

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

# REVENGE FOR OLD TIMES' SAKE

HOLLYWOOD

**A TRACY EATON MYSTERY**

**BY KRIS NERI**



"Clever plot twists and vivid characters... what might result from the unholy coupling of Mel Brooks and Janet Evanovich. But I'll take Tracy Eaton over Stephanie Plum any day of the week."

Bill Fitzhugh, author of *Past Control* and *Highway 61 Resurfaced*

Praise for  
***REVENGE FOR OLD TIMES' SAKE***

---

“Vanity, celebrity, murder, and fabulous shoes!

*Revenge for Old Times' Sake* has all this and more. Kris Neri's cool-under-pressure protagonist and her witty narrative voice are the reasons this series is an award winner. The clever plot twists and vivid characters bring to mind what might result from the unholy coupling of Mel Brooks and Janet Evanovich. But I'll take Tracy Eaton over Stephanie Plum any day of the week.”

— Bill Fitzhugh, author of *Pest Control* and *Highway 61 Resurfaced*

“Wacky, witty, wise and wonderful.

With the show-biz savvy, funny and punny Kris Neri as producer and director, readers will laugh their way through non-stop action, zany characters and a madcap plot worthy of the silver screen. (The secret? This is a smart, solid and well-written mystery -- that reveals a lot of heart.)”

— Hank Phillippi Ryan, Agatha-winning author of *Prime Time*

“A delightful mystery with a witty, feisty, fresh heroine.

Tracy's wildly outrageous family will make you thankful for your own! I found myself laughing out loud. Can't wait for the next one!”

— Deb Baker, author of *Ding Dong Dead* and *Murder Talks Turkey*

“A witty glimpse at insider Hollywood with a spunky, no-nonsense heroine, the movie-star mother from hell and cast of big egos. A fun and fast-paced read.”

— Rhys Bowen, author of *Her Royal Spyness*, Molly Murphy and Evan Evans mysteries

“A hysterical mix of incompatible personalities, unexpected plot twists, unorthodox methods of detection. Absolutely delightful! The interplay between Tracy and her aging sex goddess mother alone is worth the price of admission.”

— Chassie West, author of *Killing Kin*

“Tracy Eaton’s family keeps the *fun* in *dysfunctional!*

This is Hollywood at its zaniest, as show biz collides head-on with the legal profession.”

— Taffy Cannon, Agatha and Macavity-nominated author  
of *Open Season on Lawyers*

“Delightful amateur sleuths! Tracy and her mother give Stephanie Plum and Granny a run for their money.”

— Troy Cook, Award-winning author of *47 Rules of Highly Effective Bank Robbers* and *The One Minute Assassin*

Copyright © 2010 by Kris Neri

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, or events is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-0-9799694-5-4  
0-9799694-5-X

First Edition 2010

Cover illustration by Braxton McGhee

Published by:  
**Cherokee McGhee, L.L.C.**  
**Williamsburg, Virginia**

Find us on the World Wide Web at:  
[WWW.CHEROKEEMCGHEE.COM](http://WWW.CHEROKEEMCGHEE.COM)

Printed in the United States of America

## PROLOGUE

I never thought sex would kill me, but it nearly did.

Oh, not at that moment. Bathed as I was in the afterglow of coital bliss, death was the last thing on my mind. And it's not often a mystery author admits that.

Snuggling under the down comforter, I ran my fingers over my husband's chest. With his wavy light brown hair sleep-tousled and his dimples flashing, Drew was extra easy on the eyes this morning. But it takes more than looks to make a marriage. As different as we were, people often found us an unlikely pair. I never thought it should be that hard to grasp what kept us together. Quite simply, Drew was my rock, and I was his fun, his spirit of adventure.

Sure, I kept things from him at times, for his own good. And mine. And, yeah, rocks do crush adventures, when they fear they'll go too far afield. As if such a thing were possible. Mostly, it worked because we both knew Rock Guy needed a dash of enjoyment in his life, and though I hated to admit it, Fun Girl needed some stability.

Besides, we'd always been dynamite between the sheets.

*If it ain't broke, don't be a jackass and break it* — that's my motto.

Elsewhere in our rambling wreck of a house, I heard the faint sound of footsteps. Our houseguests were stirring. I braced for the inevitable frown that should cross Drew's face. He didn't understand why we needed to house a steady stream of visitors. While I hadn't exactly chosen our current companions, I'd been raised to welcome the chaos guests bring with them. It was the circus come to town. What's not to like?

To cover the sounds he obviously hadn't heard, I produced a contented sigh and looked past him to the time flashing on the nightstand digital clock. "This is sure a red-letter day."

"We were great, weren't we, Trace?"

Sure, but that wasn't what I meant. "It's not like you to lollygag

around here at the lazy hour of six-twenty in the A-M when your case has gone to the jury.” He generally paced the halls of the courthouse hours before the jury reported, getting in the way of the cleaning crew.

His naked shoulder peeked out the top of the comforter in a shrug. “Let’s be honest, babe. The Sullivan case hasn’t exactly been mine.”

Too true. Drew worked as a junior partner at the prominent Los Angeles law firm of Slaughter, Cohen, Rather, Word & Dragger. He, like most people, shortened its name to “Slaughter, Cohen,” while Mother referred to it as SCREWED. Hers was clearly the more accurate version. Not just who they are, but — after you see the bill — what you’ll be.

Some months before, we accidentally exposed the involvement of one of Slaughter, Cohen’s bigger clients in a crime. That’s not how they spell *teamwork* at SCREWED, and it put Drew in deep shit with the bigwigs. I’d encouraged him to join another firm, where maybe they weren’t so picky about their associates’ extracurricular activities. But until his career took a detour through the sewer, Drew had been the office rising star, on the fast track for senior partnership. Since he’s nothing if not hopelessly misguided, he vowed to stay the course.

They made it rough on him at first. They pulled him away from his beloved estate practice and made him work on a criminal case, the last thing he knew anything about, despite my efforts to educate him. They gave him the scut work to do. Eventually, Drew seemed to be winning everyone over again, until a few weeks ago, when Ian Dragger, a senior partner and first chair on the case, started tormenting him again. Since they didn’t have a prayer of winning the case that had just fallen into the jury’s hands, things didn’t look promising for Drew.

“I guess Ian didn’t let you do the good stuff,” I said.

“Maybe not, but I took some independent action on my own during the trial. Radical, even. You’d have been impressed, babe. Why should Ian get all the glory?”

What? Words like *independent* and *radical* weren’t in Drew’s life

description. They needed to come with the warning: *Stodgy guys, don't try this alone*. Did he need me to perform damage control?

I blamed sex for derailing my focus. Unless that was his knee rising up to meet me under the covers, I had a feeling we were headed for round two. I'd intended to ask him what he did, I swear. But then he nibbled on my ear, and we were at it again.

Who knew an ear nibble could turn into such a nasty bite on the butt? If I'd questioned him, rather than letting the idea float straight out of my mind, I might have gotten to the ugly truth much sooner. Instead, that quickie claimed two lives, and cost others loads of heartache, not to mention nearly condemning both my love monkey and me to an absolute eternity of canoodling. And eternity threatened to begin way too soon.



## CHAPTER ONE

Three days later the unraveling had already begun, though I didn't know that at first.

But then, *someone* kept distracting me.

"Murder's my beat," my mother intoned with great drama.

On a busy corner in Century City, L.A.'s Westside business district, Mother struck a pose against a lamppost. A very mysterious pose, very noir. Tugging down the brim of her smoky fedora, her blue-violet eyes narrowed in a fierce scowl, sure to stop any would-be bad guys in their tracks. From the looks of things, that Friday rush hour sidewalk was full of bad guys. Didn't those silly suits have anything better to do than to gawk at the bane of my existence?

Mother's hat hid most of her wavy blonde hair, but the too-short skirt of her navy suit exposed enough of those pinup girl legs to stop traffic. Literally — drivers came to a halt in the intersection and stared. Wouldn't you think a woman her age would wear longer skirts? And shouldn't my legs look half as good?

The photographer from *Starz* magazine, who'd come for a photo shoot that morning and parlayed it into a daylong media bonanza, just encouraged her. "That's the stuff, Martha," he cried with glee, as his camera clicked off frame after frame of Mystery Mother for posterity.

He was a gaunt man, dressed entirely in black, who looked as if he should be reciting profound, if atrocious, poetry on the Left Bank — not instructing my mother to "work it" on crowded Los Angeles sidewalks. He told me his name when he showed up at my door, but given my resistance to the media zoo just beginning with him, in a fit of adolescent spite, I chose to think of him as Pierre.

Worse yet, I had no one to blame but myself. Since Mother had inadvertently influenced the plot of my last mystery novel, I named her as co-author. I knew that would mean taking a book tour

together, and I was prepared for it. Well, I figured I would be when the time came. But I hadn't anticipated that my publisher would send us on the talk show circuit to build interest in the book — fully eight months before the *Deadly Shadows* publication date. Though we weren't set to leave for another ten days, Mother kicked off the insanity today with the *Starz* shoot.

Just kill me now.

In the throng behind me, I heard the inevitable murmur swell through the crowd as people recognized Mother. "That's Martha Collins, the movie star," people whispered.

Mother didn't acknowledge them, but I knew she heard those awestruck whispers. Everything in her life was predicated on making sure that recognition never stopped.

Passers-by cast occasional glances my way. My resemblance to my famous parents, movie legends Martha Collins and Alec Grainger, is striking. But in my tattered jeans and the free T-shirt from the hardware store, that screamed in violent hues, "Painters do it in color," I looked like a rube from the burbs. Precisely what I was.

I began to think Pierre's finger must have fused to his camera's shutter. Yet even when he freed it, and Mother acknowledged the cheers of the crowd with a satisfied nod, we still couldn't move on. The last member of our little entourage lagged behind.

From a half-block back, Mother's new publicist, Vanessa Eccerly, called, "Hey, you guys, wait up, willya? Why's everyone walking so fast?"

Considering the *Starz* guy had shot enough film to replicate half the movies Mother had made during her long career, I guessed walking wasn't Vanessa's thing. I just wished I could figure out what was.

Vanessa loped across the street and tripped at the curb. She was a big, gawky girl, who wore mostly granny dresses and Doc Martens, like many kids near her twenty-something age. But while she seemed to be shooting for trendy, that style just contributed to Vanessa's tendency to resemble a quaint, oversized doll. Her little Dutch girl bob was another strikingly old-fashioned touch; although

her hair was colored cotton candy-pink, its sheen resembled a doll's vinyl hair. Even her bright blue eyes often seemed as fixed and unnaturally wide — and just as vacant.

That this empty-headed plaything, Mother's new publicist, had planned our talk show tour, made me dread it even more.

Vanessa leaned against Mother's vacated lamppost to catch her breath. "Whew! Why did we park so far from this party?"

"Tracy?" Mother asked with a devilish smirk.

"I will — if you will, Mother," I said.

That cryptic exchange referred to a set of questions Mother and I kept throwing at each other. She wanted to know why I always parked blocks away from any destination, while I wondered why she hired Vanessa. The trouble with our stalemate was, even if I didn't answer her question, she knew I was walking the extra blocks to take off the last of the weight I put on when I quit smoking. That was no secret — most days my stomach rumbled loudly enough to be heard in Dallas. I was down to the final five pounds now, but they were putting up a fight.

Yet I couldn't figure why Mother hired Vanessa. One of the city's leading media consultants had always handled her film publicity. Why had she passed over him in favor of this gawky girl? Curiosity is my curse — I had to know what she was up to.

Since Vanessa's wide eyes hadn't yet blinked, I realized she was still waiting for an answer. Talk about having a breezeway between your ears. Mother often suggested I missed Vanessa's hidden depth, reminding me that there's little difference between genius and stupidity. The only difference I could see was that genius had its limits.

I gestured to the cars crawling past. "Knowing there would be a parade eyeing Mother, I figured I couldn't get any closer."

"Oh...right," Vanessa said with a slow nod.

The *Starz* guy snickered. Mother gave my wrist a nasty pinch. I gritted my teeth and pressed on.

We were bucking the exodus from the office towers around us to attend an impromptu party at Slaughter, Cohen, celebrating their accomplishment of the impossible. They'd actually secured

an acquittal for a defendant who had the poor sense to commit his crime live on cable TV, thus proving that: a) SCREWED had some damn fine lawyers, or b) they argued the case before an L.A. jury.

Though Mother hadn't put on any more shows on the subsequent blocks we trod, the crowds became quite dense as we approached Drew's building. When I saw the placards carried by the people spilling around the corner, I understood. A demonstration, and counter-demonstration, resulting from today's verdict had clogged the street.

"DOLT wins!" some placards read, while others said, "DOLT is dangerous!"

"What's a dolt?" Vanessa asked.

From beneath the brim of her fedora, Mother shot me a warning look that killed my smartass comeback right in my throat. Though she's not exactly a traditional parent, she can still produce looks that make it more than my life is worth to defy.

But how could anyone not understand those signs? DOLT stood for Decency and Order in Life and on Television, the organization whose founder, Skippy Sullivan, achieved victory in the courtroom today. I always thought Skippy should be jailed for not realizing what word that acronym would produce, but he was too busy embodying the concept.

Around the corner, the sidewalk became impassable. I took the lead, encouraging the others to wiggle through single-file. Yet I found myself agreeing with those counter-demonstrators. DOLT would have been dangerous, were it not so lame-brained.

At the garage entrance, I shouted to my companions, "We'll never make it to the main entrance. Let's cut through here."

"Will it lead to the same place?" Vanessa asked.

Never had I felt such a pressing need for an *I'm With Stupid* T-shirt. It was gonna be a long tour.

After the din in the street, the relative quiet of the garage seemed as silent as a tomb. But once my ears adjusted, I heard Drew shouting.

I ran to the other side of the garage, where I spotted Drew and Ian Dragger near Ian's forest green Range Rover. I jerked to a halt

when I saw what was happening, only vaguely aware of the sounds of my companions' footsteps catching up.

Drew might be a hunk, but he's also such a stuffy young-fogy, who never accepts anything short of conventional perfection in his appearance. His business attire typically remains so rigidly unwrinkled, he looks like a living page in a high-priced men's catalog.

I gawked in disbelief at his shocking transformation. Drew's ever-neat wavy hair hung awkwardly over his forehead, and his face looked dangerously flushed. His suit jacket had been thrown to the floor. He'd yanked his tie down, and his shirt and pants looked like they'd been put through the spin cycle — with Drew in them.

Ian Dragger still seemed more pristine in his chocolate pinstriped suit and soft gold tie. But while Ian was also an attractive man, this wasn't his finest moment, either. His emerald eyes had narrowed into hard slits, while his thin lips twisted into a mean knot on his rigid face. His hands were clenched in fists at his sides.

Drew also cocked his fists, holding them before his chest, boxer-style. "I mean it, Ian," he shouted. "I want to know why you're riding me. I know it has nothing to do with the teamwork crap you keep throwing around."

"So you're going to push your claim, you son-of-a-bitch," Ian said, so softly I wouldn't have heard it, had it not echoed in the concrete garage. "I knew it. You're no better —"

Without warning, one of Drew's fists shot out. It smashed into Ian's nose, sending him reeling into his SUV, as blood showered both of them.

I stood there, too stunned to move. That wasn't my Drew. He was up to the wazoo in impulse control — and believe me, I've tested it.

Not everyone was stuck in a stupor, though. Pierre snapped a picture just as Drew's fist and Ian's nose achieved intimacy. A photographer for a national magazine caught Drew at the most damaging moment of his life. And I'd brought that photographer there. Boy, was I in trouble.

And I didn't know the half of it yet.