

Lying in Judgment

Gary Corbin

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my mother and father, who taught me to read, to write, and to follow my dreams; and to Renee, who makes every day so dreamlike.

CONTENTS

Part 1: An Accidental Murder	1
Part 2: Jury Selection	35
Part 3: The Trial Begins	59
Part 4: Frankie Trouble	99
Part 5: Crossroads	169
Part 6: Mounting a Defense	251
Part 7: Jury Deliberations	295
Epilogue	345
Acknowledgements	348
About Gary Corbin	349
Forthcoming books by Gary Corbin	350
Excerpt from <i>The Mountain Man's Dog</i>	351

PART 1

An Accidental Murder

CHAPTER 1

Two hours late.

Peter checked his voice mail. No messages from Marcia. After eight years of marriage, he should know better, but hell. Hope springs eternal.

So much for surprising her with dinner and flowers tonight.

He rested his elbows on the dining table, careful not to disturb the place settings – his on the end, hers around the corner, close enough so their legs could touch during dinner. For the third time ever, he'd broken out the good Waterford china and hand-polished the silver – even the little salad forks neither of them ever used. The crystal wine glasses and tumblers. Good cloth napkins that matched the tablecloth. A big deal for her, God knows why.

For grins, he leaned his full weight, 190-ish pounds, onto the table. It didn't wiggle in the slightest. Good, good. While Marcia worked long hours to build her career, he'd spent countless evenings and weekends building this beast – cutting, sanding, gluing, and finishing hundreds of dollars worth of select cherry. As lumber manager at Stark's Building Supply, he could hand-pick the very best pieces from his suppliers' stocks, all at wholesale price. That was his second-favorite perk of the job. Number one was taking the occasional afternoon off to turn it into beautiful furniture, cabinets, and picture frames for his wife's art.

But too often lately he'd been enjoying his creations all alone.

He speed dialed her. Two rings, then voicemail. “Hi, you’ve reached Marcia Robertson, Vice President for Business Development at Metro Dental. I’m sorry I missed your—”

He punched the pound key to bypass the greeting. “It’s me again. Did you have plans I didn’t know about tonight? Oh, wait a sec.” The rays of the September sunset reflected off the hood of her charcoal Ford Explorer easing into the driveway. He hung up, opened a chilled bottle of Pinot Blanc, and lowered the dimmer over the dining table. He lit the tall scented candles and slid them apart so they wouldn’t singe the arrangement of fresh lilacs and wild African daisies – her favorites.

She entered the front door moments later, cell phone stuck to her ear. Her oversized handbag dangled from her other shoulder. “Sure, I can make the seven a.m. if you can reschedule the finance briefing with Marwick to Friday. (Hi, hon.) What? No, I was talking to my husband. I’m just getting home.” She gave him a quick wave and pointed to the phone. “Sylvia,” she mouthed – her secretary.

“I’ve been waiting—”

She held one finger to her lips and turned away. He tapped her arm. She extended her hand behind her, and he slid a glass of Pinot between her fingers. “Thank you,” she mouthed over her shoulder, and drained the drink in one gulp.

“Sylvia, I gotta go.” She set the empty glass on the coffee table. “I’ll let you know about dinner Friday. See you in the morning.” She sighed, clicked her phone shut and leaned against the back of a recliner. “What a day. How was yours?”

“Oh, fine.” He leaned in for a kiss. She pecked him on the mouth and bent down to remove her two-inch heels. Her black slacks hugged the slender arc of her hips. Nice. “Nobody’s buying lumber today, so I put Frankie in charge and cut out early. Thought I’d surprise you by having dinner ready when you got home.” He pointed at the table. “I expected you two hours ago.”

“Sorry. I thought I told you I had drawing class.”

He frowned. “Drawing’s on Tuesday, isn’t it? Today’s

Wednesday.”

For a second, she looked panicked, but her confident smile returned. “Yeah, but we had an extra session. Field work.” She brushed a stray curl away from her face.

“Ah.” He grinned. “Remember, any time you need to practice at home on a nude male model...”

“What? Oh, yeah.” She fumbled in her purse until she found a tiny mirror and some lipstick. Ruby red, her trademark color. She dabbed it to her lips, then tossed the mirror and lipstick back into her purse.

“Where’s your sketch pad?” he asked.

A slight hesitation. “It must be in the car. I’ll get it later. So, what’s for dinner?”

“I marinated some salmon, made a salad – oh, damn! The potatoes!” He rushed into the kitchen and flung open the oven door. “Aw, shit.” He donned thick mitts, pulled the broiling pan from the oven, and dropped it with a clatter on the stove. Acrid smoke poured from the shriveled spuds.

She appeared behind him. “Burnt?”

He tossed the mitts on the counter. “Dried up like prunes.”

She glanced into the salad bowl. “This isn’t looking too hot either. You should’ve put ice on it.”

He bit back a snappy retort and poked at the fish with a wooden spoon. It disintegrated in the shallow platter.

“No good?”

He answered with a slow wag of his head. Silence hung in the air like steam.

She sighed, a noisy release of tension. “I’m... sorry.” Her fingers enveloped his. “Listen. Why don’t I go get some take-out? Keep the table set, pour some more wine, and we’ll have a nice romantic dinner like you planned.” She wrapped her hands around his waist and cocked her head.

His frustration ebbed with the widening of her smile. He put his arms on her shoulders and bent to kiss her forehead. At six foot one, he had a good eight inches on her. “Sure. Sounds good, babe.” With one hand he pulled her in close. He slid the other down the small of her back and breathed in the lavender

scent of her perfume.

After a moment, she wiggled free of his embrace. “It’s almost eight. I’d better get going if we’re going to eat any time soon. Any preferences as to what I get?”

A wry smile, his hand still touching her waist. “Anything except fish.”

She laughed. “Okay. KFC it is. Finger lickin’ good.” She pecked him on the nose and skipped out of the room. Her shoulder-length hair trailed behind. A lacy bra strap showed through the thin fabric of her white blouse. He smiled. This could turn out all right after all. A bucket of chicken... like that cold winter night in front of a blazing fire a few years before they got married, back when even greasy take-out meant blowing the month’s food budget. The flickering light of the fire reflected in her soft brown eyes... “The fire is so warm,” she’d said with a coy smile. “You should take my shirt off.” He’d unbuttoned her red flannel top, and laughed when he realized the shirt was his. “Oh, so you’re a breast man?” she said. With each bite of chicken, more clothes came off – hers, then his. They licked each other’s fingers and devoured the chicken, and each other...

The slam of the front door jolted him. The marinade’s salty aroma tickled his nose. He sighed, flicked the disposal switch, and dumped the spoiled food down the sink’s noisy mouth.

Upstairs a minute later, he changed into clothes more appropriate for greasy take-out. He pretended that her hands, not his, unbuttoned his shirt and removed his slacks, imagined her soft hands caressing his muscular back and shoulders. He pulled on some loose-fit jeans and a short-sleeved shirt, but no undershirt, and left the top few buttons undone. Hell, maybe they could skip dinner and go straight to the main course.

On his way back to the stairs he passed the guest room that doubled as Marcia’s art studio. A large dark object lay against the futon couch.

Marcia’s sketch portfolio. She’d said she left it in the car. She would have needed this for art class. Then he recalled her brushing that stray, nonexistent hair back from her face. Her

nervous tic, one that always gave her away when she lied.

He stepped into the room, glanced back through the doorway to make sure she hadn't returned, and tugged at the bag's zipper. It took only an inch to reveal the pad's thick pages.

With a deep breath, he sat on the futon and pulled the bag's zipper all the way open. He spread the pad open on his lap. "Property of Marcia Robertson," read the familiar cursive on the cover page, followed by her address and cell number.

His heart beat like a rock and roll drummer. He should stop.

Instead, he turned the page.

The first several sheets contained what he expected: some still-life studies, nature scenes, and some self-portraits. Marcia had captured the charm of her girl-next-door good looks. Her deft use of shading and thin strokes depicted her wavy light-brown hair with precision, reflecting her meticulous personality. She included the splash of freckles across her dimpled cheeks and the sparkle in her dark brown eyes. Pretty.

The self-portraits gave way to sketches of various classroom models. Mostly men, but none of him.

He reddened. "Such vanity!" his pastor father would say. Who would want to draw a balding guy with a growing beer belly, anyway? Any smart person would stick to something beautiful: her. His father's fierce image faded.

He flipped through the pages. One face showed up with increasing regularity – a man with curly hair, thick eyebrows, and high cheekbones, in a variety of poses and settings. Unlike the other sketches, most of these were of the man's face only – no torso. The first few sketches portrayed side views of the man concentrating on something nearby or gazing off into the distance. Later images contained frontal views, relaxed, smiling. In one, he held a cocktail glass.

He shoved the pad back into the portfolio case. Probably wrinkled some of the sketches. Yeah, well, the son of a bitch would be a lot worse than wrinkled if he ever touched her. A hell of a lot worse.

CHAPTER 2

Green digits on the dashboard of Peter's pickup changed to 8:45. Across the busy four-lane street, the man and woman in Florentino's Italian Ristorante finished their wine in simultaneous gulps. Neither the distance nor the restaurant's romantic lighting could hide the man's bronze tan despite six solid weeks of autumn rain. Ruggedly handsome, athletic, and clean-shaven, his curly brown hair suffered no thin or balding spots.

Just like her portraits of the son of a bitch.

He adjusted the baseball cap covering his own thinning scalp and blew warmth onto his hands. So, this is the guy. After nearly three months of doubt – the increasing frequency of her late nights at the office, a sudden interest in wearing the latest fashions, hurried hang-ups when he happened into the room – suspicion morphed into unwelcome reality.

Dammit. He'd wanted to be wrong about this. He popped a shelled pistachio nut into his mouth and sucked the salt from it. He chewed it, but found it hard to swallow. He cracked another one open and waited. It all could be very innocent.

Marcia sat opposite this stranger. She reached across the table to touch his arm. Peter looked away. The pistachio caught in his throat.

She was so tender with him... like she used to be with Peter. Like she was with everyone else but him now. Early in her career, as a dental hygienist, her soft hands and gentle touch had made her a favorite among her patients, particularly her male patients. She only cleaned their teeth, he reminded himself a hundred times. Still, the idea of her hands on another

man drove Peter crazy.

Especially, now, this man. He gripped the steering wheel with both hands to steady his trembling fingers.

It was his own damned fault, really. Too much focus on his work, too little on surprising her with flowers or a pair of earrings. A lack of attention to his own appearance. Hours on end in the woodshop, twiddling with time-draining projects – time he could have spent with her. Having dinner out, for example, in a place like Florentino's, where wait staff in white shirts and black ties opened bottles of wine for well-dressed customers at tables covered in white linen.

She didn't used to go for such fancy places. When they first met, she loved to stroll with him in an isolated meadow for a picnic of fresh fruit, soft bread and hard cheese. Simple pleasures sufficed then, before careers, mortgages, and car payments took over their lives.

Time to get all of that out of the way. To win her back from job titles and art classes. To keep her – if it wasn't already too late. If she hadn't already decided to throw away eight years of marriage for a guy with a unibrow.

Marcia touched the chin of her friend – yes, friend, so far as he knew, still only friends – and turned his head, as if posing him for one of her drawings. She held it there a moment while talking to him. Okay, fine. They were just out to talk about art. His suspicions felt foolish. He should go. He reached for the ignition.

Her hand slid toward the man's lips. He kissed her hand. Her head drew back, as if in a heavy sigh. His lips closed around her finger...

"You bastards." Never mind what brought him here – he no longer wanted proof of her cheating ways. Instead he wanted to pound on something. He chose the steering wheel. It didn't satisfy, so he smacked it again. Still not enough. Nothing was.

She pulled her hand away from the man's pock-marked face and said something. Probably a lie. The man smiled, the idiotic grin of a man with only one thing on his mind. He nodded and

waved a credit card above his head, like those stupid college boys who wave twenties at bartenders to impress pretty girls. Marcia pulled a dressy jacket over her thin shoulders – an expensive one she hadn't worn in months – and exited the restaurant. Her slimeball date waited a half-minute – for appearances, no doubt – then donned his full-length coat and headed for the door. This could signal the end of their evening... or more to come.

Only one way to know: Follow them.

He dreaded what he'd find, and had no idea what he'd do once they reached their destination – probably some cheap, pay-by-the-hour motel.

They would probably drive separately, too. Best to follow Mr. Unibrow. Peter always knew where to find Marcia. By morning, anyway.

The man walked around the side of the restaurant to the parking lot in the rear. Peter started his truck, but kept the lights off. After a few minutes, her charcoal Ford Explorer turned left into traffic. Several seconds later, a red Camaro followed her out of the lot. Figures she'd go for somebody who wore his cock on his keychain.

He turned on his lights and pulled into traffic behind the Camaro. He remained a few cars back, discreet, confident he would not lose the bright red muscle car. Its superior speed wouldn't help much on this road. Plus, his pickup had six cylinders. He'd keep up.

Marcia was long gone. No matter. He could catch up to her soon enough.

They drove for fifteen minutes, past one-story strip malls crammed with Mexican restaurants and Asian nail salons, discount gas stations, smoky bars offering video poker and cheap beer, and "lingerie" shops offering rental companionship. The Camaro held a steady speed, passed only the slowest of drivers and rarely changed lanes. Even though he wore no jacket, sweat collected on Peter's scalp and collar. He kept his distance. His hands slipped on the wheel a few times. Wiping them on his pants didn't help.

At the edge of town, he got stuck behind two cars driving below the speed limit, and the Camaro pulled away. He tailgated the car on the left to encourage the driver to speed up. Still it took thirty eternal seconds, six slaps to the dashboard, and four thumps on the steering wheel to get past the slowpokes. He braked a moment later when a Subaru cut into the left lane, also below the speed limit. He smacked his horn, earned a one-finger salute in response, returned it. The Camaro gained another few hundred yards.

The driver turned right on Old Fairview Road. Strange. There's no motel that way... ah. "They must be meeting at his place," he said. "Or at a friend's."

Or, goddammit, at their regular place.

His heart sagged into his stomach. Hold tight, cowboy. Don't assume. Just follow.

The Camaro zoomed ahead on the winding, unlit road, barely two cars wide with no centerline and not much shoulder. Thick patches of fog seeped over the drainage ditch from the firs and pines on either side of the road. He leaned forward and focused on the fading taillights. If he lost the guy on this road, he'd never find him.

The road's sharp curves slowed their pace, and he closed the gap again. Soon the road turned to gravel. The Camaro's dust dropped visibility to almost zero. Peter coughed, rubbed his watering eyes, wanted to spit. He kept his distance and turned off his headlights. The Camaro's taillights, like the seductive eyes of Bathsheba, beckoned him onward.

They passed a state park turnoff on the right and drove another half-mile. The Camaro turned left on a fork about fifty yards ahead, and he lost sight of him. "Dammit!" He stomped on the gas pedal—

The driver's side of the red Camaro filled his view, with no time to react. Metal crunched. Glass cracked. Peter's head slammed onto the back of his hand gripping the steering wheel. The cab of the truck spun around him, blurry. Air bags slammed him back into his seat. Something clattered like machine gun fire against the undercarriage. Rocks, maybe. Or

gravel.

The air bags deflated and his vision cleared. His calf spasmed – his foot still jammed the accelerator to the floor. He smashed it onto the brake. A wall of red careened away from his windshield – the Camaro, half-rolling, half-sliding backwards across the gravel. The back end disappeared and the front end tipped skyward, wheels still spinning like crazed dervishes. Steam sprayed from the Camaro’s front hood.

Peter closed his eyes to stop the world from whirling around him. He leaned back in his seat, resting his head against the cushion. By feel, he turned off the ignition. The effort shot pain up his arms. He turned his head left to right, checking for soreness in his neck or back, but found none. Good – at least he hadn’t gotten whiplash. Maybe.

Footsteps crunched in gravel. He blinked open his eyes. The driver of the Camaro appeared through the windshield, carrying something in his right hand – a rod or bar of some kind. The man’s face contorted into a snarl, his thick eyebrows arched inwards, nose flared. He raised the bar over his head and swung downward – crack! – onto the hood of Peter’s truck.

“What the—?” Peter unbuckled his seat belt. A second crack! sounded on the hood, followed by the tinkling of broken glass. “Hey!” Peter yelled. “You son of a bitch. Did you just bust my—”

Crack! Another dent in the hood. The man’s face transformed into a grim smile. He drew his arm back again.

Peter reached behind his truck seat and yanked the tire iron from the kit secured in its compartment. He kicked open the driver’s side door and jumped out. After an unsteady moment, he righted himself.

A shiny metallic object arched toward his face. He swung the tire iron upward, and metal clanged metal. Peter’s hand stung and he nearly dropped the black bar. The stranger attacked again. Peter blocked the savage blow with another quick reaction, then jabbed the chiseled end of his tire iron into the other man’s startled face. Blood poured out of the man’s

nose and onto his lips. Still the man charged again, the black rod racing for purchase on Peter's skull.

This time Peter aimed a more strategic defensive blow, a quick slap of his bar across the invading forearm. The attacker's tire iron rattled to the ground and the man howled in obvious pain. But a moment later he bent over and reached with his good hand for the weapon.

Peter's foot shot upward into the man's face, knocking him backward. The man screamed, rolled on the ground, then scampered back toward his car.

Peter followed him. The punk had slept with his wife, smashed his truck, then attacked him with a god damned tire iron. Now he'd pay. He caught up to him at the edge of the ditch and kicked him karate-style across the back. The man landed on the Camaro's windshield. Peter swung at him with the tire iron, just missing his head by an inch. Cracks spiderwebbed across the glass. The man rolled across the car's hood and dove inside the open passenger side door, pulling it shut behind him.

Peter's breath grew ragged. He lifted the bar above his head and let fly with another blow to the windshield.

Then, blackness.

CHAPTER 3

Peter sat in his Ford, parked on the side of US 26, a divided highway lit mostly by the occasional neon sign from small businesses scattered along the route. A pale green light flickered in his peripheral vision. His breath came in irregular bursts, echoing his heartbeat. The smell of blood filled his flared nostrils, sending his stomach into a sickening churn. His hands trembled on the steering wheel.

He had no idea how he'd gotten there. Nor why blood covered his shirt and slacks. His hands hurt, but nothing else. Weird.

His phone buzzed in the cup holder. He'd set it to vibrate while waiting outside Florentino's. He checked caller ID, then answered it. "Hey, Frankie. Precisely the man I need to talk to."

"We can talk as soon as you get here," Frankie said. "You're late, man. The darts tourney started ten minutes ago."

Peter slapped his forehead. Half-dried blood smeared his palm. "Sorry, sorry, I forgot. Can you get a fill-in?"

"No way. We need you, Ace. We had to forfeit round one, but it's best of three. We can still win it if you get to the pub by ten."

He wiped the blood off his hand onto his shirt. "I can't. I—"

"Can't? Whaddaya mean, ya can't?" Frankie said. "Where are you, anyway? Should I come get you?"

"No! I'm, uh... never mind. I can't. I just can't."

"Bullshit. Get your ass down here and throw me some bulls-eyes. I even ordered you a beer already. Porter – the good kind you like. And a shot of Jack. Now come on."

Oh, sure. Just show up at the Brass Rail Tavern covered in blood and carry on as if nothing had happened. Ridiculous! In spite of himself, he laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

Everything. “Nothing. Just give me a minute.”

“We ain’t got a minute,” Frankie said. “You miss the next round and we forfeit the whole thing. That’s a hundred bucks we should be winning right now. So get your ass moving.”

“Would you shut up for ten seconds?” He took a deep breath. He smelled like blood, and looked worse. He couldn’t go anywhere in this condition. He scared even himself.

The wind whistled through the passenger-side window, open a crack. A dry-cleaning receipt rustled on the passenger-side floor. A quick glance to the back of the cab revealed a thin plastic bag protecting fresh, clean clothes.

“Come on, Pete.”

Someone exited a gas station washroom a few hundred feet away. He could clean up there, change clothes, toss his bloody shirt in the dumpster, and be at the pub in no time.

And maybe figure out what the hell had just happened.

“Frankie,” he said, “I’ll see you in twenty minutes.”

He made it in fifteen and parked the Ranger in an unlit, half-legal spot in back of the tavern. He opened the door into a pile of empty kegs. The rank odor of urine and stale beer assaulted his sinuses. He squeezed out of the truck and checked his cleanup attempt. Pistachio nuts littered the passenger side floor, but he found no blood spots in the dim luminescence of the truck’s dome light. Satisfied, he shut and locked the door.

Six feet from the pickup, he whirled to face it again. If someone noticed the dented hood and bumper, they’d ask questions – questions he couldn’t answer. But the angle of his tight parking job and the darkness of the night hid the damage.

He turned back toward the bar, his gaze focused on the pavement ahead of his slow-moving feet. A slight drizzle chilled his hands and face. For the tenth time, he checked his shirt: no blood, of course. Clean and pressed. Ditto the slacks.

He lifted his trouser legs to inspect his socks. Clean. Well, clean enough. They were black and could hide a spot or two in the smoky bar. Anyway, no one would notice his socks.

He stopped outside the bar's back door and ran a clammy hand through his hair, flattened against his head by cold sweat. He reached for the doorknob as the headlights of a familiar-looking vehicle swept across him.

A charcoal Ford Explorer. Marcia! She must have followed him. He wanted to run, but his legs were rooted in place like an old-growth redwood.

The body of the Explorer slowed to a stop next to him. He peered inside. The driver returned his stare—

His lungs deflated as a large African-American male grinned and waved. Gregg, his boss at Stark's Building Supply, bought an identical Explorer a few months after Marcia, largely based on Peter's enthusiastic recommendation.

Gregg powered down the window. The car, and his breath, smelled of cigarettes. "About time you got here. Where've you been?"

Peter cleared his throat to shove the shakiness out of his voice. "I forgot about the tourney. You coming in to cheer us on?"

"Just leaving, actually." Gregg squinted. "Hey, you bleeding? No, not on your nose — next to your ear. No, the other one."

His fingertips returned dried crimson crumbles from his earlobe. More freaking blood. "Ah, I think I may've picked a zit." He rubbed the rest of the dried blood off his ear.

"Ew. Too much information, buddy. Well, you'd better get in there."

He pushed his way inside. Loud 80's music and heavy smoke assaulted his entry. Neon Budweiser and Coors signs struggled to brighten the dark fir floors and poster-covered walls. Cheers erupted from a dartboard to his left.

"Peter! Just in time." Frankie appeared on his right, handed him a pint glass full of inky liquid topped with tan foam, and guided him to their table. "Have you had dinner? Here, have

some peanuts. Round Two starts in ten minutes.”

“Get me that whiskey you promised,” Peter said. “I’m gonna need it.”

“Right away, buddy.” Frankie took a step, then turned back to him. “You okay?”

“F-fine. Just a bit of nasty driving tonight.”

“I hear ya,” Frankie said. “Driving in this town can be murder sometimes. Christ! Why are you so jumpy?”

“Ah... sorry. Hard night.”

Frankie stepped closer and spoke in a low voice. “Did you find out... what you were looking into?”

He grimaced and cleared his throat. “I think so.”

“I’m sorry, man.” Frankie clapped his large mitt on Peter’s shoulder. “Well, think of it as an opportunity. See that blonde there, with the big hooters? She’s bored with that college kid hitting on her. Hell, I think she’d do you right now.”

Peter swatted Frankie’s arm away. “Christ sakes. Marcia may be a cheater, but I’m not.”

Frankie backed up a step. “Sorry, dude. Tell you what. After we win this tourney, we’ll go stalk Marcia’s douchebag and when he’s not looking, we take him out. Whattaya say?”

Peter choked on a mouthful of beer and nearly spit it all over his friend.

“Dude, what’s the matter?” Frankie asked. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

He took another sip of beer and popped an unshelled peanut into his mouth. “Nah,” he said with a nervous smile. “Let’s get another round of beers. I’ll buy.”

“Now you’re talking!” Frankie waved to the waiter.

He grabbed his wallet, then slid it back into his pocket. Time to pay would come soon enough.

Peter’s trademark focus and accuracy at the chalk line abandoned him, and to Frankie’s dismay, “Stark’s Marks” dropped the second and decisive game to their arch rivals, the

“Home Despots,” before their beers ran dry.

“What the hell’s wrong with you tonight, man?” Frankie clasped a meaty hand on Peter’s shoulder and dragged him toward a dark booth far away from the dartboards. “Your mind’s off somewhere in la-la land.”

Peter cupped both hands around his pint glass. “Not a good night.”

“I’ll say. You sucked.” Frankie signaled for another round.

“No more for me.” Peter waved at the waiter, pointed to himself, and shook his head. “Once I finish this one, I’m out of here.”

“The hell you are.” Frankie glared at him. “Something’s on your mind, and I want to hear it.” Peter lifted a hand to protest but Frankie shook his head. “No, man. I’m serious. I’ve known you a hundred years. Something’s bugging you and you won’t be right until you tell me.”

Peter’s gaze fixed on an aged scar scratched into the tabletop. “I... followed her tonight.”

“Marcia? Uh-oh.” Frankie swallowed the last of his pale ale and thanked the waiter for his refill. “You saw her? With the boyfriend?”

Peter finished off his own beer and nodded.

Frankie dropped his voice a register. “Did you confront them?”

“Him. Not her, yet.”

Frankie let out a low whistle. “How’d it go?”

Peter shook his head. “Not good.”

Frankie’s eyes narrowed and he leaned back. “He didn’t belt you or anything? You look okay.”

“No. Well, I mean, he tried, but...”

Peter scanned the room. The college guy that had struck out with the blonde at the bar stared at him. He looked familiar, but Peter couldn’t place him. He leaned closer to Frankie and spoke in a low voice. “Can we get out of here? I don’t want to talk about this around... people.”

Frankie’s brow furrowed. “Yeah, sure. Uh, help me finish this.” He gulped the beer, slid the glass across to Peter and

slapped some cash on the table. Moments later they huddled outside in the chilly mist of the parking lot.

“So what happened?” Frankie stomped his feet and blew warm breath into his hands.

“I’m not entirely sure.” Peter scratched the toe of his running shoe at the pavement. “I saw them in the restaurant, all flirty and kissy-faced. When they left, I followed the guy way out into east county, and all of a sudden the son of a bitch collides with me. He gets out of his car all pissed off, holding a tire iron. I grab my own and manage to get a few good licks in before he lands any on me, and then... hell. I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

Peter turned away, hands shoved into his coat pockets. “I mean I can’t remember, Frankie. It’s like I blacked out, or something.”

“Well, my man.” Frankie stepped closer and lowered his voice. “What do you remember?”

Peter turned back to Frankie and shrugged. “I hit him a couple of times with the bar. He starts yelling and runs back to his car. Red Camaro piece of shit.”

“Hey, I like Camaros.” Frankie grinned.

“Stuff it, will you? Anyway, I smash his car a few times, because I knew it’d piss him off. Then... wait a second. I remember something else. He comes right over the top of the car at me, like a damned cat. I clocked him on the head...” Peter blew air between his teeth.

“Then what?” Frankie scanned the parking lot, as if scoping for spies.

“The next thing I know, I’m sitting in my truck, and you’re calling me on the phone.”

Frankie grabbed Peter by the shoulders and pressed his face close. The aroma of whiskey and beer overwhelmed the rotting stench of the nearby dumpsters. Frankie enunciated every syllable: “What happened to the guy? Is he alive, or ... what?”

Peter broke free from his friend’s grasp, rocked his head back, and spread his hands wide. His voice dropped to a whisper. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Frankie’s whisper shrieked in an excited falsetto. “Peter! You think you might have freakin’ killed him?”

A sad shake of Peter’s head. “I just... I don’t know.”

Frankie stared at him for several seconds. “Jeez, man. You wanna go back and look?”

Peter’s vision blurred and the top half of his body grew heavy. He reached out to steady himself against his truck and choked back whatever hot, vile substance climbed up his throat and wiped sweat off his face. “No. I never want to see that place again.”

“So... what are you gonna do? Marcia’s gonna wonder what happened to the guy, and... I mean, Christ, Peter. I hope to hell he ain’t dead.”

“Frankie! Not so loud!” Peter’s voice hissed across the parking lot. A man and a woman, crossing to their car, glanced over their shoulders at him. “If he’s dead, then... aw, man.”

“If he ain’t, she’ll know anyway.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Peter leaned over, head between his outstretched arms, his hands supporting his weight against the truck. Footsteps crunched in the gravel. He looked up in time to see the college guy again, crossing the parking lot. He waited until the guy drove off, then turned back to his friend. “I think maybe I should go turn myself in.”

“Turn your – no way!” Frankie grabbed his arm. “Dude, you can’t do that. They’ll hang your ass so high you’ll need a telescope to see your toenails.”

“But it was self-defense. He attacked me.”

“After you followed him – a jealous husband chasing him out to God knows where? No way a jury’s buying that. Hell, I know you’d never pick a fight with anybody, but try convincing those yahoos in a court room. You might as well strap your own butt in the electric chair and hand them the switch. No way am I letting my best friend go down like that.”

Peter rested his forehead against the truck. Turning himself in seemed like the right choice – to take responsibility for his actions. But Frankie made a good point. No one would ever

believe him. "I guess you're right," he said. "I really screwed up, didn't I?"

"We'll figure something out," Frankie said. "I bet the guy's fine. You probably barely scratched him. Hell, you never could throw a decent punch."

"Hey!" Peter straightened, then matched his friend's grin. "Yeah, you're probably right. The guy's fine. And tomorrow he'll come over and kick my ass."

"The hell he will!" Frankie made a fist. "He comes around, he'll have two of us to contend with."

Peter clapped Frankie's back. "You're all right sometimes, you know that?" He pulled keys out of his pocket. "Guess I better go face the music at home."

Frankie's grin faded. "I don't envy you that conversation."

Peter winced. As bad as it had been to face her lover, facing Marcia could only be worse.

Peter parked in front of his 1920's bungalow a few minutes before eleven, surprised to see Marcia's Explorer parked in the driveway instead of the garage. Lights flickered off in the eyebrow dormer windows of their upstairs bedroom. Ah. She was going to bed, then.

He hesitated on the sidewalk. The house's pale blue wood-shake siding reflected an eerie glow from the sputtering streetlight. Overgrown daphne and heavenly bamboo shrubs cast yawning shadows on the front steps and seemed to say: stay away, stranger.

He drew a long, shaky breath. Piney smoke spewed from the next-door neighbor's chimney – they hadn't let the wood dry enough. Their border collie announced his arrival from her backyard prison of chain-link fence, concrete pads and dirt. "Quiet, Gypsy," he said, but the dog's incessant yapping drowned his complaint.

He dragged the 30-gallon trash can and two recycling bins from the grassy parking strip up the front steps to the red

wooden porch, lit by a dim compact fluorescent bulb. The front door to the house hung open. Strange. Marcia always kept the house locked at night.

Her sudden presence in the doorway startled him. A brown leather tote hung from her shoulder, and a wheeled travel bag rolled behind. She stopped short. "Oh, you're home. I didn't expect you... until later."

He pointed to her bags. "Another business trip?"

She shifted the bag on her shoulder. "No, I... left a note. I... I need a break for a few days. I'll be at... a friend's."

His body swayed, dizzy from alcohol. "Marcia, why?"

She frowned. "Things are so... so strange between us. I feel like I don't know you anymore."

"How is moving out going to help?" He stepped toward her. She backed away.

"I just... need some time. To sort things out. By myself."

He backed up a step and held his arms wide. "Come on, honey. We can work it out. I've done a lot of thinking. It'll all be better now, I promise."

"I've thought about this a lot, too." She folded her arms across her chest. "I know what I need to do."

He grasped at the air, found only a damp drizzle. "What's going on? I don't understand."

"I'm sorry. We'll talk, soon. In a few days. I promise." She started down the steps. He stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"This friend you're staying with. Is it a he or a she?"

"I'd rather not discuss where I'm going." She faced away from him.

His hand tightened on her shoulder. "Curly hair? Thick eyebrows? Someone in your drawing class?"

"Let go of me!" She wiggled free of his hand. He blocked her path.

"What's the matter? Am I too boring now that you're a big executive and have all these new friends in the art world? I'm not fancy enough, don't make enough money?"

"Stop it, Peter."

“Come on. I know you’re seeing someone else. No, don’t deny it. What do I gotta do to keep you? Get a high-paying job? Buy myself a fancier car? Would that do it, Marcia? A nice fancy Camaro like your boyfriend?”

A careening red sports car flashed in his memory. He winced.

She narrowed her eyes and reshouldered her bag. “We’ll talk about this in a few days. But yes, there is someone else. It’s all in the note, inside. I’m sorry it has to be like this, but – it’s for the best, believe me.” She shoved past him down the steps.

He staggered after her. She loaded her bags into the back seat of the Explorer. She got in, started the engine, and lowered her window. “You know, you think you’re so damned smart. But you’re wrong about my, er, friend. Completely wrong. For instance, he doesn’t have a Camaro. He drives a Subaru.” She raised the window, backed her car into the street, and drove away.

Peter stared after her. A Subaru?

His knees dissolved beneath him and he crumpled to the driveway. A cold drizzle wet his unblinking eyes, and all around him the night grew darker.

CHAPTER 4

Beyond the dark outlines of his pillows, the oversized red digits on the alarm clock read 3:14. His body felt like fallen timber swollen by days of rain. Pain stabbed the back of his head and stiffened his neck and shoulders.

Gypsy barked, and Peter flinched. Yes, he had slept. The dog's yapping had interrupted a dream in which he followed a red Camaro for miles and miles through traffic. The car turned onto an unmarked highway and sped up. His truck ran low on gas and sputtered to a stop. The Camaro pulled over. Marcia got out of the car, holding a snarling Rottweiler at the end of a long lead. The dog rushed at his truck, barking...

He flicked on the bedside lamp and rummaged through the end table drawer for a cigarette. He rarely smoked – sometimes at a bar, or when playing poker with the boys from work. But he never really *needed* one. Until now.

He found a crumpled pack of Marcia's Kools with one remaining cancer stick broken an inch above the filter. No matter. He lit it, inhaled, coughed hard. His stomach twisted and heaved, but nothing came up. Good.

With the cigarette stuck to his lips, he wandered the house in his bathrobe. Things seemed out of place. The window box he'd built for storing spare linens scraped his knee. Hand-made picture frames hung a-kilter. The easy chair in the living room rested at an odd angle. For the life of him, he couldn't find a damned ashtray.

Somehow things had gone all wrong. He'd followed the wrong car, or gotten mixed up in traffic, and... gaw.

Inhale... hold it... exhale.

So now some poor schmuck's car lay in a ditch, and God knows what shape the guy was in. Meanwhile the real homewrecker breathed in Marcia's scent, touched her soft brown hair, held her close and comforted her...

He made it to the kitchen sink just in time. The regurgitated taste of whiskey and beer lined his throat. This night got worse every second. First the accident and fight, then his wife's cold greeting as he'd come home, her admission of the affair, and the revelation about the car... the wrong car...

He spit more hot bile into the sink, and ran water to wash it down the drain. Gypsy barked again. Christ. She'd wake up the whole neighborhood.

Peter stumbled toward his cell phone. If only he could talk to someone. But nobody wanted a three a.m. call like this. Even family – especially his, a judgmental brother and a bipolar sister. Maybe, in spite of Frankie's advice, he should just turn himself in. Call 9-1-1, explain the crazy turn of events, following the wrong man, and the guy attacking him. Surely they'd understand, go light on him—

The phone rang, a loud, school-bell ring tone, indicating an unknown caller. He jumped an inch off the floor and stumbled backwards. His heart pounded like a pile driver. He had no idea who it could be – maybe the cops. It rang again. Maybe somebody had spotted him and turned him in. His empty gut churned some more. He could let it go to voice mail, or—

The third jangling ring echoed off the walls of his spacious living room. No more! He answered the call and pressed the phone to his ear.

“Mr. Robertson?”

He didn't recognize the voice, officious, tense, and businesslike. Cops, for sure. “Who's this?”

“This is Doctor Nuttbaum at Sunset Gardens. I'm sorry to wake you.”

He wiped his brow. “How can I help you?”

“You're listed as the emergency contact for Thelma Robertson.”

His body straightened, tense again. “What's wrong with

Mom?”

Nuttbaum paused. “A short while ago, I’m afraid, she suffered a serious stroke.”

“Oh my God.” He sank to his knees. “I’ll be right over. Do whatever you can to save her!”

The drive up Southwest Portland’s dark, winding roads stirred up eerie flashbacks of the earlier part of the evening. A red sports car zoomed past in the opposite direction. Spooked, he swerved, barely avoiding a collision. *Another* collision.

Relax. Focus on Mom.

Less than fifteen minutes after receiving Dr. Nuttbaum’s call, he arrived at Oregon Health Sciences University Hospital, well-known for stroke treatment and research. He navigated the stark white hallways, twice getting lost, before he found the stroke unit. Doctors and nurses wearing stethoscopes scurried from room to room. Orderlies brushed by pushing carts full of bleached linens and bedpans. The floor nurse directed him to a pleasant, studious woman in scrubs wearing a nametag reading “Angela Wegman, RN.”

“Your mom was lucky in that her stroke began with others present,” Wegman said. Her black-rimmed glasses seemed to keep the bundle of auburn hair in place on her head. “A nurse at Sunset Gardens was just making her rounds.”

“Yes. Lucky.” He fought for words and lost the battle. He sat in a metal-framed chair, suddenly self-conscious about looking down at the much shorter woman. She probably figured he was staring at her boobs. The loudspeaker coughed a request for Doctor Somebody to go Somewhere Else. He wanted to be somewhere else – anywhere. If only...

Nurse Wegman explained Thelma’s surgical procedure. He heard none of it. She waited for him to respond.

Say something. Anything. “Will her treatment take long?” He hoped she hadn’t already told him. His voice sounded foreign, the replay of an old tape recording.

“We’ll be finished within the hour, with a prognosis by

morning,” she said. “In the meantime, we’ll monitor her condition round-the-clock. You might want to grab some coffee.”

“Good idea.” His eyelids fought to stay open in the harsh fluorescent light. “Where would I find a cup?”

She stood. “I’ll show you to the cafeteria. We can go over the waiver forms there, and answer any questions you might have about the operation.”

Two cups of bad coffee later, his cell phone chimed “The Grasshopper Dance,” a springy tune reminiscent of once-happier times. He answered. “Hi, Marcia. Thanks for calling back.”

“I got your message about your Mom. I’m so sorry.” She yawned. “Do you want me to come down and sit with you?”

“That would be nice.” He frowned. Too sarcastic. He ran his hand through his hair, and several strands drifted from his fingers onto the floor.

“All right,” she said after an awkward silence. “Give me twenty minutes.”

Which meant forty. “Okay. She should be out of surgery by then. You can be here when they give us the news.”

An hour later, Marcia still absent, Angela Wegman entered the waiting room. Peter glanced up from an old issue of *Time*. The smoldering remains of a terrorist attack in the Mideast reflected his grim mood. So many innocent people died... He shuddered.

“The procedure appears to have worked,” Wegman said. “We should know by morning how much damage she suffered, but right now, it looks really good.”

He jumped to his feet. “Is she conscious? Can I see her?”

“No, I’m sorry. She’s in recovery now, and pretty anesthetized, I’m afraid,” she said. “She’ll be in ICU for at least a day. You should get some sleep.”

“I look that bad, huh?” He fought off a yawn.

A wan smile. “You’ve had a rough night.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” He wiped his face with his palms. “Is she going to be okay?”

“We think so, Mr. Robertson.”

“Call me Peter.” But not Petey. Only Mom could call him that. He blinked back a tear. “Poor Mom. She’s already losing control of her bodily functions and losing her mind – now, literally.”

“You’re a good son to her. I can tell.”

“Thank you. She’s been good to me, too.” His voice broke. “She’s so brave. She went into Sunset with no fuss when my brother and sister and I suggested it. That reminds me – I need to call them.” He turned aside to hide his watery eyes. If only he could turn away from this responsibility, and this whole goddamned night...

“Are they nearby?” she asked. He shook his head. Her hand hovered near his elbow. “Do you have anyone here to help you with this, Mr. Rob– I mean, Peter? This can be very difficult to cope with alone.” Her voice broke. “I’ve been through it, with my dad.”

He covered his eyes. Nobody got to see him cry. “Not... no. My wife left me this evening.”

“I’m so sorry.” She rested her hand on his shoulder, then squeezed. He turned back to face her, unable to speak. He hugged himself, pressing both arms against his churning gut. She squeezed his shoulder again. He nudged toward her.

“Are you going to be okay?”

He nodded – an obvious lie. He edged closer, as did she. Her hands dropped to his elbows. He leaned into her. His legs sagged. She caught him, held him upright. He rested his chin on her shoulder and shut his eyes. She patted his back. “I’m so sorry for you,” she said.

“I see you moved on quickly,” said a sharp, familiar voice from behind. “Please, don’t let me interrupt.”

He broke the embrace. “Marcia! This isn’t–”

“Oh, I’m sure it isn’t.” She curled her lip and cocked an eyebrow. “You don’t happen to drive a Camaro, do you, Nurse? Peter seems to fantasize quite a bit about those.”

He lowered himself into the padded metal chair. Fantasy? Oh, how he wished.

CHAPTER 5

Must. Stay. Awake.

The road came into focus and Peter jerked the Ranger back into his own lane. Thank God rush hour was over or he'd never get home in one piece.

His cell chimed the first few bars of "Amazing Grace." No need to check caller ID. "Hi, Jimmy. She's okay."

"Praise God!" Ouch! He held the phone away from his ear. Sometimes Jimmy forgot that a telephone was not a pulpit. "Our prayers are answered. Were you able to speak with her?"

"No, she's too out of it," Peter said. "But they did this, ah, procedure on her..." Better not tell him exactly what, or he'd never hear the end of it. "It worked perfectly. They don't anticipate much if any brain damage."

Peter pulled over. Several seconds passed – about the time it took for a quick prayer of gratitude. "Thank the good Lord Jesus," Jimmy said. "But you know how I feel about high-tech modern medicine interfering with God's plan. If the Lord is calling her home—"

"I don't think He is." Damn his idiot brother. Sometimes it seemed he wanted to just let Mom die.

"No, no," Jimmy said. "But I wish you would consult with me and Elizabeth before you make any big decisions about Momma."

He turned off the ignition, counted to five. "It was a life-and-death matter. Seconds counted. I had to choose, so I chose." Peter kept the pace of his words slow, his tone even. Don't upset him. "That's my job as her primary caretaker and what we agreed on three years ago. Trust me, it's no glory job."

Too many times he and Marcia had canceled plans so he could tend to Mom. No wonder she got tired of him.

“Of course, your sister and I appreciate all you do,” Jimmy said in his soothing preacher voice. “But when it comes to Momma’s care, we don’t share your faith in modern medicine. God will provide for her, as he does for each and every one of us.”

More deep breaths. Stay calm. “With all due respect, Jimmy, God alone didn’t heal her body tonight and get the blood flowing again to her brain. Doctors and hospitals did.”

“Just because you have strayed from the path of the Lord—”

He propped up his head with a clenched fist. “Let’s not talk about the fate of my soul right now. Let’s talk about keeping Mom’s soul in her body a little while longer. So long as I’m in charge of her care, we’ll rely on modern medicine. The best in the business.”

A three-count pause. “Elizabeth and I feel that primary decision-making authority should pass to one of us. Specifically, me.”

“How is that going to work, with you six hundred miles away? And pray tell, big brother, where would Mom be right now if we relied on faith alone instead of doctors? I’ll tell you!” He pounded the dashboard. “She’d be a damned vegetable right now. A mindless cow – perfect for your congregation!”

“What an evil thing to say.” Jimmy’s voice seethed. “Further testimony that you are not in the proper loving, Christian frame of mind to handle Momma’s medical affairs.”

“Listen. I... I’m sorry.” He gritted his teeth. Honey, not vinegar. “If you and Libby want to take on more responsibility for Mom’s care, fine – that’s long overdue. But this isn’t about democracy. It’s about Mom’s well-being.”

Jimmy’s voice cracked. The pulpit voice disappeared. “We love Momma as much as you do, Pete.”

He kneaded the cables in his neck and softened his own voice. “I know you do. But you two have to trust me, and not second-guess me all the time. Why don’t you come visit her? That’s what she really needs.”

“I’d love to, but I have responsibilities here – my wife, my children, my flock.”

He forced his jaw to unclench. “Your children that never see their Grandma? As for your flock – I’m sure the good sinners of Oakland would understand. ‘Honor thy father and thy mother.’ Remember that one, Jimmy?” His head pounded. He needed aspirin, and a bed.

Jimmy’s rumbling voice lowered an octave. “What a cheap shot. Momma would not be proud of you.”

“Mom! Goddammit, it’s Mom. Stop calling her ‘Momma’ like some backwoods Baptist preacher. We’re from Portland, not Alabama.”

Three impatient breaths echoed in his ear, then Jimmy’s baritone voice. “Elizabeth and I will be in touch about *Momma’s* arrangements, little brother.” The line went dead.

He sat for several minutes in the car, willing himself back to a calm state. His brother’s intervention could spell disaster for Mom. Another stroke, and Jimmy’s distrust of high-tech medical care could kill her – unless Peter could prevent it.

He couldn’t possibly help her from a jail cell.

He cranked the key in the ignition about four times harder than necessary, and his phone rang again. “Taking Care of Business.” Damn! He’d forgotten to call in to work.

“Petel!” Jessica, the office manager at Stark’s, brayed into his ear. “You coming to work today, hon?”

“Jeez, Jess. I’m sorry.” He waited for oncoming cars to pass. “I’ve been up all night. My mom had a stroke last night.”

“I’m so sorry! Poor dear! How’s she doing? Is she gonna be all right? How are you doing, sweetie?” She talked faster than he could think. Gum snapped over the jangling phones in the background.

“I’m all right. More important, she’s going to be okay.”

“Oh my gawd, don’t those doctors work miracles these days?” she said. “You know when my brother got in a car wreck, they put him back together better than he was before. Not that plastic surgery is even comparable to what your Mom’s going through. Hey, hon, where are you? It seems

noisy. Wait, I gotta put someone on hold here.”

He grinned and pictured his long-time friend juggling the phones among the mess on her desk. “I’m trying to get back onto Hawthorne Boulevard. Suddenly it’s a very popular street.”

“You talked to your brother and sister yet?” She clacked her gum louder. “Please hold. Not you, Pete. I mean these dodo customers of ours. I swear, some of them, it’s like they grew up swinging from trees.”

He checked traffic again. “My brother called me a few minutes ago. Surprise, surprise, Reverend Jimmy prefers to put all his faith in God’s miracles rather than in doctors.”

“That old blowhard. Don’t you hate those holier-than-thou types? What, they think they’ll cure her stroke by praying or something? I mean jeez Louise. God helps those who help themselves, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” He had no idea what she meant. All he knew is that the right lane contained entirely too much traffic all of a sudden. He inched partway out, stopped again.

“Well don’t you worry, honey. I’ll tell Gregg what’s up. ‘Where the heck is Peter?’ he says every five minutes. I guess some guy showed up, college kid, and said he needed to talk to you – did you have a meeting? I didn’t see it on your calendar.”

“No, I—”

“But don’t you worry, I’ll handle him. And Skip, that new guy you hired, he’s really sharp. Cute, too! I think he’s gonna—”

With a loud crash, the truck jerked right, and he bounced off his seatbelt. “What the hell was that noise?” Jessica asked.

“That, dear Jess, was the sound of a Buick taking out the front end of a Ford Ranger. Damn!”

A quick check of his front end revealed a crushed fender, hood, grill, and headlight – and complete erasure of the prior night’s collision with the Camaro. Finally, some good luck.

“You’re not hurt, are ya?” the other driver asked, reeking of cheap brandy. He reached for Peter with an unsteady hand. “Did you bump your head?”

“No, I’m fine.” He dodged the drunk’s arm. He felt

anything but fine. A fleck of red paint from the Camaro remained on his damaged bumper. He swayed, lightheaded.

“Please, let’s not call the cops,” the drunk said, slurring his S’s. “I’ll pay whatever the damage is, but I can’t afford to lose my license.”

“Police?” A numbing ripple shivered down his spine. “No. We don’t need to call the cops.” He slumped against the truck and held his throbbing head in his hands.

Somehow, Peter pulled himself together and wrote down the drunk’s personal and insurance information. He called the man’s phone number, and left him a stern message on his answering machine as the drunk cowered nearby. “Remember, I’ve got your name, license plate, everything,” he said. “Don’t even think about trying to disappear.”

“I won’t,” the drunk said. “I swear to God. I may be a shitty driver, but I’m no liar.”

“I believe you.” He slid back into his truck and turned the key. Thank God, the engine started right away. The drunk waved his arms and stumbled toward him. Peter swerved around him into traffic, then checked his rear-view mirror. A police car flashing blue-and-red pulled into the spot he had just vacated.

He should stop, pull over, and fill out a police report.

He stepped on the accelerator.