

Lying in Judgment

Chapter One

September 18

Peter Robertson knew his wife of six years loved surprises, flowers, and a home-cooked meal.

Tonight, for a change, she'd get all three.

If she ever got home, that is.

Where is she?

He speed-dialed her cell. Again, the familiar voice-mail greeting: "You've reached Marcia Robertson, Vice President for Business Development at Metro Dental. I'm sorry I missed your--"

He punched the pound key on the keypad, bypassing her message. "Marcia, Peter again. Did you have plans I didn't know about tonight? Oh, wait a sec." Just then, her charcoal Ford Explorer eased into the driveway. He hung up, opened a chilled bottle of Pinot Blanc, and lowered the dimmer over the dining table. Then he lit the two scented candles he'd bought that afternoon and slid them apart so they wouldn't singe the fresh arrangement of fresh lilacs and wild African daisies – her two favorites.

She entered the front door a moment later, cell phone stuck to her ear, oversized handbag dangling from her other shoulder. “Uh-huh, yeah. I can make the seven AM 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 Peter a quick wave and held up one finger, then pointed to the phone. “Sylvia,” she mouthed – her secretary.

“I’ve been waiting –”

She held one finger to her lips, then turned away. He admired the way her black slacks hugged the slender arc of her hips. He tapped her shoulder. Without looking, her hand extended, and he slid a half-glass of the Pinot between her fingers. “Thank you,” she mouthed over her shoulder, and drained the drink in one gulp.

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

“Oh, fine,” Peter said, leaning in for a kiss. She pecked him on the mouth and bent down to take off her two-inch heels as he continued. “Nobody’s buying lumber today, so I put Frankie in charge and cut out early. I thought I’d surprise you by having dinner all ready for you when you got home.” He pointed at the table, set with their fine wedding china. “I expected you two hours ago.”

“I’m sorry, Peter. I thought I told you I had drawing class.”

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

For a second, Peter thought she looked panicked, but her quick smile made him doubt his first impression. “Um, yeah, but we had an extra session. Field work.” She brushed a stray curl back from her face.

“Ah.” He smirked. “Remember, any time you need a nude male model...”

“What? Oh, yeah.” She surrendered an uncertain smile, then 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.

Something seemed wrong. He noticed her empty hands. “Where’s your sketch pad?”

A slight pause. “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 are still in the oven.”

He rushed into the kitchen, flung open the oven door, and swore. Donning oven mitts, he pulled out the broiling pan, dropping it with a clatter on the stove.

Marcia appeared behind him. “Burnt?”

Peter nodded. “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 bowl.

“No good?”

Peter’s answered with a slow shake of his head. Silence hung in the air like steam.

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

Peter felt his frustration start to ebb with the widening of her smile. He put his arms on her shoulders and leaned down to kiss her forehead. At six foot one, he had a good eight inches

on her. “Sure. Sounds good, babe.” He enfolded her in a tight squeeze, sliding one hand down the small of her back, but after a moment she began to pull free.

“It’s almost eight,” she said. “I’d better get going if we’re going to eat any time soon. Any preferences as to what I get?”

A wry smile, still holding her waist. “Anything except fish.”

Marcia laughed. “Okay. KFC it is. Finger lick-in’ good.” She pecked him on the nose and skipped out of the room, her shoulder-length hair trailing behind. As she retreated, he noticed her lacy bra strap showing through the thin fabric of her white blouse and imagined it uncovered, slipping off of her shoulder –

A bucket of chicken. Peter remembered a cold winter night in front of a blazing fire a few years before they got married, when take-out meant blowing the month’s budget. He recalled the flickering light of the fire reflecting in her soft brown eyes. *I’m so lucky to have her!* he thought at the time. “You look warm,” she’d said with a coy smile. “You should take your shirt off.” With a grin he’d unbuttoned her red flannel top, and she laughed when she realized the shirt was his. “Oh, so you’re a breast man?” she kidded. With each bite of chicken, more clothes came off, first off one, then the other, licking each other’s fingers as they devoured first the chicken, then each other –

The slam of the front door jolted him out of his reverie. He stared at the ruined food for several seconds, then dumped it into the grinding gears of the disposal.

Peter cleaned up the kitchen, then went upstairs to change into clothes more appropriate for greasy take-out. He imagined her unbuttoning his shirt, removing his slacks, her soft hands caressing his back and appreciating his muscular shoulders. *Maybe we can just skip dinner,* he

thought, *and go straight to the main course*. He pulled on some loose-fit jeans and a short-sleeved shirt, leaving the top few buttons undone. No undershirt – *let's make this easy for her*.

Heh.

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

Marcia's sketch portfolio. I thought she said she left that in the car? Well, maybe she just took the pad with her. I'm sure that's it.

Then again...

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

Dammit! But – why the lie?

With a deep breath, he pulled the bag's zipper all the way open. The pad collapsed to the floor. He bent to pick it up, at first intending to fold it back into the case. On impulse, he sat on the futon, then spread the sketch pad open on his lap. "Property of Marcia Robertson," read the familiar cursive on the cover page, followed by her address and cell number.

Stop! he told himself. But something compelled him. He turned the page.

The first several sheets contained what he expected: some still-life studies, nature scenes, and some self-portraits. He admired those. 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, characteristic of her meticulous personality. She included the splash of freckles across her dimpled cheeks and the sparkle in her dark brown eyes. *Pretty*, he noted with pride.

The self-portraits gave way to drawings of various classroom models. *No drawings of me*,

he noticed, then felt guilty. “Such vanity!” his pastor father would say with disapproval.

Aw, who wants to draw a balding guy with a growing beer belly? he thought. *Stick to something beautiful.* The Pastor’s fierce image faded from his mind.

As he flipped through the pages, he noticed one face showing up with increasing regularity – a man with curly hair, thick eyebrows, and high cheekbones, in a variety of poses and settings. Unlike the sketches of the other models, most of these portraits were of his face only – no torso. The first sketches were nearly all side-views of the man concentrating hard on something, looking down or off into the distance. Later images contained frontal views, relaxed, smiling. In one, he was holding a cocktail glass.

Who is this guy? Peter wondered.