

THE BOMB MAKER'S SON

ALSO BY ROBERT ROTSTEIN

Corrupt Practices

Reckless Disregard

THE BOMB MAKER'S SON

*A
Parker Stern
Novel*

ROBERT ROTSTEIN



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*Sweet savior from moribund winter,
rescuer from blank, incessant December,
defying cruel probability . . .*

CHAPTER ONE

I get out of my sagging old Lexus, brace myself against the open car door, and take a reflexive look around the underground parking garage. I always check the shadows—I've been assaulted in here before. The familiar smells of motor oil, dust, and moldy damp concrete provide solace. I walk into the courtyard. The night is warm, the garden lush with banana plants, tree ferns, and gardenias. The dim solar lanterns along the winding flagstone path provide scant light between here and the stairwell leading to my condo unit.

A woman who seems to coalesce from molecules of darkness is suddenly blocking my way. Despite the balmy August night, she's wearing sunglasses, a heavy black coat, and a scarf—perhaps a Muslim hijab—that covers her head and the lower half of her face. Her hands are concealed in her pockets.

I clench my fists to prevent tremors and walk forward, trying to mask my trepidation with a confident façade. As I'm about to pass her, she says in a barely audible whisper, "Parky."

So she's looking for child star Parky Gerald. Six months ago, during a highly publicized trial, a witness let slip that I was the former kid actor, revealing a secret that I'd kept hidden for twenty-five years. Since then, I've been hounded by obsessed fans seeking autographs and attention. I don't sign autographs, not because, as some celebrities claim, they're meaningless, but because I refuse to commit forgery. I'm no longer that kid actor. I'm Parker Stern, attorney at law.

Although I now understand why the woman is here, I'm no less cautious. What sane person stalks a forty-year-old has-been? When she takes her hands out of her pockets, I recoil, but she only reaches up and lowers the scarf.

“Heavens, Parky, you actually don’t recognize your own mother?” she says.

Of course I don’t recognize her. It’s dark, and she’s in disguise. Not only that—she’s *here*. She’s never been to my home, and I never expected her to be.

“Jesus, Harriet, what the fuck?”

She shakes her head in disapproval of my language. When I was a child, every other word that came out of Harriet Stern’s mouth was a profanity. But that was when she was a promiscuous, drug-abusing stage mother, before she became Quiana Gottschalk, the elusive, mythical elder of the cult that calls itself the Church of the Sanctified Assembly. She and the Assembly’s founder tried to embezzle millions from my movie earnings to finance the organization. At age fifteen, I became an emancipated minor and sued to get my money back. My mother and I don’t speak unless we have to.

“I need to talk with you, Parky,” she says. “Can we go up to your place?” She checks her surroundings like a wary bird and reties the scarf around her brown hair.

“What are you doing here, Harriet? They finally excommunicate you, too?”

“Your condominium unit, Parker!” She says this in the imperious tone that I grew up with, the tone she must use with intransigent Assembly underlings.

“I don’t think so.”

As I pass her, she grabs the sleeve of my cotton workout shirt. “I’m sorry. Please. I need your help.”

Something’s off. The Quiana Gottschalk I know doesn’t apologize and doesn’t beg anyone for favors, especially me. The Quiana I know travels with an entourage of Assembly thugs and would never show up at my condo alone. The Quiana I know doesn’t wear blue jeans. Why is she wearing blue jeans?

More out of curiosity than filial concern, I say, “Fine, come on up. But make it quick. I have an appellate argument tomorrow.”

We climb the stairs to my condominium unit. My mother is fifty-

nine, petite, and elegant, but usually also commanding and intimidating. Tonight, she looks as skittish as the moths flitting around the amber floodlights.

I open the door and let her inside, looking behind me one last time to make absolutely sure that her Assembly henchmen aren't lurking in dark crevices or under rocks. She walks into the living room and takes stock.

"Very nice," she says, "though I'd think that someone with your talents and success could afford something larger. And your furniture is rather stark. You could use some more color in this room. The sanctified colors of the Celestial Rainbow are dazzling."

It's true that the place lacks color: the wicker chair, love seat, and area rug are all black and white. The glass cocktail table is just black.

"I prefer it this way," I say.

She raises a tattooed eyebrow. "Yes, you've always seen things in black and white, Parky."

We stare at each other until she sits down on the wicker chair. I sit across from her on the sofa. When she leans forward with uncharacteristically rounded shoulders, I wonder if her posture indicates the first stage of osteoporosis. The Assembly has bizarre theories about nutrition and modern medicine. They insist upon a low-alkaline, unbalanced diet, deny the germ theory of disease, and believe that the government has poisoned the public water supply. Even a powerful elder like Quiana is vulnerable to their quackery.

"Aren't you going to offer your mother some herbal tea?" she asks.

"What's this about?"

She looks down at her hands, obviously disappointed at my refusal to brew her some tea. "I have a friend who needs a lawyer. I'd like you to represent him. I'll pay you your normal fee, of course. I'll pay you a premium if that's what it takes."

"I'll never represent anyone who has anything to do with your so-called church."

"He isn't a devotee of the Assembly. He's . . ." Her voice quavers, and she has to take a breath and start over. "He's got nothing to do with my present life. I knew him before."

“What’s he charged with?”

She kneads her hands, like she did back in the day when apologizing for a drinking-and-drug binge or when crying because the latest movie producer she was screwing dumped her.

“I asked you what he’s charged with, Mother.” I rarely call her that, but my response echoes her own regressive behavior.

“He wants to turn himself in. I don’t know why after all these years. He’ll need a lawyer.” Her eyes glisten. Are her tears real? My mother always wanted to be an actress, but she had neither the talent nor the temperament. That’s why she lived her dream through me, her only child. “He’s been a fugitive since nineteen seventy-five.”

“You expect me to believe that someone wants to turn himself in after almost forty years?”

She shakes her head and shrugs simultaneously. My mother has taken advantage of the best cosmetic surgery that the tithes of Assembly devotees can buy. Yet the skin on her face has softened and drooped; gravity and time have avenged her attempt to defy them. “I’d feel better if you got me some tea.”

I don’t move.

“Will you take on his case, Parky? Please.”

“Harriet, what’s he charged with?”

“Multiple murder and acts of domestic terrorism.” The words are spoken, not by my mother, but by a man standing in the dark hallway leading to my bedroom.

My peripheral vision flashes red with rage and fear. Fists clenched, I get out of my chair and approach the man slowly. He’s in his mid-sixties, five-eight or -nine, wiry, so not a physical threat—unless he’s carrying a weapon. He has a receding hairline, but still enough wavy gray hair that you wouldn’t call him bald. He’s clean-shaven, wearing a gray T-shirt with a maroon ring at the neck, a stylish windbreaker with a matching maroon pocket logo, and blue jeans. There’s a small gold earring in his left ear. Fortunately, his hands are at his sides, empty.

“Sanctified Assembly?” I ask, glowering back at Harriet.

“Your building security isn’t very good,” she says. I expect her to

assault me with a triumphant smirk, but she's staring somberly at the coffee table.

"My name is Ian Holzner," the man says. "In nineteen seventy-five, I was charged with a crime I didn't commit." There's a gentle richness to his voice. "The press has unfairly referred to me as the Playa Delta Bomber. I assume you've heard of me."

I shake my head. "History has obviously passed your ego by."

"Parky, please," Harriet says.

The man purses his lips, not quite a grimace. "I'm thinking of turning myself in to stand trial."

"In my opinion, it's suicidal," my mother says. "These days, the government is even more oppressive than—"

This Holzner character gives my mother a laser-sharp look, one that would usually bring her ever-simmering temper to a boil, but improbably, she stops talking. I'm glad, for no other reason than I don't want to hear a diatribe about how the United States government oppresses the Sanctified Assembly.

"If I decide to turn myself in, I want you to represent me," the man says. "Harriet tells me you're the best."

Interesting that he calls my mother *Harriet*, a name she's disavowed and purports to despise.

"I do very little trial work these days," I say. "I'm an appellate lawyer now. Less stressful." What I don't say is that, for the past few years, I've suffered from severe stage fright every time I walk into a courtroom. *Glossophobia* is the technical term. With a mix of powerful antianxiety medications, I've been able to manage to get through the more high-brow, and so more civil, appellate-court arguments.

"Nonsense," my mother says. "You were born to perform. If not on stage, then in a courtroom. You're going to take Ian's case."

"I don't think so, Harriet," I say.

She stands up, walks over to Holzner, and loops her arm in his. She's beaming like a grimy street lamp in a littered alley. "Parker Stern, I'd like to introduce you to your father, Ian Holzner. Ian, this is our son, Parky."

I'd think this was one of my mother's cruel, manipulative games, that Ian Holzner couldn't possibly be my father, except for one thing. When I look at him, really look, I realize that I resemble him as only a son can resemble a father.