

Ambrose

License to Lie

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Terry Ambrose

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DEDICATION

To my loving wife Kathy. Thank you for your emotional support, your help as my in-house editor, and your love. This one's for you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank my wife, Kathy, for her continued support as I pursued the writing of this novel. More than anyone, she and her trusty red pen and encouraging spirit have been called into action to bring this work to fruition.

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Some of the more recent readers who gave me feedback include Brae and Jill Wyckoff. Along the way, there have certainly been others who have helped me and if I haven't mentioned you, please accept my apologies.

FROM THE AUTHOR

I wanted License to Lie to feature two main characters, a con artist and a criminologist. Roxy Tanner's world is all about money and taking advantage of others. Skip Cosgrove has dedicated his life to helping others find justice.

If you've read my McKenna Mystery Photo Finish, you may see a resemblance between Roxy and the con artist in that book. The resemblance is not accidental and you may even catch references to events you recognize from Roxy's past.

License to Lie lets two characters who look at the world very differently tell the story of how a kidnapping and a \$5 million con forced them to wonder, what would happen if you could never trust a soul...even your own?

By the way, if you're interested in seeing what happens next to Skip and Roxy, be sure to look for Con Game.

CHAPTER ONE

Roxy

I was eight years old when I discovered how badly I wanted to live—and how easy it would be to die. I’ve lived with that lesson for twenty years. Despite all the cons and scams I’ve pulled, despite all the lies I’ve told during those years, I’ve never revealed that one simple truth. I’ll probably die with my secret. Given the life I’ve chosen, maybe sooner than I’d like.

My mouse hovered over the bank balance number on my computer monitor. I wet my lips and suppressed a giggle. I exaggerated each syllable as I mouthed, “Four million eight hundred thirty-seven thousand two hundred ninety-eight dollars.”

I winked at the monitor. “And fifteen cents.”

Rustling noises from the other room drifted in. My secretary getting settled.

“One last investor.” The words came out as no more than a breath. Soft as the silk of my favorite blouse.

I nudged the number with my mouse as though I could bump the dollar amount up by sheer force of will. It didn’t matter.

I had that last investor on the hook. In about 15 minutes, he’d park himself in the chair opposite my desk. Closing the deal would be easy. A pretty smile. Chitchat like I was interested. Flirt as though I cared. I’d learned a lot in the past twenty years. Especially about how to bury pain.

CHAPTER TWO

Skip

Skip Cosgrove wore patterned board shorts and a weathered two-tone, blue and gray jacket to cut the chill of Carlsbad's damp morning fog and sea breeze. At lifeguard station 36, he spotted the outline of the Encina Power Plant tower, a spire that rose into the gray mist until it vanished. Skip checked his watch. 7:30 a.m. Calm surf. Few intrepid souls dared brave the dark water's chill on this particular morning.

"Why don't you give them something good today?" he asked the ocean.

The sea gave him no answer. He knew it wouldn't speak to him, but he liked talking to it—or her. "Sailors have always thought of you as a woman. Are you?"

Tentacles of ocean laced with kelp erased Skip's footsteps from the sand as he strode along the beach.

"Maybe they're right." He continued, "You can be temperamental."

Another small wave washed across his bare feet. Each morning, those first few splashes felt icy. But after a few, the skin and nerves numbed. "You can't chase me away that easily."

Skip continued his morning routine. He surveyed the swells breaking no more than fifty feet away. One benefit of being self-employed, he thought, no clocks to punch. No one to tell him he couldn't do this. He watched the water. "Not even you."

His cell phone chimed in its holster. Shit. Already? "Cosgrove."

"Skip, can you meet me at nine? Got a client with a missing kid."

“This morning?”

“I know, less than two hours. Paul Nordoff went missing last night. Parents are freaking out.”

A large wave washed in, putting Skip calf deep in sixty-two degree water. He shivered. Okay, that felt cold. “Wally, you know I hate missing-kid cases. What was that name again?”

“You heard me, Nordoff. The mother’s in hysterics, the father blames her for not paying attention to his kid. I need you to probe her brain, find out what she knows. You know, do your thing, man.”

Skip pressed the cell phone to his ear and backed up as another large swell rolled in. Wally, always making it sound so easy. Skip was a contract criminologist who also practiced forensic hypnosis. His business was split about half-and-half. Sometimes, he worked for the cops, the rest of the time, for private parties. Lately, business had been slow. He should take Wally’s case, but he couldn’t guarantee results—he might not find the kid. Wally knew that, but he was a high-profile, overpriced attorney and when his clients asked for something, he made sure they got it. Skip shrugged off his reluctance. If these people had Wally as their attorney, they had bucks. Big bucks.

“There’s plenty of blame to go around, isn’t there?” said Skip.

“No.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Like I said, it’s complicated.”

“Fine. The usual fee?”

“Of course. You’ll do it?”

Shit. He felt his blood pressure rising. He needed the cash. And staying in Wally’s good graces was crucial to his business. “Yeah. Where do I go?”

He got the address, then disconnected. He could now see the power plant belching steam into the marine layer, almost as though the escaping vapors were the source of the fog hanging low in the sky. Thanks to Wally, he didn’t have time to go all the way to his normal turnaround spot. So much for being his own boss.

On the walk back, he contemplated Wally’s case. Why did they always blame the mother? Why couldn’t the husband bear some of the responsibility for the missing kid? Where had he been? Had he done something to make the kid run away?

Skip hurried back to his ground-floor condo. He rinsed and dried his feet, then entered through the sliding glass door to the living room. It only took a few steps to cross the room. In the kitchen, he poured himself a cup of coffee. He checked his e-mail—three pieces of spam, two ads, and nothing else. He deleted them all and headed for the shower.

Missing-kid cases. They were so depressing. If he got lucky and found the kid, it often uncovered more problems. Hot water pelted his face. The sting became almost unbearable as he muttered into the water, “I hate missing-kid cases.”

CHAPTER THREE

Roxy

To normal people, my life wouldn't make much sense. Normal people don't grow up intending to prey on others. They don't strive to become criminals. Deep down I don't think I ever wanted to be a bad person, but to some of us, as the saying goes, shit happens.

I pulled my first con on my mother when I was eight, so I was hardly what you might call a late bloomer. Just like anyone else starting a new job, I had to learn the ropes. Contingency planning. Backups. Game theory. Those were all foreign concepts to me back then. My plan seemed solid enough—sell the fake Rolex my mother tossed in the garbage for spending money. But things got complicated when Mom wanted the watch back. So my first great con almost landed me in the worst possible jam an eight-year-old tomboy could imagine herself in—a princess costume for Halloween.

If only a stranger hadn't taught me how much worse things could get. And no shrink—or any amount of therapy—ever got me past that memory.

I was sitting at the kitchen table enjoying my after-school snack of chocolate chip cookies and milk when Mom stormed across the room, almost ripped the lid off the garbage can, and threw something in. She whirled and faced me.

I froze, a half-eaten cookie in my mouth. My mouth went dry. Had I done something wrong?

“Goddamn piece of shit! It's not even a real Rolex.” She left the way she came in—with a red face and steam practically coming out her ears.

At first, I felt relieved because Mom was mad at whatever she'd thrown away, not me. Then, my kid-curiosity kicked in. I was still a bit confused by this whole "goddamn piece of shit" stuff that cropped up every once in a while. Mom and Dad didn't say it that much, but when they did it always seemed to apply to something different. As my stomach settled down, I realized that it would be easy for me to see for myself what a goddamn piece of shit was. How cool, I had an undercover caper. Just like a real spy. I put my half-eaten cookie back on the plate, slipped off my chair, and tiptoed across the room.

I lifted the garbage can lid and peeked in. Oh, gross! Peach slime everywhere. Mom had been canning again. But there! Halfway down. In between the peach pits! It was the watch Mom had picked up when my parents made their last trip "south of the border." That was their big, fancy code for Mexico. Why parents used big, fancy code words seemed stupid to me but, more importantly, I now knew what a "goddamn piece of shit" was.

It was the watch. So how had it turned bad? She'd bragged about that watch to all her friends for weeks now. She'd gotten a steal. It was a Rolex. It had real diamonds—a girl's best friend according to Mom. It had a perpetual date thingy that was supposed to tell Mom what she couldn't seem to remember—what day it was. And she'd just thrown it away?

I stole a glance at the door. No Mom. Parents think kids are stupid, but the reality is that kids know their parents better than parents know their kids. That means we have the advantage. Our codes are better, too. We keep them simple and quick and use them for important stuff—like when a grownup is around.

Mom would be back in a couple of minutes so I reached in and plucked out the watch. I held it out in front of me. “Yuck,” I scrunched up my nose. “You need a bath,” I muttered as I slipped over to the sink. “We don’t want to get slimy junk on Mom’s floor. Or me!” I rinsed off my new possession.

“I’ll put you in my tree house,” I said. The tree house would be safe. I kept it locked to keep out intruders—like Mom and Dad.

Was the watch broke? I checked the time on the watch against the clock on the wall. They both said 3:27. So what was Mom’s problem? I dried off the watch with a dishtowel and shoved it in the front pocket of my jeans.

I made it back to the table just before I heard Mom’s footsteps. Right on time, I thought. I took a bite of my cookie and let the sweet mix of sugar and chocolate fill my mouth. Mom marched past me toward the trash. I tried to say something, but crumbs caught in my throat. Mom stood over the can, glaring at it. Suddenly, the cookie didn’t taste so good.

Today, I look a lot like my mom did back then. I’m 5’6”, have a slim build, long blonde hair, and a nose that everyone refers to as cute. In my book, noses are a big waste. They drip and run, expel germs when we sneeze, and nobody, I mean nobody, has one that looks that good. Still, I probably wound up with one of the better ones given how easy it seems to keep men focused on my face while I get them to empty their wallets.

Most people in my business would justifiably scream slander and call one of their attorneys if someone referred to them as a con artist, but the world of investments is full of people better at

separating their clients from their money than investing it. The trick is making unsuspecting clients think someone else blew their bundle, not the investor.

I swallowed hard to clear my throat. It amazed me how that single incident had shaped my life. I remembered how Mom opened the trash lid and peered inside as if it were happening before my eyes today.

Mom got a funny look on her face, then glanced in my direction. “Roxy, did you see that watch I just threw away?”

Maybe it was the cookies—all of a sudden they seemed really dry. Like I’d just gotten a mouthful of sand. I gulped down some milk. The scratching in my throat wouldn’t go away. Did Mom know how much I hated these types of choices? I could lie and tell her I hadn’t seen it—in which case she’d get all cranky when she emptied all that slimy peach junk from the can—holy moly. I was busted. Mom would never trust me again.

“Are you okay, honey?”

Uh, no. I’d only told one lie that I could remember—it wasn’t even a good one—and I’d gotten caught. I’d pinky-sworn with Teddy, my favorite bear, to never lie again unless it was really, really big. You know, like an emergency or something. I wasn’t about to break that promise when my odds of getting caught were so high. I didn’t want to give up my new watch either.

“Mmmm, why?” Lame, but the best I could do on the spot. Mom probably wanted it back and I’d be out a watch.

“I wanted to spit on it.”

Wow, she was ticked off. “Mom, why do you hate the watch so much?”

She brushed back the bangs from her face. “Well, honey, it’s because someone took advantage of me. He told me the watch was a real Rolex that he found on the street. He said he was selling it to raise food money for his family.” Mom lowered her voice and whispered, “And a real Rolex costs thousands, I got this for a few hundred bucks. Besides, I think he stole it and if the police found out I bought it . . .” Her eyes shown with fire as her voice trailed off. She glared at the garbage can. “Bastard!” Her face went red. “Sorry, honey. That guy lied to me.”

What should I do? Grownups call me precocious—I had to go look that one up. It took a long time because I had to find Mom’s dictionary, which she’d taken to stashing in her closet. My other problem was that I didn’t know how to spell the word. That meant I had to go through almost all the words starting with a P. Once I knew what the word meant, I abused it for about a week until Mom and Dad offered me a deal—no more word, no dishes for one night.

My bargaining skills weren’t very good back then, so I took the deal.

Mom didn’t know it, but I knew her better than she knew me. I swallowed hard. “You could go to jail because of the watch?”

She forced a smile. “Probably not, honey.”

I recognized that fake smile. The last thing I wanted was for her to go to jail. Sure, she said she wasn’t worried about it. So why would she look at all those slimy peach pits and peels and whatever else that was in that can? That meant—she had to get rid of the watch.

I pulled it from my pocket and held it out, doing my best to be strong for Mom. I felt like I needed a good excuse for digging into the garbage, so I said, “Here it is. When I saw what it was, I thought how perfect it would be for my princess costume at Halloween.” I had no intention of spending Halloween in a stupid princess costume, but Mom had been after me for years to give up Darth Vader. Technically, I guess this was a lie, but I think Teddy would agree this was an emergency. We’d have a long talk later to sort this whole thing out.

I knew I was in trouble when she got all teary. Jeez, Mom.

“Oh, Roxy, you’re going to be a princess at Halloween?”

Uh—no. This wasn’t going right. Now what? “I was gonna surprise you.”

She tilted her head to one side and got that big mushy-eyed look she always got when I did something really good. I squirmed in my seat as she crossed the room. Even the safety pin I used to pin the key for my tree house lock onto my jeans dug into my skin. I was trapped and sure that she was going to smother me in kisses—and take the watch away.

She wrapped her arms around me like an octopus. “I’m so happy you want to be a princess. I was a princess when I was your age! Oh, you know what, you keep that watch. It’s a fake—a piece of costume jewelry—you use it for your costume. That seems perfect to me.”

She left the room, that silly smile still on her face. With her out of the way, I started thinking about what I’d done. A princess costume?

I mumbled, “Teddy, we need to talk.”

But I didn’t need to talk. I knew what I needed to do. Ditch the Rolex. Maybe Mom was

happy letting me have it, but what if it really was stolen? Even if it was a fake, I had to get rid of the evidence so the cops couldn't—would they take her away?

Maybe the watch fit Mom's wrist, but it was huge in my hands. What was I gonna do? No way I could let the cops come after her. I turned the watch over in my hands again. It gleamed in the sunshine streaming through the window. It was so pretty. And hot. The stupid watch could send Mom to jail. But I could stop that.

Two days later, I put on a pair of raggedy jeans and a T-shirt and rode my bike the few blocks to downtown. Using my best woe-is-me attitude, I approached a man in a fancy suit about two blocks from the courthouse...

I straightened up in my chair and wiped a tear from my cheek. That man ruined my life. My hatred for him drove me to where I am today. My mantra became simple. If you're going to take chances, make the payoff worth the risk. That's part of the reason I go after clients with lots of money. If I'm going to do jail time, something I've never done, or have some goon beat the crap out of me—got saved on that one thanks to a “superhero” who, I guarantee, didn't regret his efforts—I might as well get paid for it. My payoff today? A quarter of a million bucks.

My “clients” were the greedy people. A shrink would probably tell me they were symbols for the man I wanted to kill. Every time I took them for money, I was getting revenge. They were money-grubbing bastards with no scruples and would eventually get what they deserved—a big fat zero.

I wiped away another tear as it dribbled down my cheek. The money couldn't make the pain,

the terror I'd felt as a child, go away. I could never play Pin the Tail on the Donkey or any of those other childhood games where you get blindfolded—not after that man. I leaned back and put a couple of drops in each eye to clear the red. Whenever the memories came back, this little bottle became my drug of choice. No red eyes—no suspicion that something might be wrong.

I mentally shoved the memories away. In about ten minutes, Sonny Panaman would walk through the door and put me over my goal. He was going to hand over a quarter of a million from his trust fund for me to invest. Maybe it wouldn't erase the past, but it sure as hell would secure my future.