

Lying in Vengeance

Gary Corbin

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DEDICATION

To my brothers and sisters:

*Diana, Patsy, Donna, Judy,
Bill, Dawn, Linda, and Alan.*

*No one could ask for a
better group of friends.*

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Part One

Trapped

Chapter One

Peter Robertson bolted upright in his darkened bedroom, awakened by Santana blasting “Black Magic Woman” on scratchy, poorly-amplified speakers. Why, he wondered in his melatonin-aided stupor, would an aging seventies band break into his ninety-year-old Portland bungalow and wake him at this hour? And why on such awful sound equipment?

Something lit his bedside table with a flickering glare. His stupid cell phone. That meant bad news. He rolled across the queen-size mattress, found the phone, and held it to his ear. “Christine?” he said. 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, bright red lipstick and perfect sun-bronzed skin. He opened his eyes again and stared into the blackness. A faint glow seeped in through the edges of blackout curtains covering the window across the room. Beautiful or not, he did not welcome this call from her, regardless of the hour.

“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 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 even thought he heard her laugh. Typical Christine. She loved making his life miserable, in so many ways. Like making sleep next to impossible. She managed that even without three a.m. phone calls.

“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.” He adjusted the pillows behind him. Suddenly he couldn’t get comfortable.

“Yes, but at Pazzo’s, you paid, like a gentleman, courting the object of his desire.”

“I was not—” He stopped himself. To be honest, he had been courting her—at the time. And he had to admit, he’d enjoyed her company. Maybe he was judging her too quickly. Maybe she really did want to date him after all. “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, now his ex-wife, and her lover. That foolish decision triggered 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. The fancy restaurant where the victim of the crime worked, a man named Alvin Dark—a man whom Peter had never met before that terrible night. The victim whom Peter had later mistaken for his wife’s secret lover. The man 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.

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 served watered-down eggs from a carton 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 the pants off 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 three thousand 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 continued to badger her ever 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. That 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 into 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, 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. Obnoxious, greedy financial advisers, they 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 realizing she'd ignored 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'd ever seen in her.

He glanced at the photo on his dresser, the two of them together in Hawaii. 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. Again. And again.

She'd pay for that. God damn her.

He rolled off his bed, an iron-framed California king, 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 said whenever he asked, until she walked 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, sobbing blonde bimbo he'd thrown out at two a.m. Like it was his fault she didn't enjoy their roll in the hay. 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, too. They showed a little of that mousy dark brown color that came on in his early 20's. He despised it. So very un-California. He envied his idiot brother Earl in this regard, two years younger and as blond as Kate Upton. Even his chest hair. Which he let grow, like a twerp. Kyle rubbed his free hand over his smooth, 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. He'd succeeded at that for the last seventeen years, ever since Kyle left the foster home where they'd spent their teenage years. Earl had left him a message a year after Kyle left to tell him that their foster parents had died penniless—exactly what Kyle had wanted him to believe. The trust fund he'd convinced them to set up, naming then eighteen-year-old Kyle the trustee, had conveniently disappeared before Earl could come of age and squander it, like every other good opportunity he'd had in life. By contrast, Kyle had known exactly how to use the money, investing it in his personal training business and some passive-income funds. Make the money work for you, he'd always told his brother. But Earl just wanted to party. Cruise chicks. Get by in life the easy way.

Deplorable.

Kyle 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 this view 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.

