

FROM THE AGATHA, ANTHONY, MACAVITY, AND LEFTY Nominated Series

# REVENGE

on



**ROUTE**

**66**

**A TRACY EATON MYSTERY**

**BY KRIS NERI**

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— Elaine Viets, author of *Final Sail: A Dead-End Job Mystery*



# Praise for Revenge on Route 66

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“Outrageously Funny”

“There’s a reason why Kris Neri is a three-time finalist for the Lefty Award – her books are outrageously funny. She’s the Carl Hiaasen of the desert. This 4th Tracy Eaton Mystery is a zany trip down Route 66 with characters as bizarre and entertaining as the kitsch the Mother Road is famous for. Neri is a master plotter, weaving together the Eaton family history and Route 66 lore into a murder that will have you guessing to the last page but hoping you don’t get there because you don’t want it to end. *Revenge on Route 66* busted my guffaw meter.”

— J. Michael Orenduff, author of *The Pot Thief Who Studied D. H. Lawrence*

“Adventure, Unpredictability, and Fun”

“Kris Neri has done it again! *Revenge on Route 66* delivers just as much adventure, unpredictability, and fun as the Mother Road itself. Tracy Eaton’s fans will delight in this entertaining trip with enough bumps and kitsch to please the highway’s devotees and enough danger and secrets to satisfy mystery enthusiasts everywhere.”

— Pari Noskin Taichert, author of *The Belen Hitch*

“Buckle up!”

“Kris Neri’s Lefty Award nominated Tracy Eaton is back, this time on a wild ride along the famed cross-country road in *Revenge on Route 66*. Forget the scenery—there are murders to investigate! If you’re looking for laughs, hairpin turns, and whiplash plot twists, you won’t want to miss this madcap adventure.

Buckle up!”

— Julie Hyzy, *New York Times* Bestselling author of the White House Chef Mysteries and the Manor House Mystery series

## “Quirky, Evolving Characters”

“Past and present crimes merge in *Revenge on Route 66* to provide an enjoyable mystery full of quirky, evolving characters.”

— Linda O. Johnston, author of *Oodles of Poodles*, a Pet Rescue Mystery

## “Entertains from Beginning to End”

“*Revenge on Route 66* has as many twists and turns as the road it’s named after. With an endearingly snarky, engaging heroine and a colorful cast of supporting characters, this book entertains from beginning to end. A very satisfying ride!”

— Jess Lourey, author of the Lefty nominated Murder-by-Month series

## “Action-Packed”

“Get ready for an action-packed detour through a twisty mystery with more laughs and quirky characters than the real Route 66. Sign me up for the next road trip with Tracy and Drew!”

— Laura DiSilverio, author of the Lefty finalist *Swift Justice* and the Mall Cop mysteries

## “Vivid, Funny”

“There’s a funky rhythm to Route 66—that loopy, swoopy highway connecting the past to the present—and Kris Neri totally gets it. She also understands the passion of the folks who travel the Mother Road and captures it in vivid, funny prose.”

— Roger Naylor, author of *Arizona Kicks on Route 66*

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For Sherry, who always asks when Tracy will return in a new book,  
and for Ada for GNO.

# Author Notes

I've taken a few liberties with Route 66. Some of the places I mentioned in this novel do exist, and if you're planning a Route 66 trek, you might want to include a few of them among your stops. Other places, such as Tecos, New Mexico, the Tecos caves, and Hinky Dill's Biker Bunny Bin, are figments of my imagination, though I've tried to bring a Route 66 spirit to them and all the other places and the characters I've created for this adventure. I hope you'll think I succeeded in that.

I've cruised Route 66 many times, and I've drawn on my own experiences to capture its unique combination of quirks and innocence, and the special way it takes us back in time. I've also relied on a number of other sources. My favorite Route 66 guides are: *Route 66: The Mother Road 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* by Michael Wallis, *Route 66: Spirit of the Mother Road* by Bob Moore, and *Arizona Kicks on Route 66* by Roger Naylor with photographs by Larry Lindahl, but you'll find great insights and direction in most of the other guides as well. Any errors of fact are mine alone.





# CHAPTER ONE

Which is worse, secrets or lies? I could scarcely remember the first time Dad asked me to keep something from Mother. He never encouraged me to lie, of course. Not outright, anyway. But sometimes the only way to keep the truth under wraps is by telling a big fat whopper. Maybe they both become worse when they're joined together. More unstable, too. Is a secret really safe when it's propped up by something that can be shown to be a lie? I learned that on my last trip along Route 66. I also discovered that when you throw chance into the mix—well, then they make dynamite.

\* \* \*

The strains of a disco beat, as cheerful as a pack of chipmunks and as relentless as the dentist's drill, wafted into my dream. My feet, in their glitter socks and platform wedgies, began to tap along to the rhythm. Given the tunes and the duds, I guessed my dream took place in the eighties. Despite the depth of my sleep state, though, and the fact that I really bought into the storyline, I always knew that it was a dream.

Well, what else could it have been? In the early eighties my parents hadn't moved that far beyond their one and only stab at procreation. I hadn't even started school yet, so I could not have been the fully-grown woman I saw in my mind's eye. But mostly, slob that I am, I knew it had to be a dream because I looked too well dressed for it to be real.

If anyone could describe the clothes from that era in those terms, that is. My dream hair wasn't any blonder than in actual life, though I wore it so big and puffy, I looked like one of the stars of the nighttime soaps that were that era's version of reality TV. My bod was stuffed into a pair of Jordache Jeans, so tight they could have doubled as a tourniquet. Topping them was a Hang Ten satin jacket

the color of an Orange Julius, whose towering shoulder pads rose higher than the walls of the Grand Canyon. See what I mean about “well dressed” being a relative term? The only good thing I could say about the whole get-up was that encased within those tight jeans were a trimmer pair of thighs than I’d see in the bathroom mirror when I awoke in the morning. Ah, dreams do come true, as long as you never wake up.

More bizarre than my dream wardrobe were my actions. I stood at the open door of a commercial jet hovering in the air, holding hands with a guy I’d never met in real life as far as I knew. Certainly not the one who was probably snoring softly at my side, if I’d had any awareness of anything outside of my nighttime reverie. And in the odd way we have of sensing the conditions that rule our dreams—or maybe from the gun he carelessly waved about—I knew that man had hijacked the flight on which I was a passenger and had fallen hopelessly in love with me. Obviously, we were about to jump off into the sunset together.

Now I understood the cause of the dream. The prior night I’d watched a TV special on the thirtieth anniversary of the still-mysterious hijacking of an airliner by the notorious T.K. Mann, who, after he leaped from that plane, never surfaced again. And neither had even one cent of the ten million dollars in marked bills he’d collected as a ransom. I’d found that news special riveting, partly because my dad and I used to visit the very place where it’s said T.K. Mann landed when he jumped from the hijacked plane. But I watched it too late, and it must have sparked something squirrely in my brain. Or maybe I should blame Loco Pepe’s Kitchen Sink Burrito, so named because it contained everything but the...well, you get it. That concoction had been known to produce some loopy dreams, too. Maybe it was the combination that did me in—I’d found that TV special so compelling, the only moments I missed were the ones I spent at the door with Loco Pepe’s deliveryman.

T.K. tightened his grip on my dream-self’s hand. “You’re sure about this, Tracy?”

It didn’t seem to trouble me that I really couldn’t see what he looked like. According to the news special, the real T.K. Mann

had covered his face during the skyjacking. Different passengers provided varying descriptions, as did the witnesses on the ground, who had claimed he'd ridden off on a motorcycle hidden at his landing spot. My dream-mind had simply whipped together lots of nothing and came up with a guy who was charmingly vague.

People had also reported that he'd worn a black stretchy garment, though the descriptions of the bod below the suit varied enough to be useless, from small and wiry, to big and bony. In my dream, T.K.'s duds looked more like something they might wear on Star Trek, which always made me wonder why in the future we won't need pockets. Won't we ever need to carry a tissue to blow our noses?

My T.K. covered his head with an oversized motorcycle helmet, which hid the color of his hair, while its darkened windshield obscured his eyes. All I could see of him was a squarish jaw and the impossibly artic teeth of the toothpaste ads that were all the rage today, thirty years into the future.

T.K. threw his arm around my waist and pulled me toward him. As close as I could get anyway, with all he wore. He flashed me the grin that the guys in the disco flicks always seemed to give their girls, as if to say, "Ain't it great to be young, stupid, and unemployed?"

With my return smile, I conveyed, "It sure is, baby." Long as we had the loot.

Obviously, the pesky laws of physics don't govern dreams. Not only was there no apparent danger that we'd be sucked through the open jet door, the plane was so steady, we didn't even need to hold on. Neither did we seem troubled that the passengers or crew might rush us from behind, though I did hear some resentful grumbling from the cabin, probably because we looked so impossibly good.

"This will work, won't it, T.K.?" I asked.

I didn't know whether my dream-self was asking whether we'd get away with the crime without being apprehended—or if we'd land alive. I hoped I had enough sense to question the latter. Even in a dream, you can't be too careful. T.K. wore nothing more than a skimpy secondary parachute strapped to his chest, the kind that most jumpers regard as a backup in case the main deal fails. He had to

wear the chute there because covering his flipside was a backpack the size that people often carry when they hitchhike through Europe, for five or six years, and don't expect to have access to a Laundromat. He obviously hadn't yet shared his booty with me. I, on the other hand, carried nothing more to slow my descent than the tiny denim purse embroidered with pink flowers, which I'd thrown over one shoulder. Sure, that would help. I hoped my dream-self had enough sense to grab one of those under-the-seat floatation devices before she jumped. Maybe it could float on air.

"They haven't caught me yet, and it's thirty years later," T.K. bragged. "You're not bothered that we're taking the money, are you?"

I didn't feel bothered. "Can we give a few bucks to charity?"

His anachronistic teeth gleamed extra brightly. "Sure thing, sweetheart."

What a guy. Was it any wonder I was willing to leave behind my luggage, and what must have been a really cool wardrobe, for him?

From somewhere nearby, a buzzing sound began to wail.

"T.K., your cell phone is ringing." I didn't see it on him, so it must have been small. "You wanna answer it before we jump?"

He shook his helmeted head. "Not mine, honey. Smart phones won't be invented for while yet, and as soon as I hit the ground, I'm going splat."

I admired the good cheer he brought to that remark.

Then...*someone* shattered my dream, by giving my real life self a nudge in the side and muttering, "Tracy...alarm."

In that moment, the dream vanished. While I wasn't fully awake, I wasn't asleep anymore, either. I knew I lay at home in my own bed, with my husband Drew at my side, while he prodded me to turn off the alarm clock that howled beside my ear.

"That's T.K. Mann's cell phone," I said. Until someone disproved it, I refused to give up that theory. Besides, he wasn't there to deny it.

"Noooo," Drew said, his voice now more awake. "You just had to eat that burrito. They always give you crazy dreams."

"The TV special did it." Though burrito fumes still burned in my

esophagus, I'd never admit it.

"Every time you eat Loco Pepe's..." He sighed. "Turn off the alarm, Trace."

"You turn it off." Where is it written that, simply because you're grown, you have to stop behaving like a child? My parents were so old, they knew Adam and Eve in high school, and they had yet to give up their infantile ways. Why break a family tradition?

"It's on your side of the bed."

Right. We'd originally put the alarm clock on his side back when he worked as a lawyer. After he gave up that pursuit—a source of some tension between us—he moved it to mine. Just another step in his campaign to nudge me into assuming the primary adult role in this household, which I was resisting with everything I had.

Since the clock's buzzer wasn't getting that message, I finally smacked it off.

This was the morning when we planned to take off after my father and Drew's uncle, to join our vacation to theirs on Route 66. Though Dad was an aging Hollywood hunk, he'd always liked to take road trips along Route 66, convincing himself, when he moved through the bizarre hoi polloi you find on the Mother Road, as those of us who know it call Route 66, that he was really a regular person, deep down. Traveling with him this time was Drew's Uncle Philly, who had to rise up a ways to reach "regular person."

Was it really time to get up already? The early morning light creeping around the sides of the heavy drapes at the window said it was. How was that possible? I felt like I'd never slept. How long had my encounter with T.K. Mann lasted?

This wasn't the way I wanted to start a vacation I'd been planning for weeks, the last one I was likely to have for a while if *someone* didn't go back to the law. While what I really wanted now was to roll over and sleep for another few hours, with a groan, I dragged myself from bed.

If I had any idea how many juicy secrets I would turn up along Route 66, I would cheerfully have run all the way.