his question, but he was intrigued to know more about Carlos. “Can you show me a picture of him?”

“Oh, yes. *Discúlpeme.*” She looked to her left and her right. “I’ll be right back.”

“No need to apologize.”

She propped her phone and stood, revealing a body fit and shapely for a woman in her midforties.

As was Jacqui’s body. She and Edward worked out hard, together, to keep up with their demanding jobs and have energy and strength left over on weekends to play tennis at Hancock Hills Country Club and water ski at Lake Arrowhead.

Alana returned with a picture frame in hand and rotated it toward the camera.

Edward suppressed a gasp.

Carlos had Alana’s dark hair, full with a bit of curl. His hairline resembled Edward’s in his younger days. The shape of Carlos’s face fell between Edward’s oval proportions and Alana’s rounder contour. He had her chin and jawline. His complexion was a bit ruddy and his eyes were brown. Like Edward’s.

His self-control melted. “Carlos gets his good looks from you.”

Alana smiled, then quickly turned somber. “Eduardo, his life is in danger.”

Her words cut. The son he’d abandoned was back in his life, and he was in danger of losing him again. “From whom?”

“He believes Bancomex is laundering money for drug cartels.”

Drug money . . . Edward’s pulse quickened.

He'd prosecuted drug-money-laundering cases as a US Attorney. He knew firsthand how multinational banks had acquiesced to the methods and tactics—and ruthlessness—the perpetrators had used to make their dirty enterprises work. He'd seen how they assassinated their enemies.

Brutal savages.

He pictured Carlos meeting such a fate and shuddered. His stomach burned. "Direct or for a middleman?"

"Our largest customer, ALEXA Inversiones. Their primary business lines are real estate development and casino gambling."

"What did he find?"

She recounted what Carlos had told her he'd discovered. Payments to corporations in Nigeria and Madagascar. Electronic transfers to an account owned by the head of Mexico's bank regulation ministry. Suspiciously large daily cash deposits from gambling casinos in the Caribbean.

"He thinks there may be American involvement. ALEXA is an investor in the International Trade Center."

"Oh, that experimental complex that straddles Calexico and Mexicali. Quite controversial here. I know the man whose company built the American side."

"Stanley Gleason. He has become prominent in Mexican business circles through that project and his dealings with the chairman of our bank," Alana said. "How do you know him?"

"When I was a deputy district attorney I prosecuted some gang members who had roughed him up and ransacked his offices. Many years later he recommended me to one of the US senators from California to fill an opening here in the district court."

"So you and he are friends?"

"Acquaintances. Did Carlos report what he found to his boss?"

"He believes his boss is in on it. Carlos downloaded as much information as he could and fled."

"To where?"

Alana shook her head. “All he said was he had a plan and he trusted God to protect him.” She leaned closer. “His faith seems so . . . reckless.”

Reckless faith . . . some people I know say that’s as it should be. “What do you want from me, Alana?” He hoped that didn’t sound harsh to her, but her motive for contacting him now seemed vague.

She blinked a few times and bit her lower lip. “Can you bring Carlos into the United States and give him asylum?”

Edward looked away. What was happening here? Alana had married. Another man raised Edward’s son as his own. Twenty-five years ago, her family’s attitudes would not have allowed this conversation to happen.

“Does your husband know you’ve reached out to me?”

“Guillermo died two years ago. Accident with a drunk driver.”

She’s a widow.

A forbidden pang invaded his heart. He relished it a moment and then sent it away.

“I’m so sorry. And your father?”

Alana closed her eyes and shook her head. “Died ten years ago. Lung cancer.”

She has no one else.

“Do you have any sense of Carlos’s plan?”

“He said there’s no one in Mexico he can trust. He was in such a rush I had no chance to ask him anything. I don’t know when I will hear from him again.”

Edward’s mind swirled with the potential complications and implications of what Alana was asking of him. He would have to work the system as a private citizen, not in his official role. Personal relationships were his only leverage.

If he was going to help, then Carlos should know the truth about his father. Maybe he already did.

“Does Carlos know about me?”

“To him, Guillermo is his father.”

Her father and husband were dead. And she hadn't told Carlos who his real father was. Why?

"If I help, Carlos should know who I am."

Alana lowered her gaze. "I'm not ready to tell him."

"There won't be a better time than now."

Streaks ran down Alana's cheeks. "I understand. Will you help him, Eduardo?"

Enough with the conditions, Lamport.

He'd been handed an opportunity to atone for his youthful cowardice. A chance to reach back in time and do now what he should have done then.

Of course he would help.

"I'll get started on my end. Call me as soon as you hear from him." A new, stronger wave of emotion swelled and threatened to burst. He drew a deep breath and held himself together. "Alana, he needs to know the truth before this goes much further."

"Sí, Eduardo. Sí."

The truth.

Now it was his turn.

Think of what it will do to Jacqui.

Was one life more important than another? Yes, Jacqui was his most important human relationship. Her needs were primary. In all things.

Yet he'd been handed an improbable gift, a second chance to know the son he'd forsaken.

This was no coincidence.

If he chose not to act, it would show that in God he *didn't* trust.

Wouldn't that be the graver risk?

Chapter 3

Home of Edward and Jacqui Lamport

Hancock Park, Los Angeles

6:08 p.m.

Edward entered his home through the back door that led to the kitchen. Jacqui was busy spooning some kind of Asian food from brown containers onto plates. Her hair was up in a bun, per usual when she worked in the kitchen. He touched her shoulders from behind and kissed the back of her neck. She cooed at his affection.

“What’s for dinner, dear?”

“Thai.” She turned and gave him a peck on the lips. “Hope you don’t mind. It was the nearest good place for takeout.” She handed him a plate of noodles topped with beef and broccoli and an aromatic brown gravy. “Table’s set.”

He carried his plate to the dining room. She’d set the table with forks and chopsticks and a glass of red wine for each of them. When she set a table like this it meant she wanted to linger in conversation. He always enjoyed these times with her, but not tonight. His news really couldn’t wait. It would affect both of them, and had already. As hard as it would

be for Jacqui to hear about Carlos, she also needed to know about the second death threat and their twenty-four-seven protection. And that he'd soon be carrying a gun.

She joined him with her plate in one hand and an opened bottle of reserve Pinot Noir in the other. She took her seat and undid her bun, giving her light brown hair a quick flip. She looked extra beautiful and relaxed.

Her serene countenance would soon change.

He kept his eyes low and unfolded his napkin and placed it on his lap. "Pinot should be good with this."

Jacqui took a taste of each. "Mmm, yes." A pause. "Heard about the protesters at the courthouse. Radio news said it was peaceful."

Edward nodded as he finished a bite. He took a sip of wine. "So far."

"Can't say the same about the climate at my office. We got new poll results on Prop. Sixty-Eight today."

"Not what you were hoping for?"

"Forty percent of Latinos said they wouldn't register for the ID card. Way more than we expected."

"Did it say why?"

"Fear of deportation. The survey also said three-quarters of those families would pull their kids out of school. My local district would see the highest rates of unenrollment."

Edward shook his head. "Is this the school board's way of pressuring me to strike it down?" He took another bite of food.

Jacqui sat back. "You know, it's getting harder to be Mrs. Edward Lamport at work."

He squinted at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The board and administration don't like that it's taking you so long."

"Like *you* have anything to do with it." He wiped his mouth with the napkin and sat back.

As much as he wanted to engage Jacqui on what was important to her, he couldn't wait a moment longer to say what needed to be said.

"I know your work stuff is important, but I have news."

"Oh?"

He looked deep into her eyes. "I got another death threat."

Jacqui gasped. "My God . . . who from?"

"Someone who says he's from Las Reconquistas. Heard of 'em?"

"Yeah. They want the Southwest returned to Mexico. Crazy." Jacqui rested her face in her hands a moment. "How are you feeling?"

"Am I scared? I'm concerned, sure." He took a sip of wine. "I went to a gun range this afternoon with a deputy marshal."

"I thought you hated guns."

"Yeah, well, I have more to think about than myself."

The last thing he wanted to do right now was sit around and talk. It was time for action. On all battlefronts. But right now, his wife took priority.

"Okay if we sit in the living room and talk?"



Jacqui sat on the sofa and patted the cushion next to her.

"I'd rather stand," Edward said.

He stepped to the window and pulled back the drapes. McCormack's black Crown Vic and a black Chrysler 300 with four deputies inside were parked on the street in front of the house.

"Deputy marshals are providing twenty-four-hour protection. Five are out there right now. One'll be inside when we're home, the others in front and back."

"So we'll have no privacy?"

"We haven't talked routine yet."

She shifted her weight. "You okay? Your face is flushed."

He took a couple of steps toward her. “There’s more.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and pulled a deep breath. “Remember I told you about a woman named Alana Walsh when we were dating?”

“Your old girlfriend.” She moved her hands to her lap. “What brings her up?”

“Got a text today.”

“Uh-huh.”

“The number was from Hermosillo. It said, ‘Please call. I need your help.’ Came with a picture of me and Alana.”

“A picture?”

“From when we were together.”

Jacqui stood and walked toward him. “Okay. That’s more than strange.”

“I called back. It was her.”

She raised her brows. “You called her? Why?”

“Because she said she needed help.”

“And why did she contact you?”

“She has no one else.”

“No family?”

“Her husband died two years ago in a car accident. Parents are gone, too.”

Jacqui walked to the window and looked out. She turned. “What kind of help?”

“She has a son. His life’s in danger.”

“And why would she contact you?”

“Because he’s not only *her* son.”

She stepped directly in front of him, eyes wide. “He’s yours?”

He was quiet.

“And did you know about this before today?”

“Yes, but—”

“You have a son?” Her face reddened. She looked at him with hard eyes. “How could you not tell me?”

“I’d vowed not to tell anyone. Ever.”

She stepped back. Her eyes welled and her hands trembled. “How could . . . how could you . . . keep this from me?” She turned her back on him.

He rubbed his palms together. “Honey, please look at me.”

She shook her head.

“Jacqui. Please. Let me explain.”

She sat on the arm of the sofa, head down and arms crossed.

“Her father hit the ceiling. All about his reputation. He wanted to ship her off to a convent to have the baby, then give it away. When I heard, I went back to Hermosillo to face him.”

Jacqui looked up. “What did he want from you?”

“He kept screaming that his business would be ruined if people knew his daughter got pregnant out of wedlock.”

“Family honor’s important in Mexican culture. We see it every day in the schools.”

“I was twenty-two, she was twenty.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and paced the room. “Didn’t you ever do anything when you were young that you now regret?”

Jacqui slid to the center of the sofa and crossed her legs and folded her arms. Lowered her gaze. Said nothing.

Edward approached, tentatively.

She remained silent.

“Honey?”

She looked up. “Yes. I *did*. Something that affected me in ways I couldn’t . . .” She teared up again.

Edward sat at the end of the sofa and extended a hand.

“Not now.” She shifted. “Tell me the rest about your son.”

“Something else is—”

“I said, not now!”

She bowed her head. Silent moments passed.

“Tell me the rest . . . about your son.”

“I renounced my parental rights. Her father had already drawn up the legal documents. I signed, and he relented on sending Alana away.”

“What’s your son’s name?”

“Carlos.”

“Why couldn’t you tell me? It’s not like I would have broadcast it to the world.”

“Because I’d given my word. Because my child could never be in my life. If there was even a hair’s breadth of a chance Carlos could have been in my life, I would have told you.” He reached for her. She stood and walked toward the window.

“What did she want from you?” she said with her back turned.

“Alana asked if I could bring Carlos into the US and get him asylum.”

“Why?”

“She and Carlos both work for the second-largest bank in Mexico. He believes they’re helping their biggest customer launder drug money. Carlos took some data and fled. People are after him who want him dead.”

Jacqui shook her head. “How much can go wrong in one day?”

“There’s more going on than we know.”

Jacqui took a few more steps, then stopped. “I need a few minutes.” She turned and strode toward the hallway. The bedroom door closed.



Jacqui returned to the living room ten minutes later, dressed to go out.

“Where are you going?”

“Cynthia Thompson’s. I need help to process all this.”

“I don’t mind you talking with Cynthia about Carlos, but why don’t you invite her here?”

She looked away. “I don’t feel safe with you right now.”

Edward stared at the floor, hands in pockets. A tense minute passed. “One of the deputy marshals will need to escort you.”

“Fair enough.” She stepped to the closet next to the front door and grabbed her jacket. “What’re you going to do about Carlos?”

“I told Alana I’d help get them into the country somehow.”

“Them? You’re including Alana?”

“If we only help Carlos, the people after him will get her, too.”

“We?”

“Yes. We have to help them.”

She shifted her weight. “I’m worried. About what could happen.”

“To whom?”

“Between you and her. Where are you with that?”

“I’m not anywhere. I can’t remember the last time I’d thought about Alana before today. That life, that Edward, is dead.” He gave her an exasperated look. “Now’s not the time for this. Everything’s too raw.”

“Too raw. Well. We can agree on that.”



Silver Lake District, Los Angeles

7:32 p.m.

Jacqui gave Cynthia an extra-long hug.

“Girl, something big is troubling you.”

“Some *things*.”

“I have as much time as you need. Glass of wine?”

“Sure, thanks.”

Cynthia returned with two glasses of white wine and a small bowl of mixed nuts. “Sauvignon Blanc from Paso Robles. My new favorite.”

They settled into plush chairs that faced each other. “So, what things?”

Jacqui ran her finger around the rim of her glass. “The present and past collided big-time tonight.” She looked up at Cynthia. “Edward got another death threat today.”

“Oh, no. From who?”

“Some radical group who wants to return the southwest US to Mexico.” Jacqui pointed at the living room window. “We’re on twenty-four-seven protection by the US Marshals. One of them drove me here.”

Cynthia hurried to the window. “The black car?”

“Gracious man. Takes his job seriously.” Jacqui stood and moved toward Cynthia. “Ed told me he got a text today from an old girlfriend. The one he had in Mexico before we met. She asked for his help.”

“What kind?”

Jacqui bit her lower lip. “I’ll get to that. Her name is Alana Walsh. He got her pregnant. He has a twenty-five-year-old son named Carlos.”

Cynthia’s jaw slackened. “A son?” She reached for Jacqui’s hands. “Did he say why he never told you?”

Jacqui drew a deep breath. “He’d signed away his parental rights and vowed to tell no one.” She lowered her gaze. “I can’t believe he never told *me*.”

“Had to have a good reason.”

“He said he honored his word. I thought . . . what about honoring me?”

Cynthia beckoned her to the chairs. Jacqui took another sip of wine and plucked a few cashews from the bowl. “His son’s life is in danger. He figured out the bank he works for is laundering drug money. People want him dead.”

Cynthia gave a slow, disbelieving head shake. “What’s he going to do?”

“Bring him into this country so he can get asylum.”

“Can he do that?”

Jacqui choked back a lump of despair. “He’s going to bring both of them over.”

“Why her?” Cynthia said.

“He thinks whoever’s after Carlos would come after her, too. I have to admit, I agree with that.”

Cynthia leaned back and crossed her arms. “Let me ask you something. Does your reaction to Edward’s news have anything to do with—?”

“Stop right there. I’ve told you, I’m not going there. What’s done is done. I won’t dig up the past anymore. I won’t.”

“The longer you hide it, the worse it’ll get.”

Silence.

“Like tonight.”

Cynthia’s words pierced her heart. “What I . . . what I did was final. The boy I was with couldn’t have cared less. I was a scared girl. Totally different.”

“You sure?”

Jacqui turned to face her friend. Cynthia looked her up and down.

Jacqui asked, “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Remember our talks about living by faith and not by what we see?”

Jacqui gave a curt nod.

“This is one of those times. I see a bigger purpose in this. Edward is going to do what he has to do to rescue Carlos—and Alana—but more is about to unfold that we can’t foresee.”

“Ed kind of said the same thing.” Jacqui looked up and gave her a wan smile. “Thanks for letting me come over. I couldn’t handle this alone.”

“You’re not supposed to.” Cynthia gave her the look she always gave when she was about to challenge her. Jacqui shifted her attention to her wineglass.

“How much *does* Edward know?”

“About?” Jacqui kept her gaze down.

“Don’t play with me, sister.”

Jacqui set her glass down and folded her hands in her lap. “What the doctor said. Uterine abnormalities.”

“Did that doctor know your full history?”

“I was sixteen. They told me I could still have children.”

“So you believe it’s your fault.”

“All I know is we couldn’t have babies.”

Cynthia smiled. She had a twinkle in her eye. “I think God wants to heal you.”

Heal? What good would it do to heal a forty-six-year-old woman’s uterus? She waved Cynthia off. “Way too late for that.”

Cynthia grabbed Jacqui’s forearm and locked eyes with her. “I’m not talking about babies. Edward told you about Carlos because something he thought would never matter to your marriage now does. Do you see?”

“That baby was never in my life. What good would it—?”

A sword sliced through her.

She’d criticized Edward for keeping his child a secret their whole marriage. She felt justified doing so. But when her own hidden past—not even Cynthia knew the full story—threatened to expose itself, the pain of regret and the fear of how Edward might connect it to their infertility was more than she could bear.

She feared his judgment.

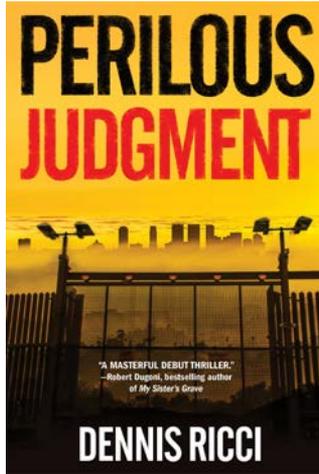
Condemnation was her self-assigned lot. The consequence would be delayed, of course, and then she would give an account, and . . . then what?

There would be another time to deal with her issue. Again.

“You’ve been a big help. I need to get back home.”

As long as she focused on Ed’s problem, she could keep her own truth locked away. Safe.

She hoped.



I hope you've enjoyed this three-chapter preview!

Perilous Judgment is available on Amazon.com and other online retailers, and you can get it in four formats: Kindle e-book, Paperback, Digital audiobook and Physical audiobook (mp3 CD).

Shalom,