

"Kris Neri has written another winner. Fasten your seatbelts and enjoy this sly, smart Hollywood roller coaster, which should appeal to mystery and movie buffs alike." — *Laura Lippman*

FROM THE AGATHA, ANTHONY and MACAWTY Nominated Author of *Revenge of the Gypsy Queen*



DEMBONES' REVENGE

A TRACY EATON MYSTERY

BY KRIS NERI

Praise for
DEM BONES' REVENGE

“Kris Neri has written another winner. Fasten your seatbelts and enjoy this sly, smart Hollywood roller coaster, which should appeal to mystery and movie buffs alike.”

— Laura Lippman, author of *Life Sentences*

“Tracy Eaton is obviously the secret love child of Lucille Ball and Sam Spade. Murder, mystery, mayhem and madcap — who could ask for anything more?”

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“Fresh, funny, and full of surprises. *Dem Bones' Revenge* will keep you turning pages, guessing wrong, and having a darn good time.”

— Parnell Hall, author of the Puzzle Lady
crossword puzzle mysteries

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Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it.

– George Santayana

Parents: Necessary evils or burdens for life?

– Tracy Eaton

CHAPTER ONE

"I'm ready for my close-up now...Dr. Freud."

"You do see I have no choice, don't you, Tracy?" the breathy voice said over the phone. "I have to kill you."

From where I stood, anyone who could ask that question didn't care how I saw it. Only six a.m., and this was already shaping up to be a day enshrined in hell.

"Without the changes to *Deadly Shadows* we require, I'll have to reject the book and kill your series," my editor, Carolyn, murmured from her superior perch as Senior Editor at Perkins & Pimm, Publishers.

Kill the Tessa Graham Mystery Series? Cold rose through my bare feet from the chilly oak parquet of my study floor, as hot air from the heating vent hit my head. The room spun around me. But my only thought was how much I hated Carolyn's voice. An editor's speech should resonate with the bold assurance a writer needs to cling to, not sound like she was working a sex line.

"Huh?" I stammered eloquently. "I don't get it."

I really didn't. My only doubt when writing *Deadly Shadows* was whether I'd raised the bar too high to hit it again. If Carolyn didn't agree, why had she given me that generous advance after reading the opening chapters? Would they want that money back? Hah! They were gonna have to catch me first.

"We'll need those changes by Wednesday," she concluded.

“You mean *next* Wednesday, right?” This was Monday.

“No, *this* Wednesday.” That hooker voice took on the brisk disapproval my third grade teacher always used when she justified putting a gag on me. Carolyn promised to fax a list of every place where the book fell short of her expectations. Ever gracious, she used a dial tone to say goodbye.

My head kept spinning, and this time, it wasn't the heat. *Deadly Shadows* was a good book, dammit. There had to be a way around this. I'd find it, too — as soon as my brain kicked in. If morning was really meant to be the best time of the day, they'd have scheduled it later, when I was awake enough to appreciate it.

I padded to the short bookcase below the window and hovered over the fax, only to be accosted by another angry voice.

“Tracy, what did you do with my tie?” My aggrieved husband, Drew, glared at me from the doorway.

Maintaining his customary lawyerish dignity took some doing, since all Drew wore was an unbuttoned blue oxford shirt and a pair of dingy Jockey shorts, so baggy they'd morphed into boxers. The sight of those hunky pecs peaking through the stiff button-down shirt almost thawed the freeze my editor's remarks had left in me. Only the dimples I loved were nowhere in evidence on Drew's chiseled face, and today his normally warm golden brown eyes weren't taking any prisoners. Didn't anyone love me anymore?

“Where's my tie?” Drew roared as if the fate of the world depended on it.

He had more than one tie. Hell, he had dozens. He meant his *lucky* tie, though Drew was too anal to admit to superstition. He'd worn that navy-and-maroon tie and those worn-out undies on the first day of every trial he'd ever won. But never had as much been riding on them as in the plagiarism suit beginning today.

Literary conflicts weren't Drew's specialty. He'd been roped into this case at the client's insistence. Stacking the deck higher still was the fact that Drew's client, whose claims were probably true, seemed an oily bastard — while the cheating plaintiff was a loveable old codger the jury could easily take to its heart. If Drew didn't find a way around those obstacles, he could kiss goodbye to

making senior partner at Slaughter, Cohen, Rather, Word & Dragger, Attorneys-at-Law.

I started to reassure Drew, only that was when the fax began spitting out its poison. “That’s from Carolyn. She’s a heartbeat away from dropping my series.”

“Babe, no...” Warmth flooded Drew’s eyes. He came over and cupped my face in his hands, as if he intended to comfort me. Instead, he sprayed morning breath up my nose by shouting, “You wouldn’t be in a bind now if you hadn’t spent your whole advance on that stupid truck. Who in Los Angeles drives a pickup?”

Everyone who didn’t drive an SUV.

“You only bought that boat so your mother would stop making you drive her places.”

“Not true. I love my truck.”

The fax kept spitting out pages. Jeez, were they paying her by the word? Too pissed to look at that roadmap to the end of my life, I let the sheets fall into toxic curls on the wooden floor.

“Why couldn’t you have kept your Jeep, Tracy?” Drew complained. “Your mother didn’t like that, either.”

But she was starting to.

The fax finally ended. Fortunately, the doorbell rang before I succumbed to temptation and stomped those nasty paper curls into dust.

As I pushed past him, Drew yelled, “Wait. My tie?”

“Relax, Drew. I sent it to the cleaners.”

He flapped his arms like a dodo bird. “You what? I have to go into court on an area of law that I know nothing about and —”

“It’s in the cleaner bag in your closet,” I shouted over my shoulder. If he got any tighter, I was gonna need a nap.

The doorbell rang again. On the living room sofa, the big lump under our ecru down comforter shifted irritably. Drew’s eyes traveled pointedly from it to me, punctuating another cause of tension between us. The movement caused a salt-and-pepper haystack to peak from the top, pillow hair that belonged to Drew’s Uncle Philly. I’d met him a couple of months before and invited him to visit us. It was probably a coincidence that as the visit stretched, our cozy

condo seemed to compress. Especially after Philly's things filled every available inch of space.

I stubbed my toe on one of the open suitcases that overflowed across the floor like a salesman's sample cases — if the salesman represented Goodwill. When I stopped to rub my toe, Drew rushed to block my path to the door.

"Tracy, tell me the truth," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Have we adopted Philly?"

"Just till we find his real mom and dad."

"The last time I saw his mom, I was still riding a skateboard, and they were lowering Grandma into the ground."

"So you don't think that's her at the door?"

He threw up his arms and stalked off toward the bedroom.

As I limped to the door, I plastered my most innocent expression on my face. Too many of our callers lately were neighbors to whom Philly had peddled the deal-of-a-lifetime. Best to be prepared. Since my robe's sash had found the secret door in the washer that half my socks used to gain their freedom, I clutched it closed and eased the door open a crack.

Not an irate neighbor, after all, but not good news, either. "Hey, Trace, time to start the closets," Randy Barlow said.

I sometimes thought Randy Barlow, the thirtyish man filling the hall outside my door, had been put together from leftover parts like some benign Frankenstein. Where were the genetic safeguards against combining the soft body of a gigantic Pillsbury Doughboy, with the sun-bleached hair and leathery skin of a surfer, and burning black eyes Rasputin would have killed for?

"What are you doing here, Randy? You said you'd come Wednesday at ten." Probably the exact time my publisher's axe would fall. How prophetic was that?

"Me, I didn't tell you nothin'. You know my mom does my scheduling. She said to come Monday at six."

Randy's baggy painter pants were spattered with red paint and smeared with Navajo White. He lumbered past me through my tiny foyer, carrying his carpentry tools and scuffing his feet against my slick parquet. I wondered how a guy that clumsy stayed on a

surfboard, but regular wipeouts might account for what didn't seem to be included between Randy's ears.

"Randy, I talked to *you* last night, remember? You said your mom was out. You know this wasn't the time we agreed on."

He dropped his tools — as a native California, I could say with certainty the floor shook like a 3.2 temblor. "Yeah, well, later I got a call about another job I gotta start then."

Why is it contractors think that because they choose to live in denial, you're willing to share their demented roost? Not that Randy was a licensed contractor. He was just a handyman my mother strong-armed me into hiring to free up closet space for Philly.

When Drew realized something else had been added to the mix, his blood pressure would shoot so high, his head could blow like Old Faithful. But I remembered another contractor rule before I threw Randy out: Once you let them go, you never get them back.

"Okay, but start with the hall closet, and stay away from Drew," I warned.

The fax rang again. I groaned, but I should have expected it. Not only couldn't Carolyn talk like a normal adult, she couldn't send a complete fax in one try. How many pages were there? Outrage rose in me like a mushroom cloud.

Drew stormed into the room. His shirt was buttoned now and cinched with his lucky tie. But shirttails peaked through his open fly. "Tracy, that lunkhead punched through my closet wall —"

The lunkhead followed on his heels. "It's gonna cost you extra to fix it, too. It ain't my fault your walls are so thin, you can't tap 'em to find the studs."

Drew gave his glorious wavy light brown hair an indignant shake. "Tap them? Is that what you call —"

Man, this was the last trial of the century I'd get up for. "Holy freakin' Labor Day!" I threw my arms out like a weather vane. "Drew, finish dressing — Randy, go to the hall closet."

The extent of my frustration must have been clear, since they both left my sight, and that was all I cared about. Was it always so nutty at this hour? Reason enough to sleep through it.

The telephone rang. I snatched the cordless from where it nested

among Philly's pipe paraphernalia on the walnut end table at the side of the couch. "What?" I growled into it.

The dulcet tones of movie star Martha Collins' voice filled my ear. "And a lovely good morning to you, too, darling."

You know that throaty voice as well as I do. It's the one that thrills you on the silver screen, the voice you consider synonymous with sex and glamour, the one that entices you from the radio to buy overpriced cat food. For me, it's different — since that's the voice that has harassed me since the minute I was born.

"This isn't a good time, Mother," I said firmly.

I raked my fingers through the blonde crow's nest that had formed on my head during sleep. Even at that hour, Mother probably looked like the quintessential Hollywood goddess: chic, icy blonde and drop-dead gorgeous. To say our standards differ is the understatement of the century.

"You're certainly testy this morning, young lady. If you had to face all the early movie calls I have, you'd manage it better."

She always forgets I was there. I remembered how well she handled toddling out the door before the sun came up. That's how I learned so many swear words.

"What do you want, Mother?"

"I want my cutie-pie son-in-law to come and get me."

Just because she hated my truck, she had no right pestering Drew. "Have you forgotten he's starting a critical trial today?"

"The way you talk about it, how could I? He's helping the Swampland Production *père et fils* prove they didn't steal that boondoggle '06 script. Imagine being proud of writing something so bloated. Four hours? It took San Francisco less time to recover from the 1906 earthquake."

"That's *Marshland* Productions," I corrected, unfairly so. Since the Marshland duo seemed part of the Hollywood minority she didn't know, she'd absorbed her opinion from me.

"Whatever. Don't worry, darling. They won't be courting today," she said.

Elsewhere in the condo, I heard the soft sounds of a sledgehammer crashing through another wall. Mother made me hire that dolt. I lit

into her.

“*Courting*, Mother? I love it when you use technical terms.”

“You want technical, Tracy? Fine,” Mother snapped. “The police think I killed the plaintiff in Drew’s case. How’s *that* for technical?”