

Michele Scott

**Toast To Murder
Chapter 1**

DO you believe in fate? Sincerely, Moros Apate Thanatos. Nikki stared at the old photo beneath the note—a newspaper photo of a bride and groom. Her groom—Derek Malveaux smiling at the camera, arm around ex-wife Meredith Malveaux on their wedding day. And the signature. How weird. Moros Apate Thanatos. Greek. Had to be Greek. Nikki didn't know what the words meant exactly, but the word Moros didn't sound good. She could jump on the computer and look it up. Whatever. It was some weirdo trying to shake her up before her wedding day. Why? Well it was sort of a known fact around wine country that Nikki had a knack for playing amateur sleuth and she was pretty decent at it. Maybe someone was testing her skills. But she didn't have time for any type of mystery right now. She had a wedding to plan for goodness sakes.

Nikki shook her head and crumpled up the piece of paper and photo. She checked the postmark. Nothing. No return address. She frowned as the phone rang. In the background, Oscar the Grouch was singing something about trash. She glanced at her little charges who appeared to be entranced by the show.

If this was another one of those blocked caller calls, she thought she might come undone. For two weeks now, she'd been getting one to two phone calls a day. Of course after receiving what she just had in the mail, she had to wonder if it was Meredith who'd caught wind that in a few days Nikki and Derek were to be wed. But she didn't see how that was possible. Meredith was in prison for murdering Gabriel Asanti, the former winemaker at Malveaux. Not to mention she and her half brother had tried to murder both Nikki and Derek. No. It seemed to Nikki that the only way Meredith and her disturbed brother Cal Winters could be behind the ominous note and prank phone calls was if they had someone on the outside doing their dirty work for them. But what for? The two of them were locked up for life. Maybe she would get on the Internet later and check out the meaning behind the signature on the notes.

Nikki grabbed the phone off the Spanish tiled kitchen counter, checking the caller ID first. She sighed. "Hi, Simon. Violet is fine. I haven't corrupted the poor girl yet, but if you don't stop bothering me, I might," she said. She opened up the garbage disposal and threw away the note and photo.

"You're such a peach. Listen Snow White, I want tails on my tux. As your best man, I mean maid of honor"—he giggled—"I think tails are necessary. They're elegant, royal, regal, and totally appropriate."

"No. No tails." She glanced up to see what the toddlers were doing.

"Oh no! No, no, no, baby!" She dropped the phone and dashed from behind her kitchen counter and into the family room where the little ones were getting into things they shouldn't have been. She had a fleeting vision of her favorite pinkberry lipstick smeared on the cream colored rug.

She took her purse from her friend Alyssa's three-year-old son Petie.

"Petie wants the purse," he whined. "Petie wants your purse, Aunt Nikki."

"No honey. This is Aunt Nikki's purse. It's not a toy."

Then two-year-old Violet stuck out her lower lip, crocodile tears filling her eyes. "Oh, sweetie girl. No tears." Nikki picked her up. Violet Nicole Malveaux was the newest family member to join the vineyard.

Nikki's best pals Simon and Marco had come home from China with Violet a little over a month ago. Simon was not only Nikki's BFF, but was soon to be her maid of honor and her

brother-in-law. Both Simon and Marco had wanted badly to be parents. They'd been jumping through the hoops within the U.S. system, but because they were gay they faced even more issues adopting than straight couples did. No one ever spoke out loud about these "issues," but they had become obvious to her dear friends after nearly eight months of getting nowhere. The guys had even asked Nikki to be a surrogate, but there was no way she was down for that. Nikki wanted a child with Derek, and they'd been trying to conceive for some time now. They both felt that the sooner they started trying to have a family, the better. The doctors had told Nikki she would likely have some difficulty getting pregnant.

Two couples wanting to become parents—and Simon and Marco had done just that. Since they didn't think they were ever going to adopt a child from their own country, and since a surrogate looked to be out of the question, they decided that maybe pulling a Brangelina and adopting a child from another country would be the way to go. And it had been. They both fell in love with little Violet at first sight. She was pretty much impossible not to fall in love with, with her big brown eyes, her dark hair that hung in wisps around her sweet face, and her precious laugh that could put a smile on even the most jaded of people. Now Violet was a Malveaux and Nikki would be a Malveaux in a matter of days because this coming Saturday was her wedding day!

Tomorrow friends of Derek's would be arriving from out of town and there was so much left to do.

But before she could get back to the wedding plans, she needed to take charge of the toddlers in the house. Why she'd agreed to babysit both Violet and Petie she wasn't sure. Well, yes she was. She loved kids. Petie's mom Alyssa had gone in for the final fitting of her brides-maid's dress, and Simon headed in with her for his final fitting of his maid of honor tuxedo. Yes, Simon was going to be Nikki's maid of honor, and Marco was to be Derek's best man. A little bit unconventional maybe, but not much went on at the Malveaux vineyard that could be considered conventional or, for that matter, even really functional. But they had a lot of damn fun. "Nikki, Nikki . . ."

"Oops. Come on gang." She walked back into the kitchen where she'd dropped the phone, forgetting all about Simon and his tirade over the fact that he wasn't going to be wearing tails. He was screaming her name into the phone. "Nikki!"

"I'm here." Violet leaned her head against Nikki's shoulder and wrapped her arms around her, entwining her fingers into her hair. The baby had taken to playing with Nikki's hair and many times it helped her fall asleep. Simon stopped by on occasions when he couldn't get her to go down for a nap and asked if she could play with her auntie's hair in order to lull her. They joked about Simon needing to get a long haired wig. "Just a sec, Simon. Petie, sit down at the table okay, and Auntie Nikki will get you a snack. Hold on for one minute."

Petie smiled. "Okay. Petie wants a snack." He batted his lashes over his big brown eyes. Oh, boy, the kid was going to be a heartbreaker.

"I know. Hang on." Nikki picked the phone back up. "Hi. Sorry."

"What in the world is going on there?" Simon sounded like he was hyperventilating.

"Nothing. Petie got into my purse while talking to you and he took my lipstick out and dumped most of my purse onto the floor. No worries. I'll pick up the mess in a minute. I think Violet is falling asleep on me. She's tired from playing all morning. I need to put her down, and Petie is waiting for a snack."

"Why didn't you put your purse away in the first place, Snow White?" he asked, referring to her by his pet name for her. "I mean, seriously. You have babies there and God knows what could be growing in your purse. Or what if one of them took out a pen or pencil and stabbed themselves in the eye? The possibilities are endless. I can't believe you would be so irresponsible."

"I don't have time for one of your lectures on parenting right now. You can scold me later. If you hadn't called with your drama in the first place, I wouldn't be irritated with you and having to pick up the contents of my purse." Nikki knew those contents ranged from umpteen receipts, candy and gum wrappers, a lipstick or two, business cards, and some loose change. She was notorious for dumping anything and everything into what Derek called her "abyss" instead of her purse. Thus, Simon wasn't completely off base with his accusation of things possibly growing in there.

"Speaking of my drama, I want those tails," he demanded.

"No. It's my wedding. I said no, and now I have to go. Bye-bye." She hung up the phone and then turned the ringer off. "Ha-ha. Too bad, so sad." She faced Petie. Violet's fingers were still wound in her hair, but she'd grown quiet and become deadweight against her.

She needed to put her down, but would have to walk into the guest room where her playpen was and Petie had started banging his fists on the kitchen table. "Snack. Petie wants snack. Petie wants snack."

"Shh, Petie. Violet is going night night. I'm getting you a snack." Balancing the toddler in her arms, she went to the kitchen pantry and took out a box of animal crackers, and got him a glass of milk. "I'm going to go put Violet down now."

"No, no. Petie wants Aunt Nikki here. You sit. You sit right here with Petie. Please." He smiled. How could she refuse? "Okay. I'll sit."

They shared the animal crackers, and when Petie was finished with his milk, they went to the couch where they sat back and fell asleep watching the rest of Sesame Street. The show was Petie's favorite and Elmo was Petie's favorite muppet. On the show Elmo always refers to himself in the third person, as in, "Elmo wants," or "Elmo likes." Thus, Petie had become Elmo's copycat.

He was an adorable little boy who'd been through a great deal in his short life. He had a rare heart condition, and for the first couple of years of his life, he needed a transplant. He had finally gotten one last year, and since then he'd grown stronger and precocious, which was good all around.

With Derek in tow, it was Ollie, Nikki and Derek's Rhodesian ridgeback who woke them when he came bounding into the house, the sound of his nails clicking against the hardwood floors. Nikki opened her eyes to see Derek leaning over her, his green eyes warm and happy, his smile bright. "Look at you. You look good like this."

"Like what?" she asked, sleep on the edge of her voice.

He touched Violet's dark head of hair, and she stirred at his touch. "Mommied out. You are in the mommy zone, and I am liking it. Except the mess is kind of . . ." He made a face.

"I know. They dumped out my purse."

"Want me to pick it up?"

"No. I'll get it."

He leaned in and whispered in her ear, "You know what? Seeing you like this makes me wanna practice those baby-making techniques."

"Easy does it there. We have wedding plans to finish up, and I think we should wait to practice on our wedding night."

"I disagree, but don't have time to argue. Just got a call from my out-of-town friends, my college buddies and their wives." He made another face, likely realizing that his news would not be exactly welcomed. "Sorry, honey, looks like they decided to come in a day early before everyone else gets in. I have to run into the city now to get them at the airport."

"What? No. No. I'm not ready for guests. Not yet. Look at me. I have peanut butter on my jeans

and—”

“You”re great. You”re gorgeous. Absolutely, positively gorgeous. And it”ll take me time to get into the city, pick them up, and come back. That should give you plenty of time to change your jeans. Don”t worry about a thing. They”re staying at the hotel, and I”ve already talked to Marco. He”ll have their suites ready for them by the time they get here. You don”t have to do a thing.”

“I think I need to do a little more than change my jeans. What about dinner? I need to go to the store. We don”t have a thing for me to fix.”

He shook his head. “Stop worrying. I”ve already taken care of that, too. It”s all good. This is our week. Relax. This will be the best week of our lives.” He bent down, traced her cheek and jaw with his finger. “I love you. And I still think we should negotiate the baby making practice. I really do. We”ll talk. Or other things.” He kissed her, melting the worries away for a few seconds until he said good-bye and walked back out the door.

Ollie plopped down at her feet. “Easy for him to say. No worries. I haven”t even told him that Simon wants to wear tails.” The caramel colored Ridgeback thumped his tail. “You wouldn”t want to wear tails. Seriously, what normal guy wants to wear tails? Oh wait, though. We are speaking of Simon.” Ollie lifted his head and turned toward the door.

“I heard that.” It was Simon, gallivanting his way through the hall and into the family room where Nikki was beginning to feel a bit weighted down by team toddler. “Normal is passé, and I am hip and hot.”

“Tails are passé.”

“Never. Not in a million years. Lookie here. How cute. I just passed the blushing groom-to-be. Uh-oh. I see the bride is not blushing. What gives?”

Nikki didn”t get a chance to explain about Derek”s friends coming into town or the note and photo, because Violet woke up and heard one of her daddies. “Daddy,” Violet said. She called Simon “Daddy,” and Marco, “Papa.”

Simon reached his arms out. “There is my little rose-bud. How is Daddy”s little girl? Come here, Vivi.”

Violet tried to pull her hands from Nikki”s hair to go into her father”s arms. “Ouch,” Nikki said. Violet whimpered. “What in the world? I think her hands are stuck.” Nikki looked up at Simon.

“What do you mean?” Simon asked.

“I don”t know. But I can”t get them loose.” Violet kept trying to free her hands but couldn”t, and she began to cry. “They”re stuck in my hair.”

“Was she playing with glue?”

“Of course not.”

Simon reached behind Nikki”s back. “Lean forward a little.”

Nikki did so. “What”s the problem?” Now Violet was starting to really cry and Petie was waking up.

“Hmmm.”

“What is it?”

“Um, Snow White . . .” He clucked his tongue. “It appears we definitely have a bit of a sticky situation.”