

# CORRUPT PRACTICES



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*A Parker Stern Novel*



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Amherst, New York 14228-2119

Published 2013 by Seventh Street Books™, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover design by Jacqueline Nasso Cooke  
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17 16 15 14 13 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rotstein, Robert, 1951-

Corrupt practices : a Parker Stern novel / by Robert Rotstein

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-61614-791-4 (pbk.) • ISBN 978-1-61614-792-1 (ebook)

1. Legal stories. I. Title.

PS3618.O8688C67 2013

813.6—dc23

2013002602

Printed in the United States of America

*To my family*



# PROLOGUE

April 27, 2010

He'd told his wife that he'd bought the Glock 22 for protection. Now, the barrel of the gun was lodged between his teeth. His heartbeat was normal, his breathing steady. His body wasn't trembling. He'd conquered the legal profession—which to him meant that he'd conquered the world—by mastering the art of calm.

Even now he was thinking, not about his family, but about his law firm. The firm had always come before everything else. It bore his name and appealed to his paternal pride. It gratified his desires. Only during the last two weeks had he realized how poorly he'd served it.

One of his favorite aphorisms was “hubris kills more legal careers than greed and stupidity combined.” He'd drummed it into the young lawyers, but hadn't heeded his own words. He'd infused the firm with a virus, believing that he could control its spread. His mistake was unforgivable.

When he heard the *click*, he tried not to gag on metal and fear. There was no longer any point in resisting. This morning's news had reported that the Malibu surf would be particularly dangerous today, bringing powerful riptides that could sweep the strongest swimmer out to sea. The last sound ever to penetrate his consciousness was the crash of an all-consuming wave.

# CHAPTER 1

I haven't set foot in a courtroom for eighteen months. I've altered my lifestyle, I tell everyone. I've decided to get out of the pressure cooker of trial work and start over before I turn forty. Only my two closest friends know the truth.

On this afternoon, as on most, I'm sitting alone at a back table at The Barrista Coffee House in West Hollywood sipping a macchiato and reading a book about the law. This one is a biography called *Defender of the Damned*, about famed LA trial lawyer Gladys Towles Root. Root represented mostly murderers and sexual predators because during the forties and fifties no one else would hire a woman. A flamboyant dresser, she was such a skilled advocate that the convicts composed a ditty about her: *Root de toot. Root de toot. Here's to Gladys Towles Root. Her dresses are purple, her hats are wide, she'll get you one instead of five.*

Lawyers truly can become legends.

Deanna Poulos comes out from the back and bops over to my table. She owns The Barrista, so named because she was a lawyer herself, one of my partners at Macklin & Cherry. Not so long ago, she wore pinstripe suits with pencil skirts to work. Now she dresses in black tee shirts and jeggings, and her left arm is half-covered with tattoos. When the firm fell apart, she quit the practice of law and opened her store on Melrose. Everyone told her she was making a huge mistake. But the shop has thrived despite the bleak economy and the cutthroat competition from the chains. I admire her bravery; I envy her freedom; I think she's gone crazy.

"Waz up, Parker?" When she speaks, a silver tongue bar is visible. She touches my cheek, and then playfully pats me on the shoulder in a way that makes the gesture seem less intimate. She glances around as if



she doesn't want anyone to overhear, although there's no one around. I think I know what's coming—a story about an ex-colleague's upcoming divorce or latest affair or professional misstep.

"Rich Baxter's in jail," she whispers.

Just because Deanna says it doesn't make it so. This kind of slander flares up all the time, the spontaneous combustion of volatile nouns and verbs.

"Where did you hear this?"

"From him. He called me from the jail."

I was going to take a sip of coffee, but my arm freezes in midair. I set the cup back down on the table so I don't spill.

"The FBI arrested him five days ago," she says. "They're holding him for money laundering and fraud. The Church of the Sanctified Assembly has accused him of embezzlement."

"Rich wouldn't rip off a client, much less his own church. Hell, that guy wouldn't overstay his welcome at a parking meter."

She hesitates. "He actually called me because he wants to hire you as his lawyer. He didn't think you'd take his call."

"Is this your idea of a joke?"

She shakes her head.

"We haven't spoken in years. Why would he possibly want me?"

"Because you're the best."

"Once, maybe. Not anymore."

"If you'd just . . . Wouldn't you enjoy taking on the Assembly?"

"No one enjoys fighting the Assembly. They always make you pay for it."

"It's time for you to get back in the game. To show some guts."

"It's not about courage."

"So you say."

Her words sting. Before I can reply, she gets up and goes back into her office. With her short bottle-black hair, slender body, and swaggering gait, from the back she resembles a rebellious adolescent boy.

This is how it started: I was down at the old Van Nuys courthouse on a simple discovery dispute over a confidential e-mail. Moments

before the judge was to take the bench, my cell phone buzzed. I still don't know why I answered the call. It was my partner, Manny Mason. He sucked in air, almost a gasp. "Harmon Cherry's dead. There's an emergency partnership meeting at five thirty. Parker, Harmon shot himself." He started sobbing.

I tried to speak—to ask how it happened, to swear at him, to call him a liar, anything—but I couldn't find words. Then the door leading from the judge's chambers swung open, and the judge walked into the courtroom. I hung up on Manny without saying goodbye.

When the clerk called my case, I stood up, determined to muddle through the hearing despite the odd detachment I was feeling. Harmon used to preach that sometimes the ability to muddle through is a lawyer's greatest asset.

The opposing counsel entered her appearance. When I tried to enter mine—all I had to say was "Parker Stern for the defendant"—my voice caught and my vocal cords felt raw and swollen. The courtroom walls elongated, and the judge's bench became a shimmering mirage. Then my cheeks flushed hot and my stomach leapt up and pressed against my throat. I croaked, "Sorry, Judge" and sprinted out of the courtroom and down the hall to the men's room, where I found an empty stall and vomited. When I finished, I went to the sink and rinsed my mouth out with cold water. Thank God the episode was over. Embarrassing, but the embarrassment would go away as soon as I won my motion. "Victory is the strongest palliative," Harmon would say.

When I returned to the courtroom, the judge was waiting for me. She told me to proceed with my argument, but when I tried to speak, the nausea returned. And then I heard a high-pitched whirr, like a child's humming top. My knees buckled. I groped at the lectern for support, but my flailing arm pulled it down with me, and I tumbled to the floor.

The shrinks call it *situational glossophobia*, a fancy name for stage fright. I've tried everything—psychotherapy, yoga, meditation, bio-feedback, Valium, Xanax. Nothing works. Deanna wouldn't think of telling someone with a bum knee to suck it up and start running, or of

admonishing an addict to show some willpower, but now she's called me a coward.

One of the baristas brings me a fresh macchiato, even though I didn't order one. I really am a fixture in this place.

A little while later, Deanna comes back to my table. "Listen to me, Parker. Rich needs a lawyer. If nothing else, you should do it out of loyalty."

"Loyalty? Where's his loyalty? He bailed on his partners only weeks after Harmon died, took the firm's biggest client with him, and stood by while rest of us split apart. Meanwhile, he's made millions off the Assembly. As much as I hate that damn cult, the legal fees could have kept the firm afloat. Not to mention that if he did commit this crime, he betrayed his family and client and church."

"All the more reason why you should help him. Remember what Harmon used to tell us? Loyalty is most meaningful when its object has betrayed you."

"That's bullshit."

"Maybe so. But it's what Harmon believed."

"You're not playing fair."

She turns and glances at me over her shoulder, her smile knowing and flirtatious, her dark brown eyes dancing like they always do when she knows she's won an argument. "When you see Rich, tell him I said to keep fighting."

## CHAPTER 2

I park at the lot on the corner of Temple and Alameda and walk toward the Metropolitan Detention Center, a nondescript high rise located near the federal courthouse and Union Station. For the first time in over a year, I'm wearing a suit. It's mid-October. The downtown air is fresh for once, the sky a pristine aqua. The sun gleams off the polished walls of the skyscrapers. Even the maple leaves, which usually turn from green to a brittle brown without bothering with the fiery in-between colors, are a vibrant yellow. All in all, it's much too nice a morning to be visiting a jail.

I pass through the rigorous security check and take a chair on my side of the Plexiglas barrier, waiting for the guard to bring Rich Baxter into the attorney meeting room. In here, the government respects the attorney-client privilege, meaning the marshals can only watch, not listen—or so say the regulations.

We were part of Macklin & Cherry's vaunted class of 1999—*Harmon's Army*. Deanna Poulos and I were The Gunslingers, litigators anxious to take depositions and get into a courtroom ASAP. Manny Mason was The Intellectual, the thoughtful lawyer who loved the law's logic. Rich Baxter was The Dealmaker, intent on negotiating eight-figure financial arrangements for powerful individuals and huge companies. And there was mercurial Grace Trimble, The Genius—the brightest of us all, but also the most fragile.

My friendship with Rich ended five years ago. He oversaw the Church of the Sanctified Assembly's day-to-day representation. I thought it was just business until he announced one day that he'd become an Assembly member. I tried to talk him out of it, insisting that the group was a dangerous cult that only wanted his money.

Things degenerated from there. He accused me of blasphemy and said I didn't believe in anything except winning cases and making money and getting laid by a different woman every week. I shot back that he'd joined the Assembly because it was the only way he could finally get some pussy—I was talking about Monica, who would later become his wife. After that, he would have nothing to do with me. When Harmon died, Rich left the law firm and took the Assembly's legal work with him, a move that not only made him wealthy, but also led to the firm's collapse. I haven't seen him since.

Last night, I pulled the indictment off PACER, the federal court website. The charges are more serious than I imagined. The government claims that a confidential source notified the Internal Revenue Service about unusual banking transactions involving the Church of the Sanctified Assembly. Rich allegedly controlled the Assembly's bank accounts. The IRS monitors identified a series of large withdrawals, followed by deposits into shell accounts in European and offshore banks. What knocks me off-balance is the amount they say he stole—the indictment details numerous transactions between May 2010 and May 2011 that total approximately seventeen million dollars. The last alleged illegal transaction alone is for six million dollars, supposedly a transfer of laundered Assembly money into a British West Indies shell company called The Emery Group, which Rich set up and controlled.

It's hard to see how the accusations could get worse, but they do. A couple of weeks ago, there was a flurry of activity in the bank accounts. Believing that Rich was about to flee the country, the FBI arrested him at an apartment in the Silver Lake district of Los Angeles. In the course of the search, the agents found a false passport bearing the name and social security number of one Alan Thomas Markowitz alongside Rich's picture. The real Alan Markowitz is a used car dealer in the valley who has no apparent relationship with The Church of the Sanctified Assembly. The agents also discovered a large quantity of methamphetamine, along with \$428,000 in cash, hidden in the casing of a Gateway desktop computer. Rich faces up to twenty years in prison for each count of mail fraud, up to ten years in prison for each count of money

laundering, and more time added on for the drug and passport charges.

The Rich I knew wasn't capable of any of this. His idea of bending the rules was leaving work early to catch a Dodgers game or hitting the bar across the street after work for a good scotch.

The door on the other side of the barrier opens. He's been jailed for less than a week, so despite his bleak situation, I still expect to find the person whom I worked with, the pudgy, avuncular man with the rosy complexion and blond hair styled so perfectly that we'd tease him about using a can of hair spray daily. When he walks in, I recoil. He's sickly thin with gaunt cheeks, as though he's suffering from a serious illness. His hair is tangled, more gray than blond. His once-bright eyes are deep-set and dull. Jail alone couldn't have done this to him. On the face of it, he's lived conservatively. The Assembly's promotional materials emphasize family values, stable marriages, physical fitness, and disdain for Western medicine. Christian fundamentalism meets New Age doctrine; the Pentecostals meet Scientology. As far as I know, he's adhered to the tenets of his faith. And yet, something insidious has eaten away at him. Maybe he *has* been using hardcore drugs.

He takes a seat at the counter, picks up the handset, and forces a smile. "Long time, Parker."

"Tell me what happened, Rich."

"What happened is they locked me up without bail for no reason. Josh is turning two in a couple of weeks. I have to get out of here so I can be at his birthday party. You'll make that happen, right?"

He hasn't changed—he always believes everything will turn out fine. His unchecked optimism is one of the reasons his clients like him so much.

"Why are you in here?" I ask.

He reveals his teeth, although I wouldn't call the way he's parted his lips a smile. "Attorney-client privilege?"

"It's too soon for us to—"

"If you're not going to agree to represent me up front, then you might as well leave. I'm only going to talk to my attorney."

"I . . . Sure, Rich. I'm your lawyer." My words send a current of



exhilaration through me. It's the first time that I've felt like an attorney since Harmon died. At the same time, I feel as if I've jumped into battle wounded and unarmed.

"I'm innocent. I've always been loyal to the Assembly, both as an adherent and as an attorney. The charges are bogus. I've been set up."

"By who?"

"I don't know."

"Why would anyone do something like that?"

"Because I learned something." He takes the handset away from his ear, and for a moment I think he's going to hang up. He slowly raises the handset again and covers the mouthpiece with his free hand. "Someone inside's been stealing from the Assembly. I'm getting the blame, but it's someone on the inside. And . . . and I also think they murdered Harmon."

"Harmon fell into a depression and killed himself."

"Whoever killed him made it look like suicide. Harmon had information."

"Which was?"

"I don't know. I was looking for a workout agreement I drafted a few years ago and stumbled on these notes that Harmon wrote. They were on a DVD of scanned documents that the firm sent over when I left."

"What did they say?"

"It was hard to understand. You know how Harmon wrote in riddles. But they talked about how someone was diverting funds from the Assembly. There were some initials, but no detail. It was like a code or something. I couldn't . . ."

"Where's the DVD now? Did the cops—?"

"That's the thing, I . . . someone stole it from me."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"Can you remember anything else in the notes?"

"It's all so fuzzy, I . . ." He shrugs his shoulders in defeat.

"Focus, Rich."

He pushes the heels of his hands hard against his temples, as if by compressing his brain he could squeeze the lost information to the surface. “Something about a financial crime. There was all this code that I couldn’t understand, and all these numbers, bank accounts, initials. I’m sorry, it’s all so foggy. I just can’t . . .”

“Any chance the original document is still in storage?”

“No. I took all the original Assembly files with me when I left the firm. The client directed me not to leave anything behind. Not even copies.” He mumbles something, an incomprehensible hum, and then perks up. “Talk to Layla Cherry. Maybe she still has some of Harmon’s old documents. You remember how Harmon was a packrat. When I left the firm, we found some Assembly documents at his house. Talk to Layla.”

“What have you told the authorities?”

“You know I wouldn’t speak to anyone without an attorney present.”

“The indictment alleges that you received the illegal payment from a company called The Emery Group.”

“It’s a lie.”

“What’s The Emery Group?”

“That’s confidential.”

“I just told you I’m your lawyer.”

“No. I mean the Assembly’s privilege. The hierarchy has given me strict orders not to—”

“You’re really going to protect the people who got you thrown in here?”

He sets his jaw. “Attorney-client privilege.”

“Can you at least tell me if the company’s legit?”

“Everything the Assembly does is legit.”

“What about the false passport? And that apartment you rented? You used a false name. Alan Thomas Markowitz.”

He just shrugs in response. As he does the next two times I ask the question.

“Jesus, Rich,” I say. “How do you expect me to help you?”



“You’ll find a way.”

Fifteen minutes later, I’ve almost run out of questions. For someone who’s acted as the Assembly’s lawyer for so long, he knows precious little—or so he wants me to believe. “I have to ask this, Rich. The FBI found drugs. Why? And what about gambling? Or women?”

“Those were your vices, not mine.”

“We’re done.”

“Parker, wait. I’m sorry. It’s just all this . . .” He sweeps his free arm in the air helplessly.

I want nothing more than to hang up the phone and walk out, but instead I say, “If this is going to work, you have to cooperate with me.”

“There were no women. I don’t take drugs. And I haven’t gambled since I joined the Assembly. This is a frame-up.”

“Anything else you want to tell me? The false passport?”

“There’s . . .” He stops and takes an audible breath.

I can almost feel his discomfort refracting through the glass barrier. “There’s what?”

He puffs himself up. “There’s nothing more to tell.”

“Whatever you say.” I take a deep breath. “What does Monica know about this?”

“Absolutely nothing. And don’t you dare try to contact her. You’re not my wife’s favorite person, you know. And anyway, she’s being guided by the Fount.”

The “Fount” is short for The Celestial Fountain of All That Is, adapted from a line in the Book of Common Prayer—“Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom.” It’s never been clear to me whether The Celestial Fount is supposed to be a prophet or God or a combination of both or a bastardization of the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity or a magic wormhole into some parallel universe where the sanctified members of the Assembly know everything.

“So I can’t talk to Monica. Who can I talk to at the Assembly?”

“No one. You’re an outsider. Worse. You’re known for your antagonism toward the Assembly.”

“I’ve never tried to hide that.”

"I bet you're thinking *I told you so*."

"I just didn't want you to get hurt."

"The Assembly hasn't hurt me. Somebody else."

"But you don't know who."

He shakes his head.

I'm about to wrap the interview up when he says, "You should know that no matter what's happened, I still believe in the Fount's truth."

"Really. Then why in God's name would you want *me* to represent you? My feelings about your church haven't changed."

His eyes turn stony. "You do know that if you get involved in this, you'll become a target. Just like Harmon. Just like me."

"I'm well aware that the Assembly does whatever's necessary to silence its critics. What does that have to do with my question?"

"Harmon and I have families who've been hurt by what's happened to us. All the other lawyers I'd consider hiring have families or people they're close to. You're the only good lawyer I know who doesn't really have anyone in your life."

"That's not true. I have—"

"Don't tell me about Deanna and Manny. In the end they're just work friends. It's not the same, as you and I proved. So if something happens to you, no one else will care, Parker. No one else will get hurt. That's why I want you. To avoid collateral damage."

"I'll get back to you, Rich." I hang up the phone and walk out, not waiting for the guard to take him back to his cell.

## CHAPTER 3

I leave the detention center and walk the three blocks to the old federal courthouse, built in 1940 as part of a Depression-era stimulus program. The main lobby has a musty odor of yellowed parchment and imperfect justice. I always make sure to breathe deeply when I enter the building. I love that smell, just as a boxer might love the sweaty smell of an old gymnasium.

I take the escalator to the second floor, where my friend and former partner Manfred Mason is arguing a pro bono case on behalf of some gang members. Manny is now associate dean at St. Thomas More School of Law. He's convinced me to teach a course in trial advocacy. The only person other than Deanna who knows about my stage fright, he views the teaching gig as the first step in my getting back into the courtroom. He doesn't realize that teaching isn't trial work.

My first class begins at three o'clock this afternoon. Yesterday, he called and said he had to talk to me before the class started, so I agreed to meet him at the courthouse. I'm not wild about the idea of walking into a courtroom, but I'm curious—I've never seen Manny argue a case. He's a corporate finance and tax lawyer, not a litigator. He certainly doesn't have the typical attributes of a trial lawyer. Most of us are outgoing, combative. Manny's humble, so reserved that people mistake his shyness for arrogance. In the past, his career suffered for it. At the law firm, he didn't bring in much business. When the firm broke up, he became a law professor, a job that suits him perfectly. Finally, he's on the fast track.

As soon as I enter the courtroom, my heart skitters. I find a back corner seat, close to the exit. I recite a silent mantra—*no reason for stage fright because I'm not on stage*. My heart just beats faster. I touch my

fingers to my carotid artery so I can measure my pulse, but lower my hand when I see the judge's clerk looking at me.

Manny is at the podium, asking the judge to dissolve an injunction against members of the Etiwanda Lazers street gang. The Lazers control the illicit drug trade in the north San Fernando Valley. Although Manny could use his considerable height to his advantage—courtroom presence is as much physical as intellectual—he hunches over, as if trying to hide his six-foot-four-inch frame behind the small lectern. He speaks in a scholarly monotone, his argument fraught with legalisms. *Void for vagueness. Arbitrary deprivation of liberty interests. No mens rea requirement.* He should be trying to humanize his dangerous clients, but he can't muster any passion. After speaking for another five minutes, he raises an index finger, leafs through his notes, and sits down. So much for ending on a high note.

"The case is submitted," the judge says. "Until I rule, the temporary restraining order will remain in effect."

As soon as she leaves the bench, my adrenaline levels off. I approach Manny.

"I'm glad that's over," he says. "At least I've survived another day before this judge lowers the boom."

"From what I saw, Harmon should have assigned you to the trial department." We both know it's a lie.

He raises his hands in mock horror. "I'm a business lawyer and a teacher. These pro bono matters are just my way of giving back to the community. And, of course, the constitutional issues are fascinating. But I'm not a litigator. I'll tell you what. If one of my cases ever gets to the Supreme Court, you can argue it."

"Right now, I couldn't argue a fender bender in small claims court."

"That will pass."

"Sure it will." There's an uncomfortable silence. "Come on," he says. "Let me introduce you to my client." He gestures toward the back of the room.

I thought the courtroom was empty. I didn't notice the man still sitting in the back row, on the opposite side of the room from where

I'd been sitting. He appears to be in his mid- to late-twenties, wearing a conservative gray suit and white shirt without a tie—a well-dressed spectator. Only when he stands and swaggers toward us does he resemble a gang member. Though he's no more than five foot nine, he must weigh 190 pounds, all weight-trained muscle. He has a buzz cut, a dark brown moustache, and a soul patch. Up close, I can see the tattoos on his knuckles.

"Parker, I want you to meet Victor Galdamez. Victor, this is Parker Stern. He was my law partner. And one of the best trial lawyers in the city. Starting today, he's teaching a class at the law school."

We shake hands. Though his grip is weak, it's typical of powerful men who don't want to hurt anyone. He smiles warmly. "Dean Mason did a great job, today, huh?" I expected to hear at least a hint of the barrio in his speech, but there isn't any.

"I was just telling him that," I say.

"Not many people are brave enough to take our side, even when we're right. We don't have the money to pay lawyers, and Dean Mason has been very generous with his time."

We chat for a while about constitutional law and the merits of the Lazers' legal position—fortunately, Manny doesn't hold out false hope—and then Galdamez excuses himself.

"He doesn't sound like your typical gang member," I say when we're alone.

"What's typical?"

"Look, I wasn't saying—"

He waves his hand dismissively. "That's the problem. Even someone like you makes assumptions. Victor's a junior at Whittier Poly. Prelaw. We hope to have him with us at St. Thomas More in a couple of years. He's a former member who got out and wants to better himself and his community. He serves as a liaison. He's the perfect client representative." He checks his watch. "Let's go down to the cafeteria and talk. I have an administrators' meeting over at UCLA in an hour."

The courthouse cafeteria hasn't been renovated since just after World War II ended. I suspect the food is of the same vintage. I buy

a granola bar; at least it's wrapped. Manny orders two hot dogs, the casings of which have a greenish tinge. When I point that out, he says it's just the lighting. We find a table in the corner and he gives a mini-lecture about how to teach a law school course—assume the students know nothing, but don't talk down to them; teach only what you're interested in; don't let them walk all over you, but don't be a tyrant. Platitudes.

"We've gone over all of this before," I say. "What's the real reason you made me come down here?"

He takes a drink of Coke. "You'll be performing in front of an audience in a few hours. I just want to make sure that—"

"It's a classroom, not a courtroom. It only happens in courtrooms."

"Still."

"How many students are enrolled?"

"I haven't checked lately. Usually there are twelve, fifteen people in these practice courses. You'll get the enrollment sheet from the registrar's office."

"I can handle a dozen law students."

He raises his arm and gives me a desultory fist bump. "I know you can."

"There's something I want to talk to *you* about. Rich Baxter's in jail."

"For what?"

"A federal rap. They say he embezzled money from the Assembly."

He shakes his head slowly and scratches his scalp with a bony index finger. "I'm shocked, but not surprised."

"You're not surprised?"

"I know it's an odd thing to say. But you know how he struggles with the technical aspects of the law."

"He got by at the firm."

"At the firm, he had help. As a solo practitioner he's been left to his own devices. And the problems that arise in representing the Church of the Sanctified Assembly are labyrinthine. I'm one of the legal ethics teachers at the law school. Studying that area from an academic stand-

point has been very illuminating. Didn't Harmon used to say that incompetence breeds wrongdoing? He was right. Most attorney defalcations start with malpractice, and I fear that for our friend Rich, the malpractice part was only a matter of time."

"You actually think he could've ripped off his own church and only client? We're talking about Rich."

"I don't know anything, of course. It's just that I've worried about him since the firm split up, feared he was adrift."

"Rich wants me to represent him. I just met with him at the federal detention center."

"Whoa. Back up. You saw him?"

I nod.

"You're not serious." He shuts his eyes for a moment, as if trying to choose just the right words. "Listen to me, Parker. Given all you've been through this last year and a half, you're not making sense. You said it yourself. You can't handle a simple procedural hearing."

"I can at least look into the charges. I owe him that after what happened between us."

"You don't owe him anything. And as far as your career is concerned, you've got to take things a step at a time. See how you do teaching this class over the next few months, and maybe after that—"

"Deanna thinks—"

"Deanna's reckless, and she wants everyone around her to be reckless. The last thing you should do right now is to jump into a major criminal case. Especially a case where you'd be adverse to the Church of the Sanctified Assembly. Under normal circumstances, there'd be no one better, but these aren't normal circumstances, are they, Parker?" He sounds like a parent gingerly trying to dissuade a child of limited talent from pursuing a pipe dream.

"You're patronizing me, Manny. Don't patronize me."

"I'm just being a caring friend."

"You know, as *your* good friend, I could give you some helpful pointers about how to present an effective oral argument. Like telling the judge a story rather than speaking in legalese. Or having a conver-



sation rather than reading from your notes. Or changing your facial expressions so you look like you give a shit about your case.”

He smiles thinly, but his eyes are cold and hard. “You might be suffering from stage fright, Stern, but you’re still a contentious son of a bitch. Insult me if you must. I’m not going to change my mind about your representing Rich. But the next time I have a pro bono court appearance, I’ll definitely have you tutor me.” He looks at his wristwatch. “I’ve got to head out to the Westside. But keep this in mind. If you were to take this case on, you’d be jeopardizing Rich’s freedom. That cannot happen.”

We stand and face each other, the tension still palpable. After a moment, he smiles again, this time more broadly. “Look, Parker, I know how much you love trying cases, how much you miss it. But slow down. Your time will come again. And knock ’em dead in class this afternoon.” He squeezes my shoulder with his large hand.

I force a smile. As a star trial lawyer with a growing number of accolades, I was once more important than Manny. I made more money and had more power. Our relative positions at the firm even distorted my visual perception of him. Back then I never thought of him as physically imposing, though he’s at least six inches taller than I. Now, he towers over me.