

Gary Corbin  
17704 SE 16th St  
Vancouver, WA 98683-1918  
(503) 312-1336  
Approximately 94,000 words  
[gary@garycorbinwriting.com](mailto:gary@garycorbinwriting.com)

## Lying in Judgment

### Chapter One

*September 18*

Two hours late.

Peter checked his cell phone and the landline's answering machine. No messages from Marcia. After six 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.

Using those things alone wasn't so much fun, though. That happened way too often lately.

He flipped open his cell phone again and pressed her speed dial code. Number two. Her birthday, and anyway, Mom was number one. Always.

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." 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 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 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 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, then 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. Mmm. “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 then 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 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 bowl.

“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 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.

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, 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. Mmm. Lace. 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 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 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, then 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.

He cleaned up the kitchen, then went upstairs to change 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. He 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 said she left it in the car. Well, maybe she took the pad out of the case and brought it with her. Sure, sure.

Then again...

He stepped into the room, glanced back 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.

Maybe she forgot she’d left it here. Or... no. During her explanation, she’d brushed that stray hair back from her face. Hair that wasn’t even in her face. A nervous tic, one she always had whenever she lied.

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.

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. None of him... he reddened. “Such vanity!” his pastor father would say.

Well, who wanted to draw a balding guy with a growing beer belly, anyway? Stick to something beautiful: her. His father’s fierce image faded.

He flipped further 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 were 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 helluva lot worse.

## Chapter Two

*November 17 – two months later*

Green digits on the dashboard of Peter's 2005 Ford Ranger 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 deep tan despite six 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 him. After two 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 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 could all 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's so tender with him... like she used to be with Peter. 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 was only cleaning their teeth, he reminded himself a hundred times. Still, the idea of her hands on another man drove him 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-dancy places. When they first met, her favorite date was a stroll to an isolated meadow for a picnic of fresh fruit, soft bread and hard cheese. Simple pleasures were enough, then. Before careers, mortgages, and car payments got in the way.

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 six 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. Fine, then. 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 and said something. The man nodded and waved a credit card above his head. She pulled a dressy jacket over her thin shoulders and exited the restaurant. Her date – yes, he had to admit, date, not just “friend” – donned his own full-length coat and left a minute later – for appearances, no doubt. This could signal the end of their evening... or more to come.

There was only one way to know: Follow them.

He dreaded what he'd find, and wondered what he'd do once they reached their destination – probably some cheap, pay-by-the-hour motel.

They were probably driving separately, too. Best to follow Mr. Unibrow. He always knew where to find her. 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 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. It might be fast, but that wouldn't help much on this road. Plus, his pickup had eight 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, 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 seem to 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. Even then 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 gripped the wheel and focused on the fading taillights. If he lost him on this road, he'd never find him.

The road's sharp curves slowed their pace, and he closed the gap again. Soon they were driving on gravel rather than pavement. The Camaro's dust dropped visibility to almost zero. He coughed, rubbed his watering eyes, wanted to spit. He kept his distance and turned off his headlights. The Camaro's taillights, like the 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 –

Metal crunched. Glass cracked. The driver's side of the red Camaro filled his view, then skidded away from him, a huge dent in its side. Shocked, his foot froze on the accelerator. Gravel clattered the underside of the pickup. The driver's shriek pierced the explosion of crashing cars, then ceased.

Released by the driver's silenced scream, he forced his foot to move. He smashed the brake pedal to the floor. Pistachios clattered off the windshield. His calf spasmed. The Camaro slid sideways across the gravel road, then half-rolled, half-slid backwards into the drainage ditch, engine running, front wheels spinning like dervishes in the foggy air.

He turned off the ignition and got out, shaking. His truck hadn't sustained much damage – some red paint and a dent on his bumper, and a cracked headlight.

He walked to the Camaro, its front end jutting out of the ditch. Its engine sputtered to a halt. The driver cursed and struggled with his seatbelt. "You stuck in there?" The driver nodded and pushed against the car door. Peter walked to his truck, grabbed a two-foot tire iron from behind the jumper seat and returned to the Camaro. "Hold on. I'll pry your door open and—"

He stopped. This was lunacy. "Help you, my ass!" he yelled. "For what? So you can go home and screw my wife again? How many times has she been in the back seat with you, eh, fuck-face?"

The driver stared at him, then raised his hands, palms up.

"Don't give me that 'I don't know what you're talking about' bullshit, you lying bastard!" He smacked the car's hood. The driver jumped and crossed his arms over his face.

"Stop? No, you stop, you lying..." He kicked the Camaro's smashed-in door. His foot stung.

"Cheating..." Another kick, harder.

“Blood-sucking...” Harder. Harder!

“Bastard!” His foot exploded into the dented door. He lost his balance, overcompensated and fell forward. His wrist slammed onto the hood. Pain shot up his arm. “Fuck!” The driver stared at him, mouth agape. “Don’t look at me like that, you cheating son of a bitch!” He kicked the car again and tumbled backwards onto the road. He leapt to his feet and lashed out. The forgotten tire iron, still in his right hand, smashed into the windshield. Cracks spiderwebbed from the point of impact.

Power surged through his body. He smashed the glass again. It felt good. A third time felt even better, as did a fourth, and a fifth... Ten dozen would not be enough unless it punched through the glass to pound the face of the cheating bastard cowering underneath. He lifted the tire iron above his head with both hands and, with all his might, swung it downward in a vicious arc.

\*\*\*

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, reflecting off the gold band on his left third finger. His breath came in irregular bursts, echoing his heartbeat. The smell of blood filled his flared nostrils. His hands trembled on the steering wheel.

He couldn’t believe what he’d done: ended a man’s life, and ruined his own. Anyone seeing him sitting in the middle of nowhere covered in blood would think: Murderer.

But he didn’t feel like a murderer. He still felt like the old Peter Robertson – the one everyone knew, the guy he was 24 hours before. Good old Peter. Mr. Reliable. The nice guy at work (and before that, school, and church), the guy parents trusted with their daughters on dates,

bowling league treasurer, you name it. He didn't break laws or hit people. He was calm, steady, non-violent Peter.

Who just killed his cheating wife's boyfriend.

His head throbbed. His stomach ached like he'd swallowed steak knives. He moaned.

"What the hell am I going to do now?"

He came up with only two options. Option One, he could turn himself in. He shuddered. He'd be locked up in prison, probably forever. He shook his head. No. He was honest, but not stupid.

Option Two: appeal to Marcia for help. With her lover gone, she'd need Peter as much as he needed her.

She wouldn't help if she knew he killed him. But she didn't know. Nobody knew, so –

His cell phone buzzed. He'd set it to vibrate while waiting outside Florentino's. He checked caller ID, then answered it. "Hey, Frankie," he said to his best friend. "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."

He slapped his forehead and smeared almost-dry blood across his palm. "Sorry, sorry, I forgot. Can you get a fill-in?"

"Nothin' doin', buddy-boy. 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."

Tears welled. "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 winnin’ right now. So get your ass movin’.”

“Would you shut up for ten seconds?” He took a deep breath. He smelled like blood, and looked worse. He couldn’t possibly show up in public 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, innocent clothes.

“Come on, Pete.”

He ignored him. “What about my face, though?” he said.

“What about your face? What the hell are you talkin’ about?”

He spotted someone exiting 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.

A drink sounded really good right then.

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

He made it in fourteen and parked the Ranger in an unlit, half-legal spot in back of the tavern. He opened the door opened 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 bumper, there'd be questions. 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. She knows. She was angry, and had turned him in. 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 a moment later. He peered inside. The driver returned his stare –

His lungs deflated as a large African-American male grinned and waved. Gregg, his boss, had 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. "How

are you guys doing in the tournament so far?"

"Uh... down one game." He hoped Gregg didn't notice the shakiness in his voice. "You coming in to cheer us on?"

"If I can find parking." 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. The dead man's blood. "Ah, I think I may've nicked a zit shaving."

"On your ear? At nine o'clock at night?"

"No, this morning. I must've picked at it while driving over." He wished he sounded more convincing.

"Ew. Too much information, buddy. Well, you'd better get back 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?"

"Fine. Just a bit of nasty driving tonight."

"I hear ya," Frankie said. "Drivin' in this town can be murder. 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 lookin’ into?”

He grimaced. He couldn’t lie to his friend, but... He cleared his throat. “I think so.”

“I’m sorry, man.” Frankie clapped his large mitt on Peter’s shoulder. “Tell you what. How about after we win this tourney, we go stalk the bastard and when he’s not lookin’, we take him out. Whattaya say?”

He 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. “For a second, it sounded like a really good idea.”

“Dude. I was only kiddin’.”

“I know, you goofball.” He laughed and rabbit-punched Frankie’s arm. “Let’s get another round of beers. My turn to buy.”

“Now you’re talkin’!” Frankie gestured for the waiter.

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