

TERROR IN TAFFETA

By

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(excerpt)

CHAPTER 1

The seafoam green bridesmaids' dresses had been a mistake. Not for the obvious reason—that seafoam green bridesmaids dresses are almost always a mistake—but because they added a sickly tinge to Nicole Abernathy's three very hungover bridesmaids.

I'd warned them not to overindulge the night before the wedding, begged them to have their bachelorette party back home instead of waiting until they got to San Miguel de Allende, but no one listens to the wedding planner when it's time to start drinking.

"Kelsey, I don't feel so hot," Nicole said, as I helped her step into her wedding dress.

"I'm not surprised," I said, "You've barely eaten all week."

"I've barely eaten all month," she said, studying herself in the mirror. "But at least the dress fits."

I laughed. Nicole couldn't have been any more than a size six, and the forgiving corset dress she'd chosen would have fit even if she'd been bingeing on cupcakes all month. "What are you even talking about? It looks amazing on you. Always has. Promise me you'll eat something at the reception?"

"I should be hungry, but the thought of food right now... ugh." Nicole clutched her stomach and shook her head. "I should have listened to you and had the bachelorette party back in San Francisco."

"That's okay," I said, with as chipper a smile as I could muster. "Being sick on your wedding day is good luck."

"Really?" Nicole's big, brown eyes searched mine.

"Sure," I lied. "Now hold still."

I felt bad for her, and tried to be extra-gentle as I tightened the satin ribbons that criss-crossed the back of her dress.

"Owww," Nicole whined.

Okay, so I wasn't gentle enough.

"Sorry. Warn me if you're going to pass out or something."

"No, that's okay." Nicole took a deep breath. "Pull tighter."

After two or three more tugs, I tied off the ribbons and tucked them down into the dress, leaving behind a tidy herringbone pattern.

I spun her around for a final inspection. Her freshly highlighted honey-blond hair was pulled into a perfectly executed chignon, and the makeup artist had not only made her look downright dewy, but had hidden all evidence of the dark circles under her big, brown eyes.

"Well, you might not feel well, but you look amazing."

As Nicole turned to admire herself, Zoe Abernathy ducked between the bride and the full-length mirror.

"Hey," Nicole said. "Move it, lady."

Zoe laughed as she checked herself in the mirror. "Maid-of-honor privileges. Or sister privileges. Or, I don't know, hungover-person privileges." She tried to smooth her short, messy hair, but her surfer-girl layers could not be repressed. "Did I mention I'm never drinking again?"

"Only about thirty times," said Dana Poole, a testy redhead who'd been hogging the other mirror while she applied the finishing touches to her makeup. The girl had been peevish all week, and the hangover wasn't exactly bringing out her best qualities.

"Well, I'm gonna say it thirty more times, so get used to it."

"I don't even want to hear it," Dana said, pointing her mascara wand accusingly at the bride's sister. "It's your own fault, you know."

"What do you mean?" Zoe said, batting her eyelashes innocently. "Nicole wanted a bachelorette party. And you can't have a bachelorette party without a cocktail or three."

"Yeah, but we're not in college anymore. We could have done without that last round of shots."

Zoe shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Dana scowled as she screwed the lid back on her mascara and tossed it back into her makeup bag. "Well, next time, keep your good ideas to yourself."

"C'mon, Dana," said the bride, taking a playful tone with her cranky friend. "You have to admit it was pretty fun."

Dana shrugged. "I guess so. Kelsey, will you get us some sparkling water? San Pellegrino, preferably."

Wait, was she really demanding I drop what I was doing and go find refreshments? "Sorry, I've kind of got my hands full here, but there's some flat water over there in the cooler."

"Whatever," she sighed.

Dana had been a late addition to the wedding party, having originally turned down the invitation to Nicole's destination wedding altogether. But after Dana found a last-minute plane ticket to Mexico, Nicole said *of course* it wasn't too late to join the bridal party.

I'd spent way too much time the previous week hunting down an extra bridesmaid dress and having it FedExed to the villa we'd rented to house the bridal party for the week. Plus, we'd had to promote one of the guests to groomsman, because the bride's mother thought an uneven number of attendants would be "tacky."

Of course, no one would ever know how hard I'd worked to pull it all off. I was the magical fairy who made things happen, and if magical fairies do their job right, everyone has a great time and the bride has a perfect day.

At least, that's how it's supposed to work.

Instead, Dana had been huffing around all morning, complaining about one thing after another. "Why do we have to get ready in this cramped little room?" *It's a two-*

hundred-year-old chapel and it wasn't built for your convenience. "Why don't my shoes match the other bridesmaids'?" You're lucky to have shoes at all on such short notice.

"Why aren't there any vegan options on the menu?" Um, because... shut up, that's why.

I'd managed to bite my tongue for Nicole's sake, but Dana was being a total bridesmaid-zilla.

From somewhere behind me, the third bridesmaid let out a moan. She'd been so quiet all week and had caused so little trouble, I was blanking on her name. What was it again? Kristen? Kirsten? Christy? Whatever it was, she put her head down on top of her folded arms and declared that she was dying.

"Okay, Pepto-Bismol all around," I said, as I headed to my emergency kit. Wedding planners have to be prepared for anything—especially *destination* wedding planners. You can't just run to the nearest drugstore in a foreign country and assume you'll find what you need. I always made sure I had double-sided tape to hold errant straps in place, clear fingernail polish to fix runs in pantyhose, and anti-nausea medication for getting girls down the aisle after a night of drinking.

"Bottoms up," I said, as I passed out the tiny, plastic dose cups. With a little luck and two tablespoons of the thick, pink syrup, they'd be able to get through the service.

Nicole scrunched up her face, looking as if she'd just taken another tequila shot.

"Sorry, Nicole." I took the empty cup from her. "It'll all be over soon."

Poor Nicole. I felt terrible for her, feeling bad on her wedding day. I genuinely liked the bride, and had ever since we'd met a year earlier back in San Francisco.

The mother of the bride, Mrs. Abernathy, had dragged the young couple into my office against their will, thinking I'd be the perfect person to put together the exquisite Wine Country wedding she'd always assumed her daughter would have. I knew immediately that she was going for elegant. A strikingly chic woman, she was perfectly put together, from her sleek bobbed hairstyle down to her high-heeled Ferragamos.

But when I mentioned that I'd planned weddings from Napa to Mexico to Europe, Nicole's face brightened and her fiancé, Vince Moreno, looked up from his iPhone for the first time since he'd gotten there.

"Mexico?" Nicole asked, as Vince's face broke into a grin.

"Napa!" her mom corrected, with a slightly sharper than necessary nudge and an isn't-that-what-you-meant-to-say look in her eyes.

Mrs. Abernathy hadn't realized Mexico was on the table—neither had I, frankly, until that moment—or she probably wouldn't have brought her daughter to me.

"Mexico would be so romantic!" Nicole squealed, exchanging an excited look with her fiancé and her sister, Zoe.

Zoe nodded enthusiastically. "And fun, too! Remember that time we went to Playa del Carmen?"

I pulled a fat binder from a shelf behind my desk and flipped through some photos. "You could get married on a Mexican beach, or you could go for a colonial town like San Miguel de Allende. It's really beautiful, very European."

They looked through some glamour shots of the romantic, colonial town with cobblestone streets, and I showed them a thick notebook full of vendors I could personally recommend in San Miguel.

"Oh, these flowers look so... professional!" Mrs. Abernathy said. "Do they have, you know, *electricity*?" The last word she whispered to make sure she wasn't offending anyone.

"They have just about everything you could possibly need." *It's Mexico, not Burundi*, I wanted to add, but didn't. "And what we can't get there, we can have brought in," I reassured her.

"That sounds good to me!" Nicole said. "Vince? What do you think?"

"As long as you're there, I don't care where we go," he said, giving his intended a spontaneous peck on the cheek. "But Mexico does sound pretty awesome."

Despite Mrs. Abernathy's initial misgivings, everything looked amazing now that the day had actually arrived. I'd peeked out earlier and seen the guests nodding their approval as they filled the wooden pews, taking in the charming, centuries-old church. The flowers were perfect, the groomsmen were all in place, and the tequila donkey was waiting patiently outside to lead the procession to the reception at the *Instituto Allende*.

Mrs. Abernathy didn't actually know about the tequila donkey yet, but the groomsmen had enlisted me to help pull off the surprise. She wasn't going to like it—having a *burro* laden with bottles of tequila being part of the proceedings—but since it

was technically a gift for the newlyweds, she didn't get veto power. Personally, I couldn't wait to see her reaction; I'd told the wedding photographer, Brody Marx, who also happened to be a close, personal friend of mine, to make sure not to miss the moment under the threat of death.

But first, we had to get through the ceremony. Luckily, the Pepto Bismol had started doing its job and the bridal party was starting to perk up a bit.

"You ready?" I asked Nicole.

"Ready," she replied.

I guided her and the three bridesmaids toward the arched doorways at the back of the chapel, where Mr. Abernathy stood waiting for his eldest daughter.

He smiled proudly and kissed her on the cheek. "You look beautiful, sweetheart."

"Kelsey," Dana said, interrupting the moment. "I have to use the bathroom."

"I'm sorry, Dana, but can't it wait until after the service?" I'd already given the nod to the groomsman to seat Mrs. Abernathy, and the quartet was waiting for my cue to start the processional.

"I don't think it can." Dana said, as she tossed me her bouquet and bolted down the hall.

I'd told them all to use the facilities before they got into their Spanx. Why hadn't she listened?

Zoe stared after the bridesmaid, incredulous. "That girl—"

The thought was interrupted by the slam of the bathroom door and the muffled sound of someone being sick coming from down the hall.

Okay, so she really *couldn't* have waited.

"Should one of us go check on her?" asked the third bridesmaid, whom I'd decided was definitely named Kristen.

"That's okay, Claire," Nicole said. (*Claire! That was it!*) "They can't start without me, right?"

"That's right," I said, as I tried to distract her with some unnecessary, last-minute adjustments to her veil.

Dana returned a minute or two later, her face blotchy red and droplets of water spattered across her shoes. No matter, all eyes would be on the bride.

Okay, *whew*. Now that we had everyone accounted for, the wedding could finally begin. I fluffed Nicole's gown around her, adjusted her veil one last time, and handed her the luscious bouquet of orchids and roses we'd picked out.

She was perfect.

"Okay," I said, "let's do this." I opened the chapel door, gave the nod to the musicians, and ducked back out. The sound of trumpets pierced the quiet of the church, then a violin, a guitar, and a *vihuela* joined in, signaling the start of the bridal procession.

Dana glanced back toward the bathroom, but I spun her around and gave her a little shove toward the center aisle. She tottered at first, but then fell into the slow rhythm of the processional march.

Claire came next, followed by Zoe, both smiling gamely for the throng of guests who twisted in their seats, eager to catch a glimpse of the girl in the white dress.

"Okay, Nicole," I said, "Remember to keep your bouquet low so you don't cover up that gorgeous gown, and don't forget to breathe."

She smiled and nodded, took her father's arm, and stepped into the chapel, entering to a collective murmur of admiration.

Vince stood waiting near the altar looking absolutely smitten. I could see why Nicole had fallen for him. Dark hair, dark eyes, muscular build—he could have a bright future as a tuxedo model if the whole media rep thing didn't work out.

After Nicole's father had gotten her halfway down the aisle, I collapsed in the back pew and kicked off my strappy sandals. Everything was out of my hands, at least for the next fifteen minutes.

I pulled my hair up off my neck and fanned myself with a wedding program, wishing I could have a do-over with the hairstylist. She'd generously offered to style my chestnut mop into an elegant updo—although I was pretty sure it was at Mrs. Abernathy's urging—but I knew it wouldn't last twenty minutes with all the running around I had to do, and I'd told her not to bother.

Whew. It was nice to have this little break in the chaos.

As Father Villareal spoke about the bonds of marriage, I went through my mental checklist of reception to-dos. Food? Check. I had stopped by earlier and the caterer was busily preparing the passed hors d'oeuvres. Music? Ready to go. The couple had opted

for a DJ and he was all set up. Flowers? We'd practically smothered the courtyard of the former-convent-turned-art-school with roses, lilies and other colorful blossoms. I couldn't wait for Nicole and Vince to see the finished product.

I relaxed a bit and listened to Father Villareal's deep, mellifluous voice. What a find he'd been. I'd never worked with him before—he was a last-minute replacement priest who agreed to fill in—but he brought just the right amount of gravitas to the proceedings. I allowed my mind to wander as he spoke. I hadn't talked to my assistant Laurel since the day before, and I made a mental note to call her later to make sure everything was going okay back at the office.

"If anyone sees any reason why these two should not be wed," Father Villareal said, "let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

I stifled a laugh. No one uses that line in wedding ceremonies anymore. I looked around to see if there were any objections, other than my own to his antiquated question.

My break came to an end all too soon. Father Villareal pronounced them husband and wife and told Vince he could kiss the bride. I stretched my legs and wiggled my toes. Time to put my shoes back on. As I bent down to fish them out from under the pew, I heard a gasp.

Uh-oh. Gasps are never good news.

I shot out of my seat in time to see Dana lurch forward, holding her stomach. She looked like—no. Really? She looked like she was going to barf again, right there on the altar.

Dana pitched forward, trying to steady herself on a tall bouquet of orchids, but to no avail. She pulled the vase down with her, causing a loud crash as they both hit the stone floor.

"No, no, no, no, no," I whispered. "This cannot be happening."

I signaled to the mariachi quartet to start playing again as I rushed to the front of the church, ready to do whatever I could to minimize the damage.

By the time I reached the front, Zoe and Nicole were crouched down next to Dana.

"Come on, get *up*," Zoe demanded, shaking the bridesmaid's limp body.

"It's okay," I whispered. "Go back to your spots."

A panicky feeling rose up in my chest. Dana must have been sicker than I realized. I had to think fast. Addressing the congregation, I announced in my most confident voice, "She's fine, everyone." I fanned her with a wedding program, which I hoped would make her magically spring back to her feet. "She just fainted."

Reading the pleading look in my eyes, Father Villareal raised his hands, and his voice boomed across the sanctuary. "I now present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Moreno."

On cue, the mariachis began playing the recessional, prompting Vince and Nicole to begin their uncertain walk back down the aisle, followed by two pairs of attendants. The remaining usher stood awkwardly, unsure what his role was now that he was devoid of anyone to usher. I shooed him down the aisle as I mouthed, "Go! Go!"

The guests filed out, glancing back to see me hovering over Dana while trying my best to look upbeat. Once they were all safely outside, I felt Dana's wrist. I couldn't find anything, but then again, I wasn't an experienced pulse-taker.

This could not be happening. I frantically felt up and down her forearm, but all I could feel was my own heart thudding in my chest.

"Dana, come on, wake up," I said, shaking her slightly, but she didn't move.

I lifted one of her eyelids, not sure what I was looking for, but was greeted with an empty gaze.

Father Villareal returned from closing the church doors with a questioning look on his face. "*Enferma?*"

Stunned, I shook my head as I sank down onto the floor.

"No, I—I think she's dead."