

LYING IN
VENGEANCE

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Lying in Vengeance

Chapter 1

Peter Robertson bolted upright in his darkened bedroom. Carlos Santana sang his 1970s hit “Black Magic Woman” on scratchy, poorly-amplified speakers. How, Peter wondered in his melatonin-aided stupor, could a band thirty years defunct be broadcasting a live concert in the second-floor bedroom of his eighty-plus-year-old Portland bungalow? And why on such awful sound equipment?

Something lit the corner of his bedroom with a flickering glare. His stupid cell phone. He reached for it and noticed the bright red digits flickering at him from his bedside alarm clock. 3:15 a.m. What idiot

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would be calling him at this hour?

Then the song snippet repeated, and he remembered creating and assigning that ringtone two months earlier to a woman in his phone's contact list — a woman he'd vowed to forget. The woman who made his life miserable, sleep next to impossible, and nightmares inevitable for weeks after the close of the Alvin Dark murder trial. The woman who'd threatened to blackmail him into doing horrible things, after realizing the horrible thing he'd done and lived with for the six months leading up to their ill-fated meeting on that jury.

"Christine?" he said into the phone. It kept playing music. Dammit! He pushed the "Answer" button, and the music stopped.

"Well, good morning, Sunshine," she said, all chipper and happy. She sounded like she'd been up for hours, probably drinking double espressos and scheduling Twitter messages to promote her various clients' brands. "Have you missed me?"

"Do you know what time it is?" He propped two pillows up against the headboard and sagged into them. Closing his eyes didn't help: he only imagined every detail of her pretty face in front of him, from the thin, black eyebrows and long lashes to her brilliant smile and bright red lipstick. He opened them again and stared into the blackness of his bedroom.

"It's breakfast time in New York," she said. "Which means it's mid-morning for you — about nine-fifteen, right?"

"Try three-fifteen." Peter rubbed his temples with

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his free hand. "You got the time change backwards."

"Oh, silly me," she said. "I'm sorry." She didn't sound the slightest bit sorry. He thought he heard her laugh, even. "Well, now that you're up, let's get that dinner planned that we talked about—what was it, a month ago now?"

"Two months."

"You're *so* right. Time does fly when we're busy, doesn't it?"

Peter scowled and turned onto his side. Monday morning was earning its awful reputation. "Christine, what do you want?"

"I just told you. I want you to buy me dinner."

"I'll mail you a gift certificate to Arby's tomorrow. Good night."

"Don't you dare hang up on me!"

Peter's finger paused an inch above the "End Call" button. Even with the phone held a foot in front of his face, he heard her throaty warning with perfect, chilling clarity. He sighed and returned the phone to his ear. "I'm still here."

"Good." Amazing how her voice could transform from dark and dangerous to soft and sexy without missing a beat. "I thought we could go back to Pazzo's, for old times' sake. Remember our first date there? You were so nervous."

"It wasn't a date. We had lunch. And it wasn't our first anything. We'd had lunch together before."

"Yes, but at Pazzo's, you paid, like a true gentleman, courting the object of his desires."

"I was *not*—" He stopped himself. To be honest, he

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had been courting her—at the time. And he had to admit, he enjoyed her company. Maybe he was judging her too quickly. “How about someplace new?”

After a beat, she countered, “A place we’ve never been...? Say, perhaps, *Florentino’s*?”

His blood froze in his veins. He’d known, deep down, as soon as he gave her the opening, she’d remind him of the restaurant where, eight months before, he’d followed Marcia, his now ex-wife, and her lover, triggering events that changed—*ruined!*—his whole life. The scene of, if not the crime per se, at least where it all had been set in motion. Where the victim, his lover, and his enemy all worked and quarreled. The victim whom he’d later mistaken for Marcia’s lover, whom he’d confronted, beaten, and—

“S’matter? Cat got your tongue?”

He shook himself out of the foul memory. “No. Not there. Not *Florentino’s*.” His hoarse voice took him aback, increasing the chill spreading across his naked body despite the summer heat. “I’m never going back there.”

“Fine. I tell you what—surprise me. I’ll be back in town later this week. Pick me up at my office Thursday at six.”

“Thursday I have plans.”

Her voice grew hard. “Make new plans.”

She hung up without saying goodbye.

Christine Nielsen hung up the phone and smiled. Peter’s buttons were so easily pushed.

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But then again, so were hers.

She took a bite of the scrambled eggs on her plate, all runny and pale. Another hotel chain that watered down egg batter to save money on top of their ridiculously inflated prices. If Leicester-Howe, LLC ever turned the corner on profitability, she'd insist on better accommodations on these hellish trips. She'd also remember, tomorrow, to order her eggs over easy. Even a runny yolk beat a plateful of this goo.

Her phone chimed, a pleasant tone, soft and melodic. Caller ID showed the name. She hit "Ignore." It rang again. She pressed "Ignore" a second time, And a third, when the caller persisted. Even 3,000 miles away, she didn't want her day ruined by the man who had, for three awful years, abused her, physically, mentally, and emotionally—and then had continued to badger her since. She made a mental note to ask the tech guy how to block calls on this phone, issued to her only days before she jumped on the red-eye to JFK. He'd offered twice, and she'd declined, knowing that what he really wanted was an excuse to hang out in her office and stare at her legs—which would lead to an unwelcome invitation to drinks after work, which she'd declined a dozen times before. As odd and unattractive as she found him, however, it might be worth it to be rid of Kyle and his harassment.

She charged the breakfast to her room and exited the hotel to the already oppressive heat and humidity of Manhattan in July. She needed to walk about six blocks to her client's office—long New York blocks

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rather than Portland's tiny two hundred foot squares. She might just melt away to nothing. Which she might have preferred over meeting with this group, an obnoxious, greedy bunch of financial advisors who prided themselves on cheating small investors, going low-bid on out-of-town ad firms like hers, and paying consultants late, if at all. But the market had tightened up in recent months, and she needed the work.

Her phone chimed again, and the display said "Caller ID Blocked." Probably the clients, wondering why she wasn't twenty minutes early. She answered in her chipper Clients-Are-King voice. "This is Christine Nielsen."

"Hello, baby."

She hung up. That rotten scumbag Kyle had called from a different phone, probably thinking she'd blocked his earlier calls.

Forget the tech. She needed to meet with Peter Robertson, soon.

That bitch! How *dare* she hang up like that, without so much as a hello. Rude, as usual. Kyle had no idea what he ever saw in her.

He glanced at the photo on his dresser, the two of them together in Hawai'i. She looked pretty damned good in that bikini. Even better when it came off.

Oh, yeah. *That's* what he'd seen in her.

He hit redial—like, really *hit* redial, literally smashing the phone with his fist. But the call went straight to voicemail. And again. And again.

She'd pay for that. God *damn* her.

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He rolled off his bed, a California king with an iron head and foot rail, one they'd used many times when they'd done the dirty deed. Truly dirty, too, the way he liked it: ropes, blindfolds, hot wax—she'd always preferred things a little rough. Or so she always said whenever he asked, until walking out on him. Then she was all, "Oh, honey, you hurt me." What crap.

He pulled on a pair of chinos, foregoing the boxers lying on the floor. They probably still had the scent of that useless blonde bimbo he'd thrown out, sobbing, at 2 a.m. Like it was *his* fault she didn't climax. In his experience, a woman's pleasure had nothing to do with what filled the space between her legs and everything to do with what filled the space between her ears. And that one had nothing.

He flipped a comb through his own blond curls and made a mental note to get on Gillian's schedule for a trim. Maybe a little touch-up on the roots—they showed a little dark brown, that mousy color that came on in his early 20's that he so despised. So very un-California. He envied his idiot brother Earl in this regard, one year younger and as blond as Kate Upton—even his chest hair. Unlike Kyle's. He rubbed his free hand over his muscular chest and added a spa visit to his to do list. He hated stubble, or any sort of body hair. If he had religion, that was probably it.

That, and avoiding Earl. For the last fifteen years, he'd succeeded at that, ever since Kyle left the foster home in which they'd spent their teenage years. Earl had left him a message once to tell him that their foster parents had died and left everything to their "natural"

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babies. He'd deleted the message—and with it, he hoped, every last trace of that unfortunate period of his life.

He trudged downstairs, brewed a cup of chai and sat on the deck of his two-story condo overlooking the dark northern California coastline. The majestic beauty of the ocean, the moonlit beach, the mountains in the distance to the north—on a normal day it had the power to calm his agitated soul. But today his frustration lingered. She had a way of getting under his skin, even when she'd flown a continent away from him.

Which he knew, because he always knew exactly where she was, who she was with, and what she was doing.

Every moment.

Every day.