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— Carolyn Hart

REVENGE



A TRACY EATON MYSTERY

Of the
**Gypsy
Queen**



BY KRIS NERI

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PROLOGUE

Talk about the unexpected. I came to New York for a vacation and to share in the joy of my sister-in-law's wedding. The operative word was *fun*. Instead, I wrestled with extortion and murder — not to mention losing ten thousand bucks — and I hadn't even been on the subway!

But I'm getting ahead of myself. During my first full day in New York, I had no inkling of the ugly obstacles that would rear up on the road ahead, though I'd already gathered it would take a few surprising bends, thanks to a rather strange and wonderful afternoon.

During my return to my in-laws' Upper East Side townhouse, my mind reeled with questions: Why were the police watching my husband's Uncle Philly? What could that lovable cherub, whom I wouldn't trust as far as I could throw Manhattan, have done to attract the attention of the boys and girls in blue? And if Philly interested them so much, why didn't the cops haul *him* in for questioning — instead of *me*?

Not that the afternoon was without its compensations. I considered getting tossed in the hoosegow as nothing less than the attainment of a merit badge I'd coveted for years, as well as priceless entertainment. Especially when it provided a little family dirt my in-laws obviously didn't want me to know.

But dampening the experience was the unease I felt over the one question that really mattered. The question that had gnawed at me ever since my sister-in-law, Marisa, failed to turn up for our appointment that morning: What had happened to her? Where was

Marisa?

I'd hoped no one would be home because I needed time alone with my thoughts. No such luck. Both my husband, Drew, and his mother, Charlotte, pounced on me the instant I entered the townhouse foyer. I noticed not a hair of Charlotte's honey blonde head was out of place, but there was fire in her stormy blue eyes. Was it too late to make my escape?

"Tracy! Finally, you're here," my mother-in-law said with an impatient sniff. "You're the only one who has seen Marisa today. Perhaps you can tell me why she hasn't kept any of her appointments."

"Actually, we never —"

The telephone rang.

"Doesn't that phone ever stop?" Charlotte's rhetorical demand overflowed with aggrieved righteousness. "Drew, I am not your sister's answering service!" she snapped as if it were his fault, before dashing to the den to answer it.

It troubled me that they hadn't seen Marisa, either, but they weren't supposed to. My rational mind continued to override the doubts with its insistence that Marisa and I would share a good laugh over the mix-up before the evening ended. Sure, we would.

Drew and I strolled arm-in-arm past the staircase into the living room. One lock of his wavy light brown hair fell over his forehead, the way it did when I played "Tracy and the stable lad" in my head. But his golden eyes looked glazed and irritated. Must have been jetlag.

He took me into his arms. "Mrs. Eaton, I hope you feel just a bit guilty. Gallivanting around while I've had a miserable day."

"Really, Mr. Eaton? I'll have you know my day wasn't all fun and games, either."

Emphasis on the word, *all*. The games I played with Philly and Detective Billy Jay Weaver were worth the price of admission at police headquarters.

"No contest," Drew said. "I had the pleasure of my mother's company when she learned my sister has fallen an entire day behind on the wedding schedule."

So those tired eyes were the result of Charlotte-stress, not travel-fatigue. Much worse. My first glance at the room should have told me. Charlotte always kept her home ready for an impromptu *Architectural Digest* spread. Sometimes I half-expected to be cautioned to stay behind the velvet ropes. Tonight, while the room tastefully decorated in this season's selection of grays still had a long way to go before looking lived in by anyone else's standards, for this crowd, it was downright messy. The black blazer tossed on a chair would have been bad enough, but the pearl gray scarf that slipped to the floor was unforgivable. The blizzard of neatly printed Rolodex cards scattered on every surface practically signaled the end of the world.

"And *you* had to be late," Drew went on. "When my mother wanted to question you about Marisa, and I assured her you would be home early."

"Why did you do that?" I demanded in self-defense.

"Because you left me a note saying you wouldn't be late."

As a mature adult, an officer of the court, Drew has a penchant for justice — which means he's a stickler for apportioning blame. And he operates under the ridiculous idea that I sometimes try to get out of things.

"Drew, it's your fault that I'm late," I said.

He threw his head back and laughed like he'd needed a good one for a while. "How do you figure that?"

I snuggled closer to his stiff-as-a-board shirt. The Eatons might feel a little ruffled on occasion, but their clothes would never tell. "Your cloak-and-dagger game started it all. It was only because I saw you following your uncle that I did, too. By the way, what's Philly's last name?"

I noticed the man in the circle of my arms was pulling away.

"You're mistaken, Tracy," he said stiffly.

"About his name? If you don't tell me things, how can I be wrong?" I complained.

"I meant, I wasn't following my uncle. What gave you that idea?"

"Drew, I *saw* you. You sailed right past Marisa's restaurant in a

cab.”

“Must have been someone else,” he insisted.

“I know my own husband.”

“Obviously not too well. I haven’t left the house all day.”

His eyes met mine and stuck with all the might of Krazy Glue. He believes that to be a sign of honesty. Like he would know. Drew is the world’s worst liar. With his strict ethical code, he doesn’t get enough practice. But he was making up for it now. If things got any screwier around there, I was going to need a guide.

The doorbell rang once, then a couple more times in rapid succession.

“Marisa!” I said. “Probably just forgot her key.”

I heard a flood of relief in my own voice, greater than the level of anxiety I acknowledged. I ran to the foyer. Before I reached the door, the ringing gave way to an insistent pounding. Suddenly, I knew Marisa and I weren’t going to share that laugh tonight, after all.

I stopped, unable to take another step, unwilling to face whatever waited on the other side of that door. I’d always held in contempt the people who avoid the tough stuff. Yet I’d engaged in denial about Marisa’s whereabouts all day. I clung to it even now.

If life hadn’t already taught me about the price of silence, I would learn it when I opened that door. And I would pay that price for as long as I lived.

CHAPTER ONE

I should have known the whole trip would take a detour through Wonderland, considering how had it started.

There I was at the airport check-in counter back home in Los Angeles, locking eyes with the clerk, but he stubbornly refused to ask The Question. He did ask the others. He said, “First class or economy?” and “Window or aisle?” He just wouldn’t ask whether we insisted on air that, apart from being circulated since the dawn of time, was more or less fresh — or if we preferred to be surrounded by compulsive personalities puffing on dead weeds.

Domestic airlines don’t have smoking sections any longer. Naturally, I knew that before I reached the check-in counter, despite the stupid look I plastered on my face to hide my dismay. I just keep hoping they’ll change their minds.

Not that I smoked. Filthy habit. I haven’t had a cigarette now in three months, twenty-two days — and I’m not so pathetic as to count minutes, but at a guess, I’d put it at forty-one and a half. So why did I shove yet another stick of gum between my tightly clenched teeth when I heard they didn’t have a place for something I didn’t do? What can I say? I kicked the habit, I simply couldn’t kick the enjoyment I derived from catching the odd whiff of the secondary killer.

But I was holding up well. I was just so focused on the clerk, certain at any instant he would rectify his omission, that I didn’t realize the woman in line behind me had addressed me the first time she spoke.

“My dear,” she repeated with a hint of impatience, “I said, *did* anyone ever tell you that you look like Martha Collins, the actress?”

Aren't voices funny? If you hear them before seeing someone, they never match. This woman sounded young and girlish while, judging by the *spots de liver* that were so thick they might have been painted on her hammy hands, she was never again going to see the sunny side of seventy.

Smiling modestly, I said, "I should look like her. Martha Collins is my mother."

"Though you are a bit more substantial," she continued as if I hadn't spoken. "Martha Collins is so hauntingly ethereal."

Was she calling me fat? She should talk. She might have had that small voice, but this woman was built like a brick company latrine.

"What did you say? You're her *daughter*?" she asked, catching up. "Of course. You're little Tracy Grainger. I remember seeing pictures of you with your parents in *Life* magazine. I so wished I could dress my girls like you, but they were older. I had my children a lot younger than your mother."

Who didn't? There was probably a whole minute left before the shutdown of Mother's reproductive system when they conceived me. It's a wonder I turned out as normal as I did.

She raised a delicate hand to her mouth to cover what promised to be a ladylike clearing of the throat, but which emerged as a cough that was more in line with her mammoth frame. Then she politely extended the hand that had trapped that honker within her. "By the way, I'm Mrs. Thomas Dodd."

"I'm Tracy Eaton now," I said and shook her hand like the true sport I am.

"Married." Mrs. Dodd gave Drew an approving glance. "Children?"

I shook my head.

"Don't wait too long, dearie. Remember, in those pictures in *Life*, your mother was no longer the ingénue."

But she was ethereal.

My good fortune held. Mrs. Dodd enjoyed our chat in line so much she snagged the seat next to me on the plane. A five-hour flight with Drew on the aisle, and Mrs. Dodd in the window seat. Lucky me.

“...so I visited my married daughter in Los Angeles. And they took me everywhere, honey, let me tell you.”

She told me.

“I had such a good time, I decided to visit my other daughter in New Jersey.”

New Jersey? I thought, listening against my will. Someone should have told this old dear that Newark was a closer airport than Kennedy.

“Traveling is wonderful,” Mrs. Dodd said, “but when it comes to a place to live, give me Bakersfield every time.”

I wouldn't dream of taking it away from her, even after hearing her recitation of its many virtues.

“Are you going to read your flight magazine?” Mrs. Dodd asked. “They didn't put one in my seat.”

There wasn't a flight magazine for my seat, either. I snatched the one Drew was reading right from his hands and gave it to her.

“Hey,” he shouted.

“Drew, she wants to read!” I sang in the tone previously reserved for the announcement of the realization of world peace.

But she didn't want to read it, merely to use the rolled-up magazine as a prop for her recreation of the stunning performance King Kong gave on the Universal Studios Tour.

I was too excited to care. There I was on a flight to New York to attend the wedding of Drew's little sister, Marisa, my favorite relative.

If Marisa didn't bear some resemblance to her mother, I would swear she'd been raised by wolves rather than by a family in the Social Register. Not that she wasn't an absolute sweetie, but she was dramatically different from parents who didn't favor deviations from the norm. She was as attractive as all the Eatons, but exotic to their all-American, creative to their conventional.

No one objected when Marisa developed an interest in cooking, but when that led to an entry-level job in a commercial kitchen, the parental howls should have been heard in Alaska. Yet that never happened. Perhaps they were simply humoring Marisa, allowing her a job unsuited to the uptight, upright Eatons, while waiting for the

interest to pass. But they had to know that was unlikely to happen when, after returning from an elite Italian cooking school, she and her new Italian fiancé, Tony Lora, opened their own restaurant, The Gypsy Princess. I never understood how she pulled it off, nor why Drew couldn't do it, too.

"Did you hear that?" someone asked.

It was Mrs. Dodd, ruffling my reverie. "The movie. The stewardess said the equipment is broken, so they can't show the movie. Can you beat that?"

No movie. Be still my heart.

The flight passed. Word-by-word. Well, I did wrestle the conversation away occasionally. Like when Mrs. Dodd actually asked me a question.

"So Tracy, what kind of work do you do?"

With one eyebrow intriguingly raised, I said, "I'm a detective."

Drew happened to be chewing one of the airline inedibles at that moment. He nearly gagged.

Can you blame me? Hadn't this woman read anything since one issue of *Life* magazine decades ago? Everybody knows the daughter of Hollywood legends, Martha Collins and Alec Grainger, writes the Tessa Graham Mystery Series, even those louts who limit their reading to Hollywood scandal sheets. If she didn't, her chain was ripe for yanking.

Besides, what I said was nearly true. Or would be eventually. That was the bitter irony of my life. While in my work, I struggled to invent plausible reasons why my character, a scholarly professor, tripped over bodies continually — the only mystery in my real life was why two newspapers were delivered to my neighbor on coupon days, while I never received any. Nothing intriguing ever happens to me. In books and movies, when someone writes about an amateur detective, people assume she can solve crimes, too. Mysteries just fall into her lap. But my first case would come along any day now. Not today or tomorrow, naturally, but soon.

You should have seen Mrs. Dodd. An uncomfortable smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, now slack with shock. People often laugh when they find themselves in situations beyond their

emotional depth. Obviously, I was too far off the mean for this country granny.

Then she didn't say a word. Not how exciting, how dangerous, how whatever. She just plunged into a graphic recital of the childbirth sagas of every member of her family. I wasn't even sure they were all female.

Well, I might have claimed a bit more of the conversation than that. I probably relayed the entire family's plans for those pre-wedding weeks, my concerns about my matron of honor gown, a detailed description of the elegant decor of my in-laws' home, my speculations about my sister-in-law's intended, as well as several thousand other thoughts that flashed through my mind. I talk when I'm excited. I talk when I'm depressed. When I'm awake, when I'm asleep. About the only time I don't talk is when my mouth is full, and I'm very slender. Damn near ethereal! I just hate competition.

Mrs. Dodd wasn't that bad as seat partners go. Before we parted, she remembered to return the flight magazine that neither she nor I, not to mention Drew, had read, and she left me with a few words of wisdom. I should ease up on the makeup when I approached my mother's age, and be sure not to forget, during these hustle-bustle weeks, to eat my roughage.

I felt like warning her to watch her own health. When we parted, she let another one of those consumptive coughs fly. Not so much as a whiff of smoke came off her clothing, but I sensed she was another recovering tobacco addict, though she had obviously played Kentucky Roulette longer than I had. I wouldn't have pegged the old girl as the smoker-type, but it just goes to show you that people will fool you every time.