

Lying in Judgment

Chapter One

September 18

Peter Robertson didn't need an expensive counselor to tell him he needed to get the romance back into his six-year marriage. He knew Marcia loved surprises, flowers, and a man who cooked. Tonight, for a change, she'd get all three.

If she ever got home, that is.

Where is she?

He called her cell number that night. 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 Nissan Pathfinder eased into the driveway. He hung up, set a chilled bottle of Pinot Blanc on the dining room table, and lowered the dimmer. Then he lit the two scented candles he'd bought that afternoon and slid them apart so they wouldn't singe the flower arrangement he'd so carefully chosen. 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 her finger to her lips, then spoke into the phone. “Sylvia, 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!” she said. “How was yours?”

“Fine,” Peter said, leaning in for a kiss. She pecked him on the lips and bent down to take off her two-inch heels as he continued. “I left early. I thought I’d surprise you by having dinner all ready for you when you got home.” He pointed at the table, all set with their fine wedding china, silver, and crystal. “I expected you two hours ago.”

Her face fell. “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 she regained her composure so quickly that he doubted his first impression. She brushed a stray hair back from her face. “Um, yeah, but we had an extra session. Field work.”

He looked at her handbag, her empty hands. “Where’s your sketch pad?”

A slight pause. “In the car still. 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. “They’re dried up like prunes.”

Donning oven mitts, he pulled the broiling pan out, dropping it with a clatter on the stove.

Marcia appeared behind him. “Burnt?” she asked. Peter nodded. She glanced into the salad bowl. “This isn’t looking too hot either. You should’ve put ice on it.”

Peter bit back a snappy retort, grabbed a spoon and poked at the fish. It disintegrated in the bowl.

“No good?” Marcia asked.

Peter’s despondent shrug and slow shake of his head answered for him. Silence hung like heavy steam in the air.

She sighed, a noisy release of tension. “I’m ... sorry, Peter.” He felt her fingers wrap gently around his.

“Listen,” she said in a soft voice. “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.”

Peter hesitated a moment, and 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 was a good eight inches taller than her. “Sure. Sounds good, babe.” She gave him a quick hug. He began to return the embrace, but after a second or two she began to pull free.

“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. “Anything except fish.”

Marcia laughed. “Okay. KFC it is. Fin-ger lick-in’ good.” She pecked him on the nose and skipped out of the room, her shoulder-length brown hair trailing behind.

A bucket of chicken. Peter was reminded of a cold winter night in front of the fire, 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. On his way back to the stairs he passed the guest room, which doubled as Marcia's art studio. An object lying against the futon couch caught his eye and stopped him in his tracks.

Marcia's sketch portfolio.

He stepped into the room and eyed the black patent leather case. He glanced through the open 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 white pages.

Damn, damn, damn.

He pulled the bag's zipper all the way open. *Stop!* he told himself. But something compelled him. He spread the sketch pad open on his lap.

The first several pages were 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 wavy light-brown hair was well-represented by her deft use of shading and thin strokes. She included the charming splash of freckles across her dimpled cheeks and the lively sparkle in her dark brown eyes. From the self-portraits, the drawings progressed to pictures of some classroom models. *No drawings of me*, he noticed, then felt guilty. What would his father say about that? "Such vanity!" Pastor Donald would say with disapproval.

Besides, he thought, *who wants to draw a balding guy with a growing beer belly? 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.

Chapter Two

November 17, 2002

The digital clock on the dashboard of Peter's '95 Impala changed to 8:45 as the man and woman in Florentino's Italian Restaurant finished their wine in simultaneous gulps. Although he was parked across a busy four-lane street, Peter could see them clearly in Florentino's front window. The man, ruggedly handsome and athletic in build, sported a deep tan despite six weeks of autumn rain. Clean-shaven, his curly brown hair suffered no thin or balding spots.

So, this is him, Peter thought. The other man. He adjusted the baseball cap covering his own thinning scalp and blew warm foggy breath onto his hands. *I wanted to be wrong about this!* He popped a shelled pistachio nut into his mouth and ground it between his teeth, then cracked open another one, waiting.

Marcia was seated across from this stranger. She nodded and smiled at him, then reached across the table to touch his arm. Peter looked away. The pistachio, or something, caught in his throat. *She's so tender with him,* he thought. *Like she used to be with me.* Marcia's soft hands and gentle touch had made her a favorite among her patients as a hygienist early in her career. *She's only cleaning their teeth,* he'd had to remind himself at times. Still, he hated sharing her soft touch with anyone else. Especially, now, this man.

Florentino's appeared to be a pretty swank restaurant. Peter could see white linen tablecloths and wait staff in white shirts and ties delivering bottles of wine to well-dressed

patrons. *How her tastes have changed.* He remembered a time a few months after they'd first met, strolling in a sunny meadow, the light shining through her hair, turning it an auburn hue... her eyes never left his, and his never left hers, as they talked about everything and nothing at all. Having nothing but each other was more than enough, then. *Those were the happy times,* he thought. *Innocent and care-free. What happened? How did we lose that from our lives?*

The man waved a credit card above his head. Moments later Marcia pulled a dressy jacket over her thin shoulders as her date signed the charge slip. He was still donning his own full-length coat when she exited the restaurant.

They were leaving separately – for appearances, no doubt. *Which one should I follow? I guess it doesn't matter. They're going to the same place – probably to a cheap, pay-by-the-hour motel.* His stomach churned at that thought. He decided: *Follow him.* Her, he could find later.

The man followed Marcia around the side of the restaurant to the parking lot in the rear. Peter started his car and waited with the lights off. A few minutes later, Marcia's Pathfinder turned left into traffic. Seconds later, a red Camaro followed her out of the lot. Peter turned on his lights and pulled into traffic behind them.

He remained a few cars back, discreet, no risk of losing sight of the bright red muscle car. They drove for ten, fifteen minutes, passing only the slowest of drivers and rarely changing lanes. Peter kept his distance. Marcia was long gone. *No matter,* he thought. *We'll catch up to her soon enough.*

As they reached the edge of town, the Camaro began to pull away. Peter tried to catch up, but he was stuck behind two cars driving abreast, five miles below the speed limit. He changed lanes, trying to encourage the car on the left to speed up. It did, but it took a good thirty seconds to get past the two slowpokes. He had to brake a moment later when another car cut into the left

lane, also below the speed limit. He tapped his horn, earned a one-finger salute in response, returned it. The Camaro gained a hundred, two hundred yards on him.

He managed to get around the slow drivers and close the gap on the Camaro just as the driver turned right on Old Fairview Road. *Strange. There's no motel this way... ah.* "They must be meeting at his place," he said aloud. "Or at a friend's. Or..." He didn't want to complete the thought, but his mind forced it: *at their regular place.* His heart sagged into his stomach. *Hold tight, cowboy,* he told himself. *Don't assume. Just follow.*

The Camaro pulled away on the winding, unlit road. It was narrow, barely two cars wide, with no centerline and not much shoulder. Fog seeped over the drainage ditch from thick patches of firs and pines on either side of the road. The dust raised by the Camaro dropped visibility to almost zero. Peter gripped the wheel and focused on the fading taillights. He didn't want to lose him on this dark, unfamiliar road. He'd never find him again if he missed a turn.

The Camaro slowed as the road's curves became sharper and more frequent, and Peter was able to close the gap between them. Soon they were driving on gravel rather than pavement. Peter kept his distance, as much to stay out of his dust as to avoid suspicion. They passed a turnoff on the right and drove about another mile on gravel. The Camaro turned left on a fork about fifty yards ahead, and Peter lost sight of him. He sped up to regain ground –

And crashed into the side of the Camaro, lurching backwards through the intersection!

Metal crunched. Glass cracked. Gravel clattered the underside of the Impala as Peter, too stunned to react, continued to press the accelerator. The driver's fearful shriek pierced the explosion of crashing cars, then abruptly ceased.

As if released by the silenced scream, Peter forced his foot to move. His calf spasmed as he pushed the brake to the floor. Pistachios clattered off the windshield. The Camaro,

meanwhile, slid sideways across the gravel road, then half-rolled, half-slid backwards into the drainage ditch, engine still running, front wheels spinning like dervishes in the foggy air.

Breathing heavily, Peter turned off his car and got out, shaking. His car hadn't sustained much damage – some red paint and a dent on his bumper, and a cracked headlight. Apparently the Camaro had absorbed most of the impact.

He walked to the Camaro, its front end jutting out of the ditch. Its engine sputtered to a halt. He heard the driver whimpering, struggling with the door handle and cursing at his seatbelt. “Sorry, mister,” Peter said. “I didn’t see you coming. You stuck in there?” The driver nodded and continued fussing. Peter walked to his car and popped the trunk, removing a tire iron from the car-jack kit and returned to the Camaro. “Hold on,” he said. “I’ll pry your door open and–”

Mid-sentence, he stopped. *Help him, my ass. I wonder how many times Marcia has been in there with him. Not stuck, though. Willingly!*

“You bastard!” he yelled. “Bastard, bastard, *bastard!*” With each oath he kicked the Camaro’s smashed-in door. His foot stung, only making him angrier. On the last kick he slipped, slamming his wrist onto the hood, shooting pain up his arm. “Fuck!” he yelled. The driver looked out at him, eyes wide, mouth agape. “Don’t look at me like that, you cheating son of a bitch!” Peter kicked the car again and lost his balance, falling backwards onto the road. Frustrated, he leapt to his feet and lashed out. The forgotten tire iron, still in his right hand, smashed into the windshield, spreading spiderweb cracks from the point of impact.

Seeing the broken glass, anger and adrenaline surged through Peter’s body. He smashed the glass again. It felt *good*. All at once he wanted to pound this fancy hot rod – and its driver – to pieces. He lifted the tire iron above his head with both hands and swung it downward in a vicious arc, aiming at nothing, as his furious scream split the cold night air.