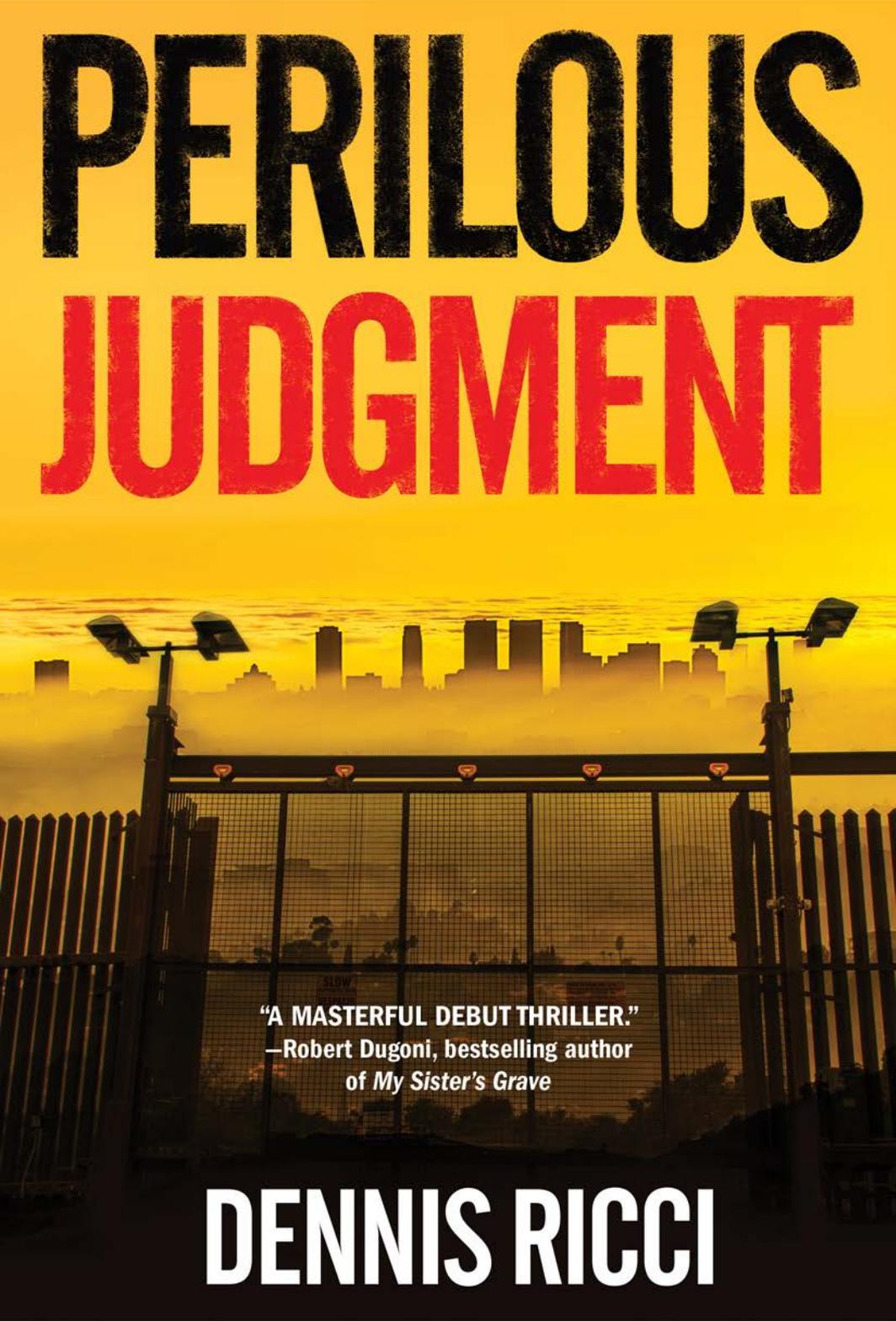


# PERILOUS JUDGMENT



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

**DENNIS RICCI**

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*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 straight-away 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.”