

Double Wedding Death

A HARRIET TRUMAN/LOOSE THREADS MYSTERY



Arlene Sachitano



Stephanie Looked At Her For A Moment Before Speaking.

“Really? I babysat the bride when she was little.” She paused. “I’ve never set eyes on him. But then, I was surprised when I got the invitation. I haven’t talked to any of the Johnsons for quite a few years. Not since Jennifer was in middle school. I was planning on coming to this conference anyway, though, so I figured why not?”

Harriet wasn’t sure what to say about that, and was glad when she was saved by their hostess.

“Okay, campers, time to add up the score for your table. The winning table will be awarded our first door prizes.”

Harriet had her head bent adding up her points on the calculator function of her phone, or she might have seen what was coming. As it was, she was defenseless when the bride strode into the room from the lobby and slapped her cheek so hard she almost fell off her chair.

“Stay away from my fiancé,” the woman screamed.

Lauren leaped to a protective stance over Harriet, but the woman stormed out, across the lobby and out the front doors.

Mavis stood up. “Someone call nine-one-one.”

Also By Arlene Sachitano

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Quilter's Knot
Quilt As You Go
Quilt by Association
The Quilt Before the Storm
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DOUBLE WEDDING DEATH

A Harriet Truman/Loose Threads
Mystery



ARLENE SACHITANO



ZUMAYA ENIGMA

2017

AUSTIN TX

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

DOUBLE WEDDING DEATH

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ISBN 978-1-61271-326-7

Cover art and design © April Martinez

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sachitano, Arlene, 1951- author.

Title: Double wedding death / Arlene Sachitano.

Description: Austin TX : Zumaya Enigma, 2017. | Series: A Harriet Truman/loose threads mystery |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017009432 (print) | LCCN 2017013223 (ebook) | ISBN

9781612713274 (Electronic/Kindle) | ISBN 9781612713281 (Electronic/EPUB) |

SBN 9781612713267 (trade pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Quiltmakers--Fiction. | GSAFD: Mystery fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3619.A277 (ebook) | LCC PS3619.A277 D68 2017 (print) |

DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017009432>

**This is for Bonnie, Amy, Judy, and
Sally**

Acknowledgments

This book takes place at an actual appliqué conference held in Galveston, Texas. Thank you to conference organizer Sally Coble and her three friends Bonnie, Amy, and Judy for answering my many questions about the detailed workings of this endeavor. Deviations from their wonderful event were created by me for story purposes and responsibility for these are mine alone.

Thank you to the Tremont Hotel for hosting the event and providing a primary setting for my story. Thanks also to Tina's on the Strand and especially store manager Boyce for putting on an event in real life that I was able to fictionalize in my story.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for all their support and understanding when I'm off doing 'book things'. I'd especially like to thank my granddaughter Claire who along with her sister Amelia provides endless inspiration for my writing and who pointed out to me that everyone in the family but her have been mentioned in past acknowledgements.

As always I greatly appreciate the support of Linne and Jack of The Craftsman's Touch Books, as well as Deon Stonehouse of Sunriver Books and Music and Diana Portwood of Bob's Beach Books. I would also like to thank everyone at Latimer Quilt and Textile Center in Tillamook for selling my books and giving me multiple opportunities to promote them at their events.

Last but not least, thank you to Liz and Zumaya for making this all happen.

Chapter 1

Beth Carlson winced as she settled into the upholstered chair in her niece Harriet Truman's bedroom and swung her swollen foot up onto the ottoman. The five pounds and counting she'd added to her petite frame since her car accident earlier in the month were not helping her foot heal.

"Don't forget to pack a light sweater. It'll be hot outside, but the hotel will likely keep it air-conditioned where your workshop classrooms are. I know air conditioning is air conditioning, but somehow, when you're on the hot, humid Gulf Coast it seems like it's stronger or colder or something."

Harriet laughed. "I already have a cotton cardigan and a lightweight zip-front hoodie in my bag." She pointed to her open suitcase on her bed. "They have a pajama party every night in a common room so we can do our stitching homework. They told us people really do wear pajamas, but I'm not about to be seen in my holey sleepshirt, so I have to come up with something to wear for that, but I think everything else is packed."

Beth glanced at her watch.

"It's barely noon. If you haven't done anything about your pajama dilemma in the next hour and a half, I may have a solution. I packed up my sewing patterns in a box and put them in the attic, back when it was my attic, before you took over the stitching business. Mavis and I made lounge pants and shorts a few years ago for a church bazaar. You could drop me at my physical therapy appointment then go to Pins and Needles and get some fabric while I do my exercises. It won't take any time at all to make you a couple of pairs of shorts or pants. You can wear them with a t-shirt and be good to go."

“Do you think we’ll have time to make some for Lauren, too? When we talked yesterday, she didn’t have anything, either, and was just planning on wearing jeans.”

Beth rubbed her chin with her hand.

“Well, if Mavis is done with her own packing, and she’s willing to help, we should be able to do that. You need to get hold of Lauren and make sure it’s what she wants. And she’ll need to pick her fabric. And we’ll need to take her measurements.”

Harriet pulled her phone from her pocket and began dialing Lauren while Beth grabbed the landline receiver from the nightstand and rang her friend Mavis.



Lauren Sawyer came through the door of the Pins and Needles quilt store in downtown Foggy Point and joined Harriet in front of the purple fabric rack.

“Okay, if we have to use clown fabric, count me out.”

Harriet rolled her eyes.

“I was on my way to the flannel shelf, but I saw you coming through the window. I’m going to do the drawstring shorts out of quilt fabric, but I think I want flannel for the long pants so I can use them when we get back.”

“Good idea. Teeshirt material would have been nice, but I’m thinking Marjorie doesn’t have any, and there isn’t time to go anywhere else.”

“Since this is the only fabric store in Foggy Point, you’re probably right.” Harriet said, and headed toward the flannel section at the back of the showroom.

Lauren smirked as she followed.

“I’m quick like that.”

“I’m really looking forward to some time away,” Harriet said as she tilted a bolt of flower-print flannel out from the rack, studied it, then slid it back in place.

Lauren ran her hands across several bolts, stopping on a brown-and-green pine-tree print.

“I just hope the other stitchers aren’t too intense.” She unrolled a few folds of the fabric so she could see the full repeat of the print. “I like this. It will remind me of home.”

Harriet chose a green-and-brown tartan plaid.

“This won’t remind me of anything, but I like it.”

They walked two rows over and began the process again, this time looking at cotton fabrics.

“Did you get into the needle-turn class?” Harriet asked.

Lauren nodded as she pulled a bolt of brown with geometric patterns in black, white and green from the shelf.

“I’m not sure I know exactly what needle turn is, but I guess I’ll know by the end of the week.”

“I’m assuming needle turn involves turning under the edge of an appliqué piece with your needle before you stitch it to the background fabric. I chose it because it had the shortest list of supplies required.”

Lauren shifted the bolt into a two-handed grasp.

“I hear you. That factored into my decision process, too, but the main thing I was looking for was the word *beginner*. I got into both of my first choices. I’ll be doing the wool felt pillow for my second class. How about you?”

Harriet considered an owl print in browns and grays.

“Same.”

“Do you know what Mavis and Connie are taking?”

“Given they’ve been quilting about a hundred more years than we have, I’m pretty sure they’re taking the two classes that weren’t labeled ‘beginner’.”

Lauren laughed. “You’re probably right.”

“James is excited about his cooking classes.”

“We’re lucky your favorite chef decided he needed to learn to cook Cajun. I’m not sure why, since he already has the most popular restaurant in my neighborhood, if not all of Foggy Point. Harriet picked up her two bolts and headed for the cutting counter at the front of the store.

“We better get moving if we’re going to get these made before we go.”

“Do we need elastic?”

“I have all your notions all ready up by the register,” Marjorie Swain called from three rows over. She was tall and stout and had a voice that could reach all four corners of her store. “Mavis called before you got here and told me which elastics you need. She likes the one we have that has a drawstring built in. It works well for shorts and pants.”

“Well, that was thoughtful of her,” Lauren said.

“Yes, it was,” Marjorie agreed, and took her fabric. She stopped before she set the bolt down. “You two look after the other two while you’re down south. I know Mavis and Connie think they can take care of themselves, but neither one of them is a spring chicken and as worldly as they think they are, neither one of them has traveled beyond Seattle without a family member in tow for at least twenty years.”

Harriet looked at Lauren.

“With what’s happened in Foggy Point in the last year or two, we’ll probably be safer in Galveston.”

Lauren laughed.

“Or practically anywhere else.”



Harriet walked through the door connecting her kitchen with her long-arm quilt studio and twirled around in a pirouette.

“What do you think?” She was wearing her new long sleep pants.

Connie Escorcia stood up and circled her.

“They look great.” She turned to Lauren, who was taking the plastic wrap off a tray of cut vegetables set on Harriet’s large cutting table. “Are you going to model yours?”

“Harriet wasn’t really doing a fashion show. You just happened to arrive during her final fitting. I did mine already, and both pairs fit fine, so no need to repeat it. And mine look great, too.”

“Where are the rest of the Loose Threads?” Connie asked.

Lauren ticked off names on her fingers.

“Robin is meeting with a support group for part-time lawyers who are moms, but she’s bringing rotisserie chickens from the grocery store. DeAnn had to wait for her husband to get home from baseball practice with the boys so he could watch Kissa, and then she’ll be coming and bringing fruit salad. Jenny is on her way as of five minutes ago and bringing dessert. Who am I forgetting?”

“Carla?”

“She’s picking up Wendy from a play date then heading over, and I can’t remember what she’s bringing.”

Aunt Beth repositioned her foot on an ottoman Harriet had brought in from the living room.

“Be sure you transfer some of the old pictures off your phone so you’ll have room to take pictures of everything in your classes and anything they’ll let you photograph at the keynote speech.”

Connie left the food table and came to sit beside Beth.

“Don’t worry. I’m bringing my digital camera, and I already asked the organizers if the people showing their vintage quilts were allowing pictures, and they are.”

Mavis Willis came in from the kitchen.

“So, what time are we leaving for Seattle tomorrow?” She glanced at Lauren and Harriet before turning to Connie.

Harriet walked over and sat down on a rolling work chair she pulled over from the cutting table.

“We probably can’t check into the airport hotel until after lunch.”

Lauren joined her travel companions.

“How about we leave at eleven-ish and then stop and eat lunch half-way?”

“Works for me,” Harriet said, and Connie nodded agreement.

“Lucky for us I have a software security contract with Sea-Tac,” Lauren said, referring to the computer programming work she did for the Seattle airport. “We can leave our car in the employee parking lot for free.”

Connie got up and headed toward the kitchen. “That’s a nice perk.”

“Yeah, well, it’s the least they can do after what I did for them.”

Harriet looked interested.

“Do tell.”

Lauren laughed. “Not a chance. It’s completely classified.”

“Will you two stop?” Aunt Beth scolded. “You.” She looked at Harriet. “Go get out of your new pajama pants before you spill something on them. And you, missy...” She turned to Lauren. “...go into the garage and get the box of plastic cutlery and the stack of paper plates.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lauren said with a salute and went to do her task.

“Are you sure you and Jorge are going to be able to take care of Scooter and Carter?” Harriet asked her aunt. Scooter, hearing his name, came over and jumped into her lap.

Beth smiled at the little dog.

“He’ll be fine as long as he has Fred here with him.” She stroked Harriet’s fuzzy gray cat, who was currently curled up on *her* lap. “Carter is another story. I think he spends a lot of time sitting in Lauren’s lap while she’s working on her computer.”

“I’m sure Carla or Jenny or even Rod would take him if it gets to be too much.”

Aunt Beth reached over and scratched Scooter’s ear.

“I’m sure Jorge and I can handle all three of them. Don’t you worry.”



Connie groaned.

“I shouldn’t have eaten that last mini lemon tart, but it was so delicious.”

Jenny smiled.

“That’s why I brought them here. I made them and the pecan tarts for a historical society meeting, and there were too many leftovers to tempt my husband and I.”

Harriet set her empty plate on the cutting table.

“I’m counting on you guys to keep an eye on Aunt Beth while I’m gone.”

“I’ll be fine,” Beth protested.

“Try to make sure she doesn’t overdo in my absence,” Harriet continued, as if she hadn’t heard her aunt. “She’s supposed to use her cane for at least another week.”

Jenny grinned at Beth.

“Don’t worry. We’ve made a schedule and are going to drive her to her PT and various groups and meetings while you’re gone. She’ll be fine.”

“I’m not a child, you know!” Beth complained.

Harriet laughed. “No, you’re not, but you have been known to overdo on occasion.”

Beth rolled her eyes but couldn’t disagree.

Lauren stood up.

“I better get going. I need to get gas on the way home and pack my new jammies.”

Carla scooped up her toddler, who had been playing on the floor with the dogs.

“I better take this one home and put her to bed. Take lots of pictures.” She blushed as she usually did when she said something assertive.

Connie picked up her purse.

“As I said, I’ve got my camera *and* my new phone. Between the two, I should be able to take pictures of everything we do.” She patted Carla’s arm. “If it’s a good workshop, maybe next year I’ll stay home, and Rod and I will take care of Wendy so you can go.”

“Hopefully, Aiden will be back by then so I can leave the house,” Carla said. She was employed as the young veterinarian’s housekeeper and was totally in charge of his affairs while he was out of the country on an indefinite assignment in Uganda.

Then, her face flamed red when she looked at Harriet.

“Carla, it’s okay. You don’t have to cringe every time Aiden’s name comes up. We were dating, and now we’re not and I’m okay with that.” Even she could hear the lack of conviction in her voice.

Carla ducked her head, and the rest of the women exchanged looks. Mavis got up and moved over to pat Harriet’s shoulder.

“Let’s not spoil our send-off with talk of past troubles,” she said in a quiet voice.

“Never.” Harriet gave her a forced smile. “Thank you everyone,” she said, standing and straightening her back. “I’ll see my fellow travelers in the morning, and the rest of you in a little over a week.”

The group said their good-byes, and one-by-one, they headed home.

Chapter 2

Harriet and Lauren arrived downstairs in the lobby atrium of the Tremont House Hotel first; Connie and Mavis were taking longer to get settled in their rooms. Their flight had left Portland at six in the morning, and it had taken another two hours after they'd landed to drive to Galveston, including a stop at Walmart to pick up spray starch for Mavis and Connie's class.

Lauren sat in a padded wicker chair in one of several conversation groupings in the common space while Harriet went to the bar to get them iced tea.

"Thanks," she said when Harriet returned and handed her a frosty glass. "How long is it until our meet-and-greet?"

Harriet checked the time on her phone.

"It's four o'clock, and our meet and greet is either five or five-thirty. Do you want to go walk around the neighborhood? The historic Strand area is only a block away. That's where the shops are supposed to be."

"In a minute. What I'd like right now is a snack."

Lauren's phone rang, and Harriet recognized from the ringtone it was a work call.

I'll find us something, she mouthed and headed back to the bar.

She ordered a charcuterie plate then sat at the bar to wait while Lauren dealt with her client emergency. A blond young man sat down at the bar next to her. He reeked of alcohol.

"Hi, pretty lady, my name's Michael. Whiskey sour," he said to the bartender and then turned back to Harriet. "You're not here with the groom's

party—I'd know because that's me, and we've definitely not met, but I intend to rectify that right now."

He wasn't exactly slurring his words, but it was clear to Harriet the drink the bartender handed him was not the first or probably even the second or third of his day.

"I'm not on anybody's side at the wedding. I'm here with the stitching group."

Michael toppled toward her in an uncontrolled lurch, and she put her hand on his shoulder, pushing him back until he caught his balance.

"Whoops," he said, and had sufficient good grace to blush. "Sorry 'bout that. I started celebrating a little early. The women are off getting their nails waxed or their hair painted or something."

Harriet looked around for help.

"Is your best man around, or any of your groomsmen?"

"No, nope, none. They all have jobs. They'll come for the wedding."

Michael abruptly leaned forward and laid his head on her shoulder. She tried to push him off, but he was a dead weight. She glanced over at Lauren; no help there—her friend was standing by the elevators with her back to the lobby, still on her phone. The bartender looked sympathetic, but he was serving a couple at the other end of the bar and made no move in her direction.

She put her hands on both Michael's shoulders and tried again to force him upright.

"Take your hands off my fiancé!" a big-haired blonde dressed in head-to-toe pink screeched from the top of the entrance stairs. She hurried over to the bar as fast as she could on her stiletto heels, trailed by four similarly coifed and shod women and a thick woman with straight black hair and sensible shoes.

"Take your fiancé off my hands," Harriet retorted and, with a final push, sent him backward, away from her. He would have fallen off his stool if the dark-haired woman hadn't stepped up and caught him.

"Come on, Michael. Nap time for you. Jennifer," she told the blonde, "why don't you take the girls upstairs to clean up and change for dinner?" She turned to Harriet. "I'm sorry. He's normally not so boorish."

Michael laid his head on her shoulder.

"You're so nice to me. I don't deserve you for a sister."

"I'm not your sister," she told him and reached her hand out to Harriet. "I'm Sydney Johnson, and this is my sister's groom-to-be. I'm afraid he's had too much to drink. They're getting married in a few days, and until the rest of his party arrive, he doesn't have much to do."

Harriet dabbed her shoulder with a napkin in case he'd drooled on her.

"No harm done."

"Did he stain your shirt? We can pay for the dry cleaning."

Harriet smiled.

"It's not a problem. I'm fine."

The bartender brought Harriet's plate of snacks.

"Sorry," he said under his breath.

"No problem," she whispered back and took her plate of cheeses and meats.

She smiled and started to turn away, but Sydney stopped her.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Harriet. Harriet Truman."

"That must be tough."

Harriet sighed.

"You have no idea." She carried the plate of food to the table in front of where she and Lauren had been sitting. Settling into a chair, she leaned back with a sigh and watched Sydney wrestle the groom to the elevators.

"So, what was that all about?" Lauren asked as she slid her phone back into her pocket and sat down.

"Just your everyday garden variety drunk. Apparently, we're sharing the Tremont House with a wedding party. The women were out getting beautiful, and the groomsmen haven't arrived yet, so the groom spent the day drinking."

Lauren selected a slice of prosciutto from their plate and popped it into her mouth.

"I guess he was having his own private stag party."

"Everything okay with your client?"

"Yeah. Some people require a lot more hand-holding than others."

They ate their snack plate and drank tea in silence for a few minutes. Then, Harriet leaned back in her chair.

"Boy, I needed a little protein."

Lauren sighed.

"Yeah, I remember when they used to serve food on airplanes. I loved the cereal and banana. I never ate cereal except on planes."

"What is it Thoreau said?"

"I don't know, enlighten me."

Harriet stared up into the atrium.

"'Things do not change; we change'."

"I'm pretty sure it was them that took the cereal away, not me."

“Yeah, well, that was the only change quote I could come up with on short notice.”

Lauren stood up.

“Come on, let’s go across the street to check in for the conference then take that walk.”



Harriet took a deep breath as they started down the block. The architecture was nineteenth-century stone and brick. According to her guidebook, it was one of the largest and most historically significant collections in the United States.

“I love the way this place smells. I don’t know if it’s the water or the sea life or something, but it doesn’t smell like our waterfront.

“I think that might be mold you’re smelling, from everything being so humid.”

“Don’t be so cynical. You can almost feel the history of this place in the air.”

Lauren looked at her like she was crazy.

“If you say so.”

Harriet surveyed the wharf, which was four blocks behind their hotel. Two gigantic white cruise ships sat at anchor. Vacationers bustled up and down the gangplanks, while white-jacketed crew hurried back and forth on all visible decks.

“I guess I didn’t realize Galveston was such a cruise port,” she commented.

“I’m not sure that’s always been the case. I think I read somewhere they’ve only been here since two thousand.”

“I bet having all the cruise visitors has changed the character of this area.”

Lauren stopped in front of a gray-and-pink three-story building two blocks from the hotel.

“This is the Hutchings Sealy building,” she said and read from the screen of her smartphone. “It says here it was one of the earliest examples of steel-frame construction in Texas.”

Harriet sniffed. “My nose says it’s the home to a shop with some great-smelling candles. I’m going in to investigate.” She turned and climbed the three steps into the shop.

“I’m not really into can...” Lauren looked up a second, interior set of steps to the main floor of the shop. “Hello, linen clothes.” She pushed past Harriet, went up the steps and started browsing a rack of shirts.

Harriet pulled a printed flyer from her purse and scanned it.

“I think this is one of the shops on our private spree night. If you wait until then you can get a discount.”

A smiling woman came out from behind the sales counter and stood beside Lauren.

“The blue in that shirt really brings out your eye color. I heard you talking. If you’d like, I can put it behind the counter until your shopping night.”

“You don’t need do that. I know I’m here early.”

“It would be our pleasure. Besides, if you pay for it when everyone gets to our shop, it’ll prime the pump and get the others to open their wallets.”

“Anything for the cause,” Lauren said and laughed.

Harriet set a half-dozen square candles on the counter.

“I’m going to go ahead and get these candles today. They smell so good even without lighting them.” She held a yellow one up to her nose and inhaled. “They’ll make our room smell wonderful.”

Lauren sneezed. “Whatever.” She slid her phone from her pocket and looked at the time. “We better get going. I’d like to make it around the block before we need to go back for our reception.”

The clerk wrapped Harriet’s candles in red tissue paper and put them in a small shopping bag.

“I hope you both enjoy your stay in Galveston, and we’ll see you in a couple of days.”



The hotel property included the Davidson Building across Ship Mechanic Row from the main hotel, and the first gathering of the appliqué conference was in its first-floor ballroom. Harriet and Lauren left the hotel lobby and crossed the street, entering through one of multiple sets of double doors.

Harriet turned slowly around as she took in the curved staircase with its wood-and-brass handrails and bold floral carpeting.

“Wow, you can almost see Scarlett O’Hara sweeping down this staircase.”

Lauren scrolled down the face of her phone.

“Yeah, except for the fact that this was a warehouse until a few decades ago. They consulted the historical society when they built the ballrooms and staircase to be sure they were historically accurate.”

Harriet rubbed her hand along the brass banister.

“So, this could have come from Home Depot? It looks amazingly old.”

“The rich-architect version of Home Depot, but yeah, it was fabricated to look old, but it’s probably a lot younger than your house.”

“My house may be an old Victorian, but whoever built mine didn’t spend the kind of money these people did.”

Connie and Mavis came into the lobby and walked over to where Harriet and Lauren were examining the wood-and-brasswork. Connie gazed up the grand expanse of stairs.

“I wonder how old this building is?”

Harriet and Lauren looked at each other and laughed.

“You don’t want to know,” Harriet told her. “Go with your imagination.”

Mavis looked across the lobby and into the ballroom.

“Looks like they’re ready for us to check in for our reception. Shall we go get this party started?”



“Why do you need to know how many pets I have?” Lauren asked the woman who had handed her the questionnaire.

A smiling woman with waist-length silver hair stepped up to the sign-in desk.

“It’s for our ‘getting to know you’ event a little later. It’s all in good fun, and you’re welcome to ignore any questions you’re uncomfortable answering, although it may cost your team points if you do.”

Lauren scanned her paper.

“That didn’t help much.”

“I promise, this is not intended to embarrass anyone,” the woman assured her.

“If you say so,” Lauren muttered.

The room had been set up with round tables, each seating eight or ten people, and a long buffet table arranged down the middle. White-coated waiters bustled in and out, bearing bowls and trays of guacamole, chips, cheese, crackers, hummus and pita bread. A bar was set up at the back of the room where a black-shirted bartender arranged bowls of cut lemons and limes and a similarly dressed woman stacked clean wine glasses on a table behind him.

Harriet finished filling out her survey and glanced at Mavis’s.

“Wow, you’ve been to all fifty states? I didn’t know you traveled that much.”

Mavis sighed. “I don’t anymore, but my husband had a thing about geography. Every summer for years we drove around the country, collecting a state-shaped refrigerator magnet at each stop until we had them all.

Our final trip was to Hawaii.” She paused for a moment. “It was our last family vacation.”

Connie reached over and patted her hand. Mavis put on a brave face most of the time, but she was still trying to come to terms with the fact the husband she’d believed had died many years before had been living in Europe with another family until his recent actual death.

Harriet was saved from having to comment by a call to order by one of the conference hosts. Four women had organized the appliqué conference, and they each spoke in turn, describing the schedule of events and the locations for various activities.

“As some of you may have noticed, there is a large wedding party sharing the hotel with us,” said a small woman with dark curly hair. “They will be having a dinner upstairs in this building tonight, and then the rest of the time, they’ll be in the main hotel. The wedding itself will take place in one of the historic churches, so we shouldn’t be in each other’s way. In fact, with the exception of tonight, you may not even notice them.”

Harriet leaned toward Lauren and whispered, “We’ve noticed them, if that jerk in the bar is part of the group she’s talking about.”

Lauren smiled. “We’re lucky like that.”

“I’ll give you all a chance to nosh on the tasty snacks the wonderful Tremont people have prepared for you, and then we’ll begin our ‘getting to know you’ activity.”



“I’m glad we didn’t plan on going out to dinner tonight,” Mavis said a half-hour later as she dug in to her second plate of hummus and carrot sticks.

Connie groaned as she watched the hotel staff deliver plates of large cookies to a new table they’d set up at the end of the buffet.

“*Dios mio*. They should have warned us there was dessert.”

The dark-haired hostess tapped a water glass with her fork.

“Now, if you all could look on the back side of your questionnaire...” She paused as papers rustled, and the group complied. “...you will find a number. Susan has set a table tent with a number on each of your tables.”

Susan, a small athletic woman with a cap of short brown hair, held up a folded card with the number seven on it from Harriet’s table to illustrate the point.

“Go to the table that matches the number on the back of your paper, and I will give you your next instruction.”

Harriet and Lauren both had the number three, but Mavis had a five, and Connie an eight. They made their way to their new seats.

Their hostess tapped the glass again.

“I’m going to read a number of questions or statements. If you answer in the affirmative, give yourself a point. Some of the questions are worth more points—for instance, if you’ve ever competed in an Olympics, you get five points. And some—for example, how many grandchildren you have—are worth one point per.”

The questions began, and within a few moments, the attendees were laughing like old friends. Everyone was surprised when it turned out there were four beauty pageant winners, including Connie; and Harriet and Lauren exchanged raised eyebrows when they each notched a point for having a PhD.

Three members of the group were medical doctors, and one woman had acted on television, on a soap opera most of them had never watched. A woman with flame-red hair wearing a turquoise shirt with a rhinestone heart outlined across her ample bosom laughed when it turned out she was the only one there who had won a national quilt-show award.

“It was a fluke,” she told Harriet and the other women at her table.

Harriet sipped from the glass of ice water the waiter had delivered as the activity continued.

“I’m pretty sure they don’t give those awards out lightly. Do you have a picture of the quilt?”

“I’m Stephanie,” the redhead introduced herself as she flipped through pictures on her phone. When she found the winner, she turned the screen toward Harriet.

“Wow! I remember seeing this on the front of a magazine.” Harriet passed the phone to the others at the table.

Stephanie took her phone back and slid it into her purse.

“I’ve not entered a quilt in a show since then. It was only the fourth quilt I’d ever made, and I’m just not sure I’ll ever make another one that good again. I decided to go out on top.”

“It’s a fabulous quilt,” Harriet said, and the others at the table agreed.

“Now I can relax and just have fun with my quilting,” Stephanie said and laughed again. “And this trip is dual purpose. I’m actually attending the wedding at the hotel. It’s not till the weekend, so it’s perfect.”

Harriet picked up her pencil and twirled it in her fingers.

“I’ve met the groom.”

Stephanie looked at her for a moment before speaking.

“Really? I babysat the bride when she was little.” She paused. “I’ve never set eyes on him. But then, I was surprised when I got the invitation. I haven’t talked to any of the Johnsons for quite a few years. Not since Jen-

nifer was in middle school. I was planning on coming to this conference anyway, though, so I figured why not?"

Harriet wasn't sure what to say about that, and was glad when she was saved by their hostess.

"Okay, campers, time to add up the score for your table. The winning table will be awarded our first door prizes."

Harriet had her head bent adding up her points on the calculator function of her phone, or she might have seen what was coming. As it was, she was defenseless when the bride strode into the room from the lobby and slapped her cheek so hard she almost fell off her chair.

"Stay away from my fiancé," the woman screamed.

Lauren leaped to a protective stance over Harriet, but the woman stormed out, across the lobby and out the front doors.

Mavis stood up. "Someone call nine-one-one."

"And hotel security," Connie added.

Tears streaked down Harriet's cheek, and an angry red handprint was forming on her face. She gasped for breath, and Connie picked up her water glass and held it out.

"Here, take a sip of water," she ordered.

The bartender came over with a maroon cloth napkin wrapped around a handful of ice. He handed it to Harriet, and she pressed it gently against her cheek.

Three men dressed in navy-blue blazers with the Tremont House insignia on the breast pocket hurried through the front doors and gathered around Harriet. One man held some sort of radio in his right hand. The gold name badge on his chest said *Bruce*.

Bruce looked from Harriet to Mavis to Lauren and then addressed Connie.

"Is it really necessary to involve the police in this?"

Connie drew herself up to her full four-foot, eleven-inch height before speaking.

"Harriet has been attacked by a total stranger for no reason, and you are asking if we need the police? She's been assaulted."

"We will do our door prize drawing tomorrow night after show-and-tell," the curly-haired woman announced in a loud voice. The room was buzzing with talk about who had seen what. "Let's go back to the hotel, and if anyone feels like it, in an hour we will have our first pajama party in the room opposite the elevators."

The quilters gathered their purses and filed out of the room.

"Would you like us to call the police?" another of the navy-blazer guys asked Harriet in a strained voice.

“We’d be happy to drive you to the local emergency room,” the third man offered.

“And of course, the rest of your stay will be on the house,” Bruce told her. “If you’d like a room upgrade, I think that could be arranged, also,” he added.

The first man leaned in and looked at Harriet’s cheek around the napkin-full of ice.

“We have a private physician on call if you’d prefer to be seen at the hotel.”

Harriet took the ice away from her face and set it on the table. Her cheek was swelling. Mavis leaned in and studied her then shook her head.

“You need an x-ray at least.”

Harriet reached up and gently touched her cheek.

“Mavis is right. I need to have my cheekbone x-rayed, but I’m not interested in having Bridezilla arrested for assault. I’m sure she’s stressed about her big day. I did encounter her very drunk fiancé earlier this afternoon, and she clearly misinterpreted what she saw.”

The blue-blazer guys all visibly relaxed. Harriet was sure the hotel had seen the wedding of the century slipping through their fingers, not to mention a six-figure or more lawsuit.

Mavis sat down beside her.

“Honey, if you want to go home tonight, you just say the word, and I’ll get us tickets on the next flight.”

Harriet attempted a smile, then winced.

“I am not ruining our fun week of stitching just because a stressed-out bride took out her frustrations on my cheek unless I have to. Besides, I wouldn’t want to leave James here by himself. Let’s see what an x-ray shows. If the doctor says it’s just a bruise, I’m staying.”

“Honey, James is a big boy. He’ll understand if you want to leave.”

Harriet looked at her.

“If I told James I was hurt badly enough that I have to leave, he would insist on coming with me.”

Connie raised her eyebrows and turned to Lauren.

“I didn’t realize things had progressed that far.”

Lauren smirked.

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“You guys can stop talking about me like I’m not here,” Harriet said. “James and I are just friends, but since it was his idea for us to come here, I know he’ll feel responsible.”

Bruce turned away and spoke into his radio. He let out a long breath as he turned back to Harriet and her friends.

“I’ve called the ER and arranged for you to be seen immediately. Our limo will take you there, and our rep will stay with you and take care of all the expenses.”

“I’d like my friend to come with me,” Harriet tipped her head at Lauren, “And, Mavis, please let *me* tell Aunt Beth after I’ve seen the doctor and can assure her I’m fine. You and Connie should go ahead and go to the night stitching activity. We’ll let you know when we’re back.”

Mavis’s brows pulled together.

“Connie and I will take a cab and meet you there.” Her tone told Harriet there would be no argument.

Bruce looked over Harriet’s head and out the front windows.

“There’s the car. Shall we go?”

Chapter 3

Harriet checked her watch as she got out of the limo in front of the hotel. Lauren collected both their purses and followed her out of the car.

“Do you want to stop in the café and get something to eat before we go up to the room?” Lauren asked as they crossed the hotel lobby.

“Didn’t I hear someone say there would be homemade cookies at the pajama party tonight?”

“Yeah, you did.”

“I can hold an ice pack on my face down there while I’m eating a cookie just as well as I can sitting upstairs alone in our room.”

“They said the pajama party is in the room opposite the elevators,” Lauren said and turned around. “We can just go on in, if you want.”

Harriet turned toward the conference room doors.

“I can’t stitch one-handed, so I’m good. Did you want to get your project?”

“I say we go straight for the cookies. After tonight’s excitement, I’m not really in the mood to stitch.”

Barb DePan and Ann Purgason, the conference organizers, came over as soon as Harriet stepped through the door.

“Are you okay? Is there anything we can do for you?” Barb asked.

Ann pulled out a chair at the closest table.

“Here, sit down.”

Harriet settled in the chair and put her ice pack down on the table.

“I’d really like a cookie. Chocolate, if that’s an option.”

Before she'd finished speaking, a woman whose hips said she knew her way around a cookie table brought a paper plate filled with a selection of cookies and put it in front of her.

Harriet looked up at her.

"Thank you so much. I'm Harriet, by the way."

"Alice," the woman said and held out her hand. "How did it go at the hospital?"

Harriet picked up a chocolate-frosted chocolate cookie and took a bite before she answered.

"I have a small fracture on the edge of my eye socket where her ring hit, but nothing is displaced, so for now there isn't anything for them to do."

"I imagine they gave you some pain meds and decongestant and maybe an antibiotic."

She smiled with the half of her mouth that wasn't swollen.

"Are you a doctor?"

Alice joined her at the table, setting a cookie down on a napkin.

"No, I'm an ER nurse in a college town. And believe me, I've seen more broken faces than I care to remember. Usually from Friday-night bar fights." She bent and scanned Harriet's eye and the surrounding area. "If nothing's out of place, it should heal just fine. Be sure to take the decongestants they gave you, and if you *have* to sneeze or blow your nose, keep your mouth open. You don't want any pressure to build up anywhere in your face. Did they give you steroids for the swelling?"

Harriet nodded. "They said I only have to take them if the swelling doesn't go down in the next couple of days. And I'm going back so they can take a look for themselves the day after tomorrow."

"Don't expect it to be better in two or three days. You're going to be puffy for a while."

The door opened slightly, and a woman peeked in and scanned the room before opening it all the way and entering. It was the woman with the sensible shoes from the bar—Sydney Johnson, the bride's sister.

She came to Harriet's table and sat down.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "I'm so sorry for my sister's terrible behavior. Is there anything the family can do? We'd like to pay your hospital bill and for anything else you might need."

Connie and Mavis arrived and joined Harriet.

"I think you and your family have done enough, thank you." Mavis said, glaring at the woman as she spoke.

"Why don't you and Connie go get your cookies and then come sit down," Harriet suggested.

Mavis hesitated, and she and Connie looked at Harriet, then Sydney. They finally turned without speaking and walked to the back of the room and the cookie table.

Harriet watched them until they were out of earshot then looked back at Sydney.

“The hotel is handling my medical bills. Maybe you should talk to them.”

Sydney’s shoulders sagged, and she sighed deeply.

“I’ll do that. If there’s anything else...”

Sydney pulled a man-style wallet from her pocket and extracted a card, writing a phone number on the back. “You can reach me at this number.” She put her hands on the table and started to push herself to her feet.

Harriet gave her a half-smile.

“Why don’t you sit down and have a cookie while you’re here?”

“Oh, I couldn’t impose,” she said. She fingered the edge of her shapeless tunic with her left hand.

Lauren gave Harriet a look that said “Are you kidding?”

“Yeah, she couldn’t impose.”

“Oh, come on.” Harriet insisted. “You weren’t the one who whacked me. And it couldn’t have been a picnic dealing with the drunk groom.”

Connie and Mavis had returned with their cookie plates; Lauren looked to them for help.

“I think her drugs are talking.”

Sydney smiled at Harriet.

“You are way too kind, and you’re right—dealing with Michael is no picnic. I wish I could say his behavior is an isolated incident, but unfortunately, that would be a lie.”

“Why is your sister marrying him?” Lauren asked.

Sydney’s lip curled up on one side.

“She says she loves him.”

Lauren rolled her eyes. Mavis took a bite of a butterscotch cookie and chewed.

“If he drinks like that on a regular basis, the marriage isn’t likely to last long,” she said then.

“Have you tried to talk to your sister?” Connie asked.

“No one wants to hear what the resident old maid has to say, least of all my sister. My mother considers me the one great failure in her life. Besides, Jennifer knows what side her bread is buttered on. She gains a sizable inheritance when she marries Michael and produces an heir.”

Harriet picked up another of the double chocolate cookies from her plate and handed it to Sydney.

“This’ll help.”

Sydney smiled.

“Thanks. I wish it was that simple.”

Stephanie came over to the table.

“How’s your eye?” she asked.

“Slightly broken, but they tell me it will heal just fine.”

“Well, that’s a relief. It would be terrible if you came down here for a fun week of stitching and went home permanently maimed.”

Connie sent her a warning look, but Stephanie didn’t seem to notice. She turned to Sydney.

“Hi, Sydney. I don’t know if you remember me, but I used to babysit you and Jennifer when you were little.”

Sydney gave her a forced smile.

“Of course I remember. Your red hair is hard to forget. Jen wanted to dye her hair that color in junior high, but Mama wouldn’t let her. I didn’t know you and Mama were still in touch.”

Stephanie’s cheeks turned pink.

“I haven’t heard from your mother in years. Frankly, I was surprised when I received an invitation to your sister’s wedding.”

“Mama doesn’t have a lot of friends.”

Stephanie shook her head.

“I guess that explains it.” She turned back to Harriet. “I better get back to my stitching. I just wanted to see how you were doing. I hope you feel better tomorrow.”



“Are you going to take the hotel up on the room upgrade?” Lauren asked as they got off the elevator and started down the hallway toward their room.

Harriet sighed.

“Maybe that’ll sound like a good idea tomorrow, but tonight I just want to ice my face down and go to bed.”

Lauren slid the room key into the door lock. When the hotel had been repaired in 2008, after Hurricane Ike, many of its features had been upgraded to contemporary standards, including door locks that now opened with keys embedded with a computer chip so they functioned like a swipe card but looked like a key.

“I’d like to see what the upgrade room would look like,” she said as she dropped the key into the pocket of her hoodie.

Harriet looked around their room. The ceiling had to be at least eighteen feet overhead. Two queen beds with iron frames sat opposite a small sofa and coffee table. An antique armoire had been modified to conceal a

flat-screen television. Beside the entry door was a large walk-in closet. The bathroom had a steam-heated towel rack beside the deep bathtub-shower combo.

“This looks fine to me. I’m not sure what else we’d need.” She crossed to a round glass table in the corner of the room and picked up the ice bucket. “I’m going to go get some ice for my face. Don’t lock me out.” Just to be sure, she flipped the door’s bar guard out before she closed the door behind her, so it couldn’t shut completely.

The hotel rooms were arranged around the lobby atrium, and Harriet had to cross a short open walkway to the opposite side of the building to find the room that held the ice machine. She mentally shook her head as she looked down into the lobby and saw the groom once again draped against the bar, downing a drink.

A hotel maid was pushing her cart along the hallway a few doors down from the ice room, and Harriet nodded as she passed her. An older hotel maintenance man emerged from one of the rooms, and as she filled her bucket with ice, she heard him scolding the maid.

“That was weird,” she told Lauren when she’d returned to their room and was refilling her eye bag with fresh ice. “I overheard a maintenance guy arguing with the hotel maid in the hallway. They were speaking Cajun, but I’m pretty sure I got it right. A large part of the language is French.”

“How could I forget? You’re the Rosetta Stone of our group. What were they arguing about?”

“He was reprimanding her for ‘bothering with the quilters.’ He told her to focus on the wedding party.”

Lauren rinsed her toothbrush and tapped it on the edge of the sink before setting it down on a folded washcloth and stepping out of the bathroom to go to her bed.

“That makes a certain amount of sense. I mean, the wedding party is likely to have bigger tippers.”

Harriet held the fresh ice pack to her face.

“But he said ‘don’t bother with the quilters.’ I’m pretty sure the hotel expects her to clean every room on her schedule no matter who occupies the room.”

“Maybe they do something extra, like put chocolates on the pillows at night, or fold their towels into animals the way they do on a cruise ship.”

“The chocolate I can believe, but towel animals in an elegant old hotel like this one? Somehow, I doubt it.”

“I guess time will tell. And speaking of time—do you want to shower first or second in the morning?”

“I’ll take second so I can ice my face beforehand.”

“Let’s hope the rest of our trip is less eventful.”
“Amen to that.”

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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